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Trying to be good: love and
family relationships in Iris
Murdoch's novels

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Introduction

British writer, university lecturer, prolific and highly professional novelist, Iris Murdoch is one of the most extraordinary, influential personalities of the 20th century not only in Britain, but all over the world. In a career that lasted little less than forty years she produced twenty-six novels, as well as three philosophical books, and she also published four theatrical plays, several poems and a short story. As Richard Todd says:

In the period since the appearance of her first published novel *Under the Net* in 1954, she has emerged not only as one of the most productive and influential British novelists of her generation but, equally importantly, as a powerful intellectual and original theorist of fiction.¹

Jean Iris Murdoch was born on 15th July 1919 from Anglo-Irish parents in Dublin, Ireland. Her mother was an Irish woman who had been trained as an opera singer, but gave up her career in the opera world to dedicate herself entirely to her marriage and to the family. Iris' father was an English Civil Servant who had been a cavalry officer during I World War, and afterwards he worked as a government clerk. When Iris was one year old, the family left Ireland and moved to London, where her father joined the Civil Service. Iris grew up in the western suburbs of Hammersmith and Chiswick, only returning to Ireland once a year for summer holidays. She always thought of her childhood as a happy one, surrounded by her parents' love which, being an only child, she did not have to divide with any siblings. Since she lived so far away from Ireland where her relatives lived, she always identified herself with exiles, and in several novels she tells of characters who are exiles, displaced persons living far from their place of origin and their family. The fact of being an only child also represents an important aspect of her childhood, she used to think that she would like to have a brother or sister to

¹ Richard Todd, *Iris Murdoch*, New York, Meuthen, 1984, p. 13.

share her infancy with, and this appears in the plots of her books, which are often characterized by close sibling relationships. She also analyses different types of brotherhood, writing about half-relationships, where the characters have siblings born from another marriage or affair, thus portraying unusual, non traditional relations within families. In the introduction to her book on Iris Murdoch, though, Hilda Spear points out:

As she grew older, however, she gradually came to the conclusion that a brother might well have had an adverse effect upon her own life for he might have had all the money available for education...²

Having no brothers partly explains the reason why Murdoch “has had no external compulsions upon her to espouse the cause of feminism and has responded to life and experience without the burden of ‘gender consciousness’ being thrust upon her.”³ Being an only child thus enabled her to have a good education first at border schools and then at Oxford. On the ground of her own experience, Murdoch often underlined the importance of having a good education, particularly for women. Even though she was not a militant feminist and she rarely represented specifically female subject matters in her books, as an author she has always been very conscious of the submitted and unfair role of women in a traditional, patriarchal society where a married woman is considered just as “a subdivision of her husband’s mind”⁴.

For what concerns her personal story, anyway, Murdoch was able to have her parents’ undivided attention, and at the age of twelve she was sent to a boarding school in Bristol, where she developed her interest in classics, modern languages and literature. Her interest in stories, instead, began much earlier, during her childhood and was fostered by her father, who encouraged her to read both books for children and for adults. Among

² Hilda D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, London, MacMillan, 1995, p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince*, quoted in H.D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, London, MacMillan, 1995, p. 3.

the books she particularly enjoyed were Lewis Carroll and Kim's books together with Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. In 1938 she began a new course of studies at Somerville College, Oxford, where she read classics, philosophy and ancient history. During her period at Oxford, like many other students, she joined the Communist Party, but soon realised she did not share the view of Marxism and, years later, interviewed by Jeffrey Meyers, she explained:

I was a member of the Communist Party for a short time when I was a student, about 1939. I went in, as a lot of people did, out of a sense that arose during the Spanish civil war that Europe was dangerously divided between left and right, and we were jolly well going to be on the left. We had passionate feelings about social justice. We believed that socialism could, and fairly rapidly, produce just and good societies without poverty and without strife. I lost those optimistic illusions fairly soon. So I left it.⁵

Her university years were marked by II World War in September 1939 and after finishing her degree at Oxford she joined the Civil Service as an Assistant Principal in the Treasury, coming back to live and work in London. To this period of her life belongs the social commitment to help the people who had been displaced and disoriented by the conflict, and in order to do this, she started working for the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) in displaced persons' camps not only in Britain, but also in Belgium and Austria. As Spear says:

Her experiences with UNRRA left an indelible impression on her mind and emphasised her identification with exiles; throughout her novels there are depictions of exiles and refugees, illegal immigrants who have fled the horrors of their own country, men and women trying to escape from their past.⁶

⁵ Jeffrey Meyers, *Iris Murdoch, the Art of Fiction No. 117*, The Paris Review.

⁶ H.D., Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, p. 5.

Murdoch liked reading literature at school, but during her university years she focused her studies on philosophy and the classics, and so in the early 1950s she published her first philosophical works, mainly concerning metaphysics and existentialism. In order to further her studies she applied for and was awarded a scholarship to go to the USA but, due to her previous membership to the Communist Party, the American authority refused the visa, and she had to give up going to America. In 1947 she spent an academic year studying philosophy at Newham College in Cambridge and then returned to Oxford the following year to teach Philosophy, also becoming fellow of St. Anne's College. By this time "she knew that she wanted to teach philosophy, wanted to be a writer and wanted to be in Oxford."⁷ Around the same period she began writing novels and sent one of them to a publisher, but was rejected. Finally, in 1954, Chatto and Windus accepted her novel, and *Under the Net* was published. In 1956, two years after the publication of her first book, she married the critic and scholar John Bayley, and they began a long and happy marriage, which lasted more than forty years: "it has been a happy and supportive marriage, enabling Murdoch to write in peace and security."⁸

Iris Murdoch's numerous and different works are difficult to place in any particular category and, as Bran Nicol states in his book: "...her fiction seems to position itself outside the central patterns of post-war British novel."⁹ In a period characterized in literature by the crisis of representation, Murdoch wants to preserve through her work the importance and the function of literary realism. She belongs to the generation of late-twentieth century writers who, more than any previous generation, is conscious about their art and the ideas which inform it, but "Murdoch's status as a philosopher in her own

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁸ *Ivi.*

⁹ Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch. The Retrospective Fiction*, London, MacMillan, 1999, p. 2.

right gives unusual emphases to her own self-awareness.”¹⁰ Murdoch’s conception of the novel, as it has developed over four decades of theory and practice, could be called anti-modernist, in that the author declares herself against the typical product of modernist tradition, what she calls the ‘crystalline’ novel. For Iris Murdoch a ‘crystalline’ novel is nothing but a simplified version of the world, a way to bridle the enigmatic elements of life (the accidental events in life, the mystery of people) by enveloping them in a theoretical structure, while, as Bran Nicol explains, she thinks that “the novel has the duty to portray the world as it is, and to strive to tell the truth about it, chiefly by portraying realistic characters not subordinate to the demands of plot or to the ideas which support it.”¹¹ Murdoch’s anti-modernist attitude is, however, quite usual for a novelist who began her career just after the Second World War, when the widespread feeling of a rupture in society was accompanied by a shift in the intellectual climate; modernism, so focused on subjectivism and self-reflexivity was unable to confront the problems of the post war era. According to the author, as a matter of fact, modern literature is characterised by a diminished respect for personality and this is visible in the modernist novel, where the author creates a structure of underlying myth in which each allusion, image and character have to fit. By doing this, modernist novels lose one of the most important points, according to Murdoch, that is the combination of form and character. Murdoch had always expressed her admiration for the ability of great writers such as Shakespeare and Tolstoj, who were able to create real independent characters who stood up outside the myth structure created by their author, who were both representational of a universal pattern and yet autonomous, because they were able of being remembered as individuals. In her essay published in 1959, *The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited*, Murdoch states what is her aim in her fiction, that is to look back to what she calls the ‘tolerance’ of the nineteenth century novelists: “their capacity to

¹⁰ *Ivi.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

display a real apprehension of persons other than the author of having a right to exist and to have a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves.”¹²

This ideal of tolerance reveals to what extent Murdoch’s fiction derives from, and is influenced by, her moral philosophy. The author’s philosophical work deals largely with the relation between art and morals, and she sees both of them as attempts to find out what is meant by, what is really held to be, “Good”. She identifies her thought with neo-Platonism, according to which the only way to approach goodness is by attending to the contingent and eliminating selfishness by the psyche: “Art is not an expression of personality, it is a question rather of the continual expelling of oneself from the matter in hand.”¹³ This ‘continual expelling of oneself’, though, does not mean the author has to become uninterested in his characters; impersonality, according to Murdoch, should not mean non-existence, and she often underlines that the author has to be neutral but at the same time interested, showing both a tolerant and impartial attitude towards his characters. With her work, as a matter of fact, she aims at creating individuals instead of types, and one way to do this is by completely refusing to create myths in her novels. Even though her novels typically contain references to other works of literature, to philosophy and mythology, she never uses them to create a stiff structure within to imprison her characters. It is always her own characters themselves who try to compare their own situation to other sources such as myth or literary works:

Once again, this can be seen as a response to the modernist practice of producing in a work an underlying myth which delimits the contingent world by making it representable and knowable.¹⁴

¹² Iris Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1959, p. 257.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

¹⁴ Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch. The Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 9.

Murdoch is tied to Platonism as much as she is determined to distance herself from the thought of Jean Paul Sartre, who exerted considerable influence on her intellectual life and direction in the first years of her career. Murdoch was still working with the refugees in Belgium when she first faced the existentialist movement, and she became one of the first non-Gallic readers of Sartre. Her first published book, *Sartre Romantic Rationalist* (1953), dealt with Sartre's theories and thought about art, consciousness and the importance of the novel as an instrument of human enquiry. Murdoch wrote about the philosopher and his concept of philosophical novel that: "the novel is a picture of, and a comment upon, the human condition, and a typical product of the era to which belong also the writings of Nietzsche, the psychology of Freud, the philosophy of Sartre."¹⁵ It can be said, though, that Murdoch's admiration of Sartre's ideas comes more from the shifting in thought that characterised the post-war era rather than from an effective sharing of his view. The period following the Second World War was influenced by ideas that altered the way in which consciousness was portrayed, challenged the views of human nature and human freedom and changed the way in which the relation of individual to society was represented.

As Todd points out:

Murdoch's subsequent arguments about realism, literature and art undoubtedly have their origins in many of these issues, but the reinterpretation is distinctive, and there is in fact an increasing detachment from Sartre as time goes on.¹⁶

This detachment is caused, among other things, by a rather different concept of the individual, described and represented in Sartrean novels as too shallow and flimsy. As underlined by Antonia Byatt, according to Murdoch, Sartre has in his novels a "dry" view of human personality and all he can achieve is a picture of man as a "lonely, self-

¹⁵ Iris, Murdoch, *Sartre Romantic Rationalist*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1953, p. 10.

¹⁶ R., Todd, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 17.

contained individual, who is seen as the analogue of the literary self-contained symbol.”¹⁷ Murdoch argues that Sartre’s picture of man is that of a solitary and totally free individual, completely absorbed by his attempt at ordering the experience around him into false and easily comprehended wholes. While Murdoch insists that reality is not a given whole:

We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy.¹⁸

The attempt of Murdoch’s characters to understand and control what “does exist and escapes from the schemes of relations in which we imagine it to be rigidly enclosed”¹⁹, that is, incomprehensible reality, is one of the aspects this dissertation will try to analyze. This work will also try to show what was the main aim of the author, what she saw in, and what she meant by understanding “the absurd, irreducible uniqueness of people and of their relations with each other.”²⁰ In order to do this I am going to analyse three novels published in different periods of Murdoch’s long career to underline diverse types of relations the author tells of in her books. By writing in her works about relations of marriage, unfaithfulness, incest and homosexuality, most of the times within familial relationships already complex and articulate, Iris Murdoch shows how the normal, everyday life of ordinary people forms part of what she calls ‘the ultimately mysterious transcendent reality’ and demonstrates that, as her husband John Bayley commented, “the conventional and the mysterious are closely allied, are indeed one and the same thing.”²¹ The novels in question, besides being very different from each other, were also published in different moments of Murdoch’s career.

¹⁷ Antonia, S., Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom. The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch*, London, Vintage, 1994, p. 4.

¹⁸ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre Romantic Rationalist* cit., p. 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²¹ John Bayley, *The Characters of Love*, New York, Basic Books, 1961, p. 239.

The first one that will be analysed, *The Sandcastle*, published in 1957, is part of her early novels and has been defined by A.S. Byatt “a lesser work, in so far Miss Murdoch turned from the highly polished complexity and wit (in all senses) of her earlier works to this ordinary story, set in very humdrum and limited surroundings.”²² It is true that, if compared to Murdoch’s previous works *Under the Net* (1954) and *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956), this novel seems quite a lesser work, but it is precisely in its ordinariness and triteness that Murdoch detects the aspects of that incomprehensible reality she describes in her books. The protagonist’s dilemma about whether to put a stop to his marriage and leave his family in order to be happy with another woman represents what the author defines ‘a basic human problem, a real moral issue’ which, she thinks, is neglected for abstract studies of the state of man. My dissertation will try to argue how *The Sandcastle*, apparently boring and ordinary as a novel, actually shows that “reality is more compelling than convulsive attempts to grab a freedom which denies the stuff of life.”²³ The second novel this work will consider is entitled *The Italian Girl*, was published in 1964 and tells of the relations within a family where the most important member, Lydia, has just passed away; the family reunites for the ceremony of her cremation and from this moment Murdoch starts a plot which claustrophobically converges into a spiral of secret affairs, fascination and death, showing how even an apparently normal and ordinary family can conceal secret, unmentionable relations which go beyond unfaithful love, up to incest and obsession. The third novel, *The Good Apprentice*, was published in 1985 and tells of the desperate attempts of redemption of the protagonist, Edward, who caused with a tragic and foolish prank his best friend’s death. Around Edward rotates an extended family in which every member is tied to the other by secret affairs, passionate relations and inappropriate sexual attraction, showing,

²² A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 65.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

once again, the complexity and variety of reality hiding behind what seems to be the most common, solid institution, that is family.

By analysing these novels and explaining the complex relationships among the characters, this dissertation will try to show that the author's aim is to define what, for her, is the main significance of art, the pursuit of the good. According to Todd, in Murdoch's thought, and therefore in her novels "whatever is contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly still to be explained holds crucial place."²⁴ Her pursuit of the good, in art and life, is itself a form of attention to the particular. As stated again by Richard Todd, it is precisely by telling of the contingent, particular, and seemingly ordinary aspect of human relationships in the novels that the writer traces the essence of 'real people':

[...] the novelist's essential task is that of creating character by revealing secret obsessions which 'real people' do not give away. It is this understanding which accounts for her complex conception of realism.²⁵

²⁴ R. Todd, *Iris Murdoch* p., 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Chapter 1:

The Sandcastle

1.1. General Remarks

The Sandcastle was published in 1957, and it is the third novel in Iris Murdoch's production, coming after *Under the Net* and *The Flight from the Enchanter*, respectively published in 1954 and in 1956. Between the first two novels and the one this chapter deals with there are several structural and subject-matter differences. As Antonia Byatt observes:

The first two books have a social dimension, an emphasis on the possibilities of man's freedom in society at large and mechanized, an interest in works, in the sense of jobs, which is not importantly present in *The Sandcastle*, more concerned with freedom within personal relationships.²⁶

It has also been remarked that the plot of *The Sandcastle* is, compared to the previous novels, particularly ordinary and, in a way, maybe too plain. The novel tells of the love story between a middle aged married schoolmaster, William Mor, and a young woman painter, Rain Carter. Mor's attempt to leave his sarcastic and hostile wife Nan and to put a stop to their worn out relationship is foiled and in the end, he decides to remain with his wife. Given its ordinariness and seeming plainness *The Sandcastle* has been compared, by Byatt again, to a "woman's novelette, or perhaps an expansion of a story for a women's magazine"²⁷, maybe because in the end the family is reconciled, and Mor gives up his plan of going away with young Rain. Even though the story ends in an apparent

²⁶ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*. cit. p. 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

banal and maybe expectable way, this novel can be seen, as Byatt says, “as a study of the degrees of freedom available to individuals”²⁸. Every character, as a matter of fact, appears “free and separate”²⁹, independent and resolute to take individual decisions, but through the events of the plot Murdoch shows how each of them is, at heart, “related to a rich and complicated world from which as a moral being he has much to learn.”³⁰ The choices of the protagonist, for instance, which he makes for himself and his personal happiness or satisfaction, inevitably affect the others surrounding him, thus showing that

Freedom is not choosing; that is merely the move we make when all is already lost. Freedom is knowing and understanding things quite other than ourselves.³¹

This novel gives the sense that every character, from the protagonist to the most marginal one, is surrounded by the lives of other beings, their feelings, choices and will, and to pay attention to other beings, to be aware “of the surrounding world”³² becomes, in a way, too much altruistic. As Lorna Sage claims: “Murdoch’s people are inveigled into ‘seeing’ each other by atavistic urges – desire, fear, passions of all kinds”³³ and this is the primary reason for Mor’s fascination with Rain, a young and beautiful woman for whom he is ready to abandon not only his wife, but also his children and his career as a schoolmaster. It becomes clear, by the end of the novel, that Mor has a very limited, self-centred consideration of his love story with Rain, which renders him unable to ‘see’ her for what she really is, a woman painter, therefore an artist, who could never have carried on both her career and the relationship with Mor. Given Murdoch’s idea of freedom as the awareness of being surrounded by people and lives other than oneself, it is no surprise

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁹ Iris Murdoch, *Against Dryness* cit., p. 18.

³⁰ *Ivi.*

³¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1959, p. 271.

³² Lorna Sage, *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists*, London, McMillan, 1992, p. 73.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

that the protagonist's worn out and chilled marriage is seen, primarily, as "the locus for thinking about the limits of freedom"³⁴. Mor's violent bid for freedom and his strong belief of having found real love in Rain, together with Nan's hardness and apparent insensitivity unite, thus depicting "a marriage that threatens to disintegrate, but is saved by the characters being forced to face reality"³⁵. It is precisely this facing reality that, in the end, keeps Mor and Nan together and leads Rain to disappear without a word from their lives, and although, as Byatt says,

There is no suggestion that the difficulties have all been replaced with radiant understanding, but some kind of insight has clearly been achieved by both partners to their marriage.³⁶

In this novel Murdoch shows how ordinary events of everyday life, like the crisis of a marriage and the desire to be free so as to be able to follow one's personal desires regardless of other human beings, is to all intents and purposes, a very essential part of human life. The opacity of persons, the oneness of every character as 'free and separate' contribute to the "mystery of freedom in relation to reality"³⁷ and the only way to be free, says Murdoch, is to 'see' things and people other than ourselves, to go beyond the bounds of the self.

1.2 Freedom denied: Mor

William Mor's involvement in an extramarital love story with a young and beautiful girl, for whom he is determined to leave his wife, represents "a real moral issue and

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁵ H. D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 35.

³⁶ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit. p. 67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

involves ordinary moral virtue”³⁸. One of the first things the reader is told at the beginning of the novel is, as a matter of fact, that Mor had been brought up as a Methodist: “He believed profoundly in complete truthfulness as the basis and condition of all virtue”³⁹. The moral issues he has to face concern both the future of his children and his own political ambitions, as well as his decision to leave his wife Nan. All these elements can be put down to what Murdoch defines as “a kind of freedom to act”, which Mor feels is denied to him for diverse reasons. The encounter with Rain Carter, thus, makes the protagonist see the girl as the most evident embodiment of the kind of freedom he feels he lacks in his life and, as Spear underlines, “it is nothing for a middle-aged man to believe himself in love with a vulnerable woman half his age”⁴⁰.

His worries about his children’s future is centred on their financial difficulties and above all, on the disagreement with his wife Nan, who is against their daughter Felicity’s starting university:

‘I don’t know what I think about it,’ said Mor. [...]
‘Well, I know what I think about it’, said Nan. ‘Our finances and her talents don’t leave us much choice, do they?’ She looked directly at Mor. Again it was impossible not to reply.
[...]
‘I don’t want Felicity to be a typist,’ said Mor.
‘Why not?’ said Nan. ‘She could have a good career. She could be the secretary to some interesting man.’
‘I don’t want her to be the secretary to some interesting man,’ said Mor, ‘I want her to be an interesting woman and have someone else be her secretary.’⁴¹

In this passage of the novel Murdoch’s attention and stress on education as the fundamental factor in deciding the role and the position of women in society stands out. It is important to underline that the characters who insist for Felicity’s university education

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1957, p. 8.

⁴⁰ H. D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* cit. p. 26.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

are males; both Mor and Mr. Demoyte, the former headmaster of the school where the protagonist teaches, have clashes with Nan who, as a woman, is supposed to be the most resolute when it comes to her daughter's future. According to Deborah Johnson, this comes as no surprise:

It is characteristic of the author to frame her feminist statements in a cautious way, as she does all her political announcements. This association of feminism with educational issues is a vital part of the tradition of liberal humanism in which Iris Murdoch writes.⁴²

The protagonist's real and great concern with his children's education and choices for the future is, in a way, the only closest point of contact with them. The relationship between Mor and his children Donald and Felicity which, as Byatt points out, "should be part of the stuff of his life, is asserted, rather than shown, to exist."⁴³ And there are several moments, with Mor's elder son Donald in particular, in which the lack of communication and contact between the two is rendered painfully real:

Random encounters between himself and his son during school hours embarrassed both, and Mor avoided them as much as possible. [...]
As Mor looked at him, he felt a deep sadness that he was not able to express his love for his son, and that it could even be that Donald did not know at all that it existed.⁴⁴

If the contact between the protagonist and Donald is barely sketched, the relation Mor has with Felicity could even be defined as nonexistent. There are very few moments in the book when they find themselves in the same place, and even less the moments when they exchange words. The girl lives in a world which is her own, which she created and about which her family does not know anything. The emotional distance between her and her

⁴² Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1985, p.

⁴³ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 67.

⁴⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 42-43.

parents and the lack of real contact is represented through Felicity's great interest in magic, but, as Byatt underlines: "Felicity's magical activities are no substitute for it."⁴⁵

The girl's magical rituals, together with the "presence" of Liffey, the dog of the family, are symbols which Byatt compares to a "useful pointer; a vanished vitality, recalled by the imagination"⁴⁶, in that the dog is dead and only lives in Felicity's imagination, but it used to be an important part of the family:

This animal had formed the bond between Nan and Mor which their children had been unable to form. Half unconsciously, whenever Mor wanted to placate his wife, he said something about Liffey.⁴⁷

Liffey, however, is no longer alive, her memory only lives in Felicity's mind and in the rare moments when Mor and Nan are in tune with each other, almost to underline that "the existence of this symbol is a statement, an illustration, rather than a living part of the novel, and is, decorative, rather than a part of the action."⁴⁸ Another symbol which, in Murdoch's intention, should be - together with the interest in magic - a substitute for the lacking relationship Mor has with his daughter, is the gipsy. This weird figure appears for the first time in an important episode, when Rain's car gets stuck in the mud and ends up into the river under the eyes of Mor and of the girl. He unexplainably reappears, called by Felicity's enchantment, when Mor has Rain in his house, as to symbolise both the father-daughter relationship they share and Rain's other gipsy self, her free, rootless existence, by which Mor is fascinated. Byatt does not agree with Murdoch's using the character of the gipsy to represent these two aspects:

"I had not quite understood this until Miss Murdoch pointed it out to me – but I do not think that to understand it disposes of my

⁴⁵ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, cit., p. 69.

⁴⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 9.

⁴⁸ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 69.

objection to such a symbolic figure appearing as a substitute for Felicity's relation with Mor, or even this apprehension of Rain's 'gipsy' quality."⁴⁹

1.3 Mor's strive for freedom

The anxiety caused by the decisions about his children's future, the fact that the family is short of money, of which Mor is painfully conscious, and thus compelled to rely on Mr. Demoyte's generous help in order to allow the children an education, provoke in the protagonist the sense of impotence and the feeling of inability to act. The complicated, apparently loveless marriage he is in, and the refusal of his wife to recognise his political ambition, something which really represents who he truly is and what he really wants for his life, are the restrictions to his "freedom to act". Freedom to act which, instead, finds free expression in Mor's relationship with Rain Carter who, as a matter of fact, "represents many different kinds of escape: to youth, wealth and a life away from the constriction of his marriage."⁵⁰ The protagonist's strive for freedom is not only emotional and sentimental, but, as he is considering to candidate for a safe Labour seat, also political. It is Mor himself who gives the very first definition of freedom in the novel, during a W.E.A. class. When asked by one of his listeners about the fact that freedom is a virtue, he replies

...the freedom which inspired the great Liberal leaders of the last century, is political freedom, the absence of tyranny. This is the condition of virtue, and to strive for it, it is a virtue. But it is not in itself a virtue. To call mere absence of restraint or mere kicking over the traces and flouting conventions a virtue is to be simply romantic.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁵⁰ R. Todd, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 37.

⁵¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 54-55.

1.4 Comparing two opposites: selfless Everard and authoritarian Demoyte

The true definition of freedom as a virtue is perfectly represented in one of the characters of this novel, that is, Mr. Everard, the present headmaster of the school where Mor teaches. Everard is the character who most nearly corresponds to the idea of freedom as the absence of selfish desires:

He lived in the open, with simplicity, seeming to lack altogether the concepts of vanity or ambition, weaknesses which he was equally incapable of harbouring in himself or of recognizing in others.⁵²

Notwithstanding Everard embodies this idea of freedom, it is interesting to note that he is described and rendered in the novel as a figure of fun, even comical in a way, someone who, as Byatt points out, “is at a loss as to how to exercise the power he holds”⁵³. Everard’s complete opposite is Mr Demoyte, the former headmaster, explicitly described as an old tyrant who thinks he still holds authority and power at St Bride’s, and notwithstanding his bad temper is admired and respected by the protagonist as someone who ‘draws love’:

“For his scholarship, Mor, whose talents were speculative rather than scholarly, admired him without envy; and for his tough, honest obstinate personality and his savage tongue Mor rather loved him: and also because Demoyte was very partial to Mor. [...]

His long period as headmaster of St. Bride’s had been punctuated by violent quarrels with members of the staff, and was still referred to as ‘the reign of terror’”⁵⁴

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵³ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 70

⁵⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 19-20.

1.5 False freedom and the refusal to recognise “the limits of reality”

Mor’s desperate strive for freedom, both in his everyday family life and in politics, though, turns out to be useless or, better, unreal. He sees in Rain an escape and the chance of being free from the oppressive relationship with Nan, of being able to express himself for what he really is, whereas he finds in his wife obstinate opposition and refusal to ‘see’ and understand his real being, together with a strong will of imposing her views and her decisions on their children’s life:

He told himself that her strength sprang only from obstinate and merciless unreason; but to think this did not save him either from suffering or from feeling resentment.⁵⁵

When the protagonist meets Rain, therefore, he is fascinated by the girl’s air of innocence, her young age and the free, rootless existence she leads, even though both of them know, and she even admits, that she sees in Mor a memory of her recently dead father, thus rendering their relationship impossible and unreal from the very beginning. As Byatt observes, as a matter of fact, there is “a lack, in terms of the novel, of something real, solid, in which we can believe, and about which we can care.”⁵⁶ The way itself in which Murdoch describes Rain, according to Byatt, betrays the fact that the author is

too involved in it, too sure of the real power of her heroine’s enchantments, which are more asserted than shown, with constant reference to the gamine, the boyish quality of her, and description of her clothes of a kind which smash again of the romanticism of the women’s magazine, rather than giving her being.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁶ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 68.

⁵⁷ *Ivi.*

Mor is, however, helplessly attracted by the girl although he knows, or better he senses, that their bond is not real and therefore cannot exist. He realises it in two different moments, both of them during his wife's absence from their house:

He knew perfectly that the notion of being in love, which was all very well for boys in their twenties, could have no possible place in his life. Mor took seriously the obligations imposed by matrimony. [...]

It was simply the non-existence in his life, as it solidly and in reality was, of any place for an emotion or a drama of this kind.⁵⁸

The other episode which clearly represents the impossibility of their love story is when Mor decides, "as it seems to him he has the right to decide, to go away with Rain"⁵⁹; while they are walking around alone in London, the protagonist clearly perceives he is 'damned'. These episodes, as well as the one of Rain's car stuck in the mud and finally overturning in the river during one of the moments they spend together alone, symbolise "the intractability of matter, of the normal against which one's efforts are unavailing, no matter how violent."⁶⁰ Mor is, in a way, forced both by the events and by Rain herself to let her go and continue her free and rootless life without him. The freedom Mor has longed for turns out to be a very selfish and egocentric view of reality, the inability of the protagonist to 'see' both Rain and his wife Nan as the persons they really are:

Mor is placing both Rain and Nan, he is not aware of them as 'real, impenetrable human persons' he is deforming the nature of reality by fantasy.⁶¹

1.6 The "respect for reality": Bledyard

⁵⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 159, 160.

⁵⁹ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 70.

⁶⁰ *Ivi.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Mor seems unable to understand that, in case they decide to live a life together, this would prevent Rain from concentrating entirely on her painting, thus depriving her of the real freedom in her life. The character who tries to make the protagonist realise this is Bledyard, one of Mor's colleagues at St Bride's. Bledyard is an odd man, he lives in a clinically simple bedroom, has problems in public speaking and has an unsettling twitch that makes him repeat the same word several times while he speaks; notwithstanding his oddities, he is the character who gives, through his dialogues with Mor and with Rain as well, the clearest and most convincing representation of Murdoch's idea of freedom, reality and love. As Byatt underlines, as a matter of fact, it is Bledyard who "puts to Mor the idea that freedom consists of a respect for the limiting functions of reality."⁶² Bledyard, therefore, pushes Mor to open his eyes and not to deform reality:

There is such a thing as respect for reality. You are living on dreams now, dreams of happiness, dreams of freedom. But in all this you consider only yourself. You do not truly apprehend the distinct being of either your wife or Miss Carter.⁶³

Through Bledyard's views, Murdoch expresses her ideas on art and morals, her views on freedom and the understanding of the ultimate concept of "Good" that represents the basis of her thought. Bledyard's opinions on art and morals become relevant to the argument of Mor's striving for freedom and of his refusal to 'see' and consider everyone else but himself. Criticizing the portrait of Mr. Demoyte Rain is painting, he explains:

When confronted with an object which is not an human being, we must of course treat it reverently. We must, if we paint it, attempt to show what it is like in itself and not treat it as a symbol of our own moods and wishes. The great painter the great painter is he who is humble enough in the presence of the object

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 73

⁶³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 216.

to attempt *merely* to show what the object is like. But this *merely*, in painting, is everything.⁶⁴

With these words, Bledyard wants to underline that Rain's painting can be compared to "a series of definitions", and that it "does not look mortal"⁶⁵, in the sense that her work is something that has achieved a form "at the expense of the individual particularity of the unique human being."⁶⁶

By making Bledyard state such things Murdoch is trying to explain and represent in individualized example what she means by "deforming the nature of reality by fantasy", i.e. what Rain does in her painting and Mor does with their relationship. If we consider Rain's portrait of Demoyte, for instance, all we can see is a form, "an idea of a man, like the modern crystalline novel, not a living picture of a man, in the sense in which Miss Murdoch admires Tolstoj's characters."⁶⁷ Conversely, real freedom is something that one can achieve only by recognising and respecting the "limiting functions of reality" on which Bledyard insists in his sermon to Mor:

You imagine [...] that to live in a state of extremity is necessarily to discover the truth about yourself. What you discover then is violence and emptiness. And of this you make a virtue [...] you do not know even remotely what it would be like to set aside all consideration of your satisfaction [...] You live in a world of imagined things. But if you were to concern yourself truly with others and lay yourself open to any hurt that might come to you, you would be enriched in a way of which you cannot now even conceive. The gifts of the spirit do not appeal to imagination.⁶⁸

Bledyard believes that "our vision of other human beings is corrupted by our need to interpret them by what we are ourselves"⁶⁹ and it is precisely his opinion that clearly expresses the concept that "there are limitations to Mor's freedom which he is ignoring in

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁶ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 71.

⁶⁷ *Ivi.*

⁶⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 216.

⁶⁹ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 71.

deciding to go away with Rain.”⁷⁰ Bledyard tries to make Mor understand that he is considering only himself in his firm striving for freedom, failing to understand and to take into consideration Rain and Nan for what they really are. Mor’s reply to this observation is, expectably, centred on himself and his feelings, as the ‘lonely self-contained individual’ Murdoch has always criticized :

All I can say is that this is my situation and my life and I shall decide what to do about it.⁷¹

It is fundamental, therefore, to notice that the protagonist’s decision of leaving his wife and family excludes all consideration of the other two persons involved in his choice, not to mention his children.

1.7 Freedom as acknowledgement of the ‘other’: Nan and Rain

Nan, Mor’s wife, comes here to have an important role; it is only when he makes up his mind to leave her and to go away in order to start a new life with Rain that the character of Nan and their twenty years long life together acquire relevance. Mor is only aware, or seems only able to notice, that his wife “has frustrated him, breaking within him piece by piece the structure of his own desires”⁷², thus provoking in him anger and resentment. He is sure he no longer loves his wife, but this, in a way, becomes irrelevant and for the first time perhaps, although unconsciously, he recognizes that reality is not so easy to deform, no matter how much one desires it:

Of course he no longer loved her. But somehow to say this was not to say anything at all. He had lived with Nan for twenty

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 72.

⁷¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p.

⁷² A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 70.

years. That living together was a reality which made it frivolous, or so it seemed to him, even to ask whether or not he loved her.⁷³

As to support this idea that Mor has of his life with Nan, Murdoch tells us that the protagonist had already started to realize this before, when his marriage began to have problems; what he did not know and of which he became aware through his marital crisis is that “he was tied for life to a being who could change, who could withdraw herself from him and become independent.”⁷⁴ Although his relationship with Nan is loveless and has begun to fail, then, it is “real, and cannot be destroyed merely by willing it.”⁷⁵

What Mor does not see and seems to refuse to recognise is in the end, achieved by Nan. It is her, as a matter of fact, who realizes how they have been limiting each other throughout their life together. Before the arrival of Rain she was in the same situation as her husband, failing to see and to consider him as “the other” besides herself. As Murdoch explains in *Sartre Romantic Rationalist*, Nan’s situation can be compared to a kind of

mauvaise foi, the more or less conscious refusal to reflect, the immersion in the unreflectively coloured awareness of the world, the persistence in an emotional judgement, or the willingness to inhabit cosily some other persons’ estimate of oneself.⁷⁶

Her refusal to reflect is interrupted in a rather shocking way by two events in particular; one is her discovering Mor and Rain embracing each other in the living room of her house. The other is the understanding of a thing she has always refused to see, that is, that Tim Burke, a close family friend, is in love with her. By seeing with her eyes the love story between her husband and Rain, and by “coming to grips with what she has known

⁷³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 208.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁵ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 72.

⁷⁶ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1953, p. 42.

but not admitted”⁷⁷, Tim’s love for her, she is forced to think about Mor and their marriage in a new and different way, and as Byatt says, “her thoughts about Mor move from the persistence in an emotional judgement to reflection.”⁷⁸ When Tim declares his feelings for her, as a matter of fact, she is forced to face, for the first time, an individual who is “close, mysterious, other than herself, full of the brim of his own particular history”⁷⁹. When faced with the possibility of “exploring”, of getting to know a person who is other than herself, thus experiencing real freedom, the absence of concern about oneself and the complete focusing on the other, however, she decides not to do it. This is, in my opinion, one of the most important points in the novel. Nan has, here, the same chance that Mor has with Rain, and while he is determined to leave his wife and family, to explore this new person in his life, although out of a completely egocentric and “blind” way, she realizes “the reality of her situation, the irresponsible silliness of her present conduct”⁸⁰ and therefore, does nothing. But this situation has obliged her to think, and if initially she is convinced that her husband will listen to her and do as she tells him as always, when she begins to realize that she might lose him, her views change completely. It is in this moment precisely, when she becomes aware that she might really lose her husband, that she also begins “to think – even to dream – about him”⁸¹; after having found out Mor and Rain together and after he has confessed that he is in love with the girl, Nan

thought about him more intensely than she had ever done since she had first being in love with him. [...] She began, though she did not let this become clear to herself, almost to desire him.⁸²

⁷⁷ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 77.

⁷⁸ *Ivi.*

⁷⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p.198.

⁸⁰ *Ivi.*

⁸¹ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 77.

⁸² Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 228.

As Byatt underlines, therefore, Nan “is aware again of Mor as another person, not an extension of herself”⁸³, and to demonstrate her acceptance of him as he really is, of his most profound and true being, she decides to give him her public support in the nomination for the Labour seat. This decision is seen by her husband as nothing more than a desperate attempt to ruin his relationship with Rain, who is completely in the dark about Mor’s political ambitions. The revelation, which takes place during the formal dinner at St Bride’s for the official presentation of Mr. Demoyte’s portrait, indeed destroys the love story between Rain and the protagonist, but even though Mor does not understand it, his wife’s decision is the public, as well as the intimate, acknowledgment of his real being. In this way, Nan achieves her freedom, by recognising the existence of the other and withdrawing herself from her egocentric vision of reality:

Her normal existence had not demanded, had even excluded reflection. It had contained her firmly like a shell with every craned filled [...] Now the pressure of reality upon her had been withdrawn and she was left alone in the centre of a void where she had suddenly to determine afresh the form and direction of her being.⁸⁴

It is interesting to notice how the effective achieving of freedom, the utter understanding of what it means to be free, that is, attending to the contingent and eliminating selfishness by one’s psyche, is a goal reached by female characters in this novel. Both Nan and Rain acquire their freedom by recognising Mor as a real, impenetrable human person, who is independent from their will and their desires, and if it is true that Bledyard is the character who best expresses and represents, though only theoretically, Murdoch’s ideas on this, it is also true that Mor, the protagonist, is far from comprehending this concept. His love for Rain, his bid for freedom comes from the anger and resentment he feels towards who, he thinks, has always limited him and prevented

⁸³ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 77.

⁸⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 226.

the expression of his real being. It is no surprise, therefore, that when he reasserts his feelings for her, what she means for him, in a desperate attempt to keep her from leaving, he does it using self-centred statements to convince her:

I love you, and nothing else is of any importance [...] He spoke savagely, trying to force the ideas into her mind. [...] I began to be when I loved you, I saw the world for the first time, the beautiful world full of things and animals that I'd never seen before. What do you think will happen to me if you leave me now?⁸⁵

His being married, his difficult and complicated relationship with his wife and the presence of his children are, to Rain's eyes, those limitations to freedom she cannot ignore. While Mor, in his strive for what he believes to be his personal fulfilment, is deforming the nature of reality by fantasy, Rain, after having thought about it, becomes aware of the impossibility of their life together. It is her decision, as a matter of fact, that changes the situation, it is her who makes the choice of going away without him, thus renouncing their love. First Bledyard, then Rain herself, try to explain to Mor the impossibility of living their love. In his pursuit of happiness and in his blind certainty that freedom for him means a life with Rain, regardless of all the rest, Mor leaves out everything, ignoring the other persons involved to reach his personal satisfaction.

As Byatt notices, Bledyard, one of the first who tries to convince Mor, to make him understand, "uses against him the definition of freedom he has himself already offered to the W.E.A. class"⁸⁶:

'You speak as if this were a sort of virtue,' said Bledyard, 'you speak as if to be a free man was just to get what you want regardless of convention. But real freedom is a total absence of concern about yourself.'⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 299- 301.

⁸⁶ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 75.

⁸⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 213.

Bledyard thinks that Mor is, in a way, “diminishing Rain by involving her in all this”⁸⁸, and it is through the argument of painting that Bledyard explains his point of view: “A painter can only paint what he is. You will prevent her from being a great painter.”⁸⁹ What Bledyard has comprehended at first sight, Mor refuses to see, and as a matter of fact, it is Rain who, “by respecting the ‘otherness’ of the other partner, breaks the impossible fantasy.”⁹⁰ When she comes to know of the protagonist’s intention to candidate himself for the Labour seat, she recognizes the limiting power of reality, and she understands that real freedom means not to limit each other:

You are a growing tree. I am only a bird. You cannot break your roots and fly away with me. Where could we go where you wouldn’t always be wanting the deep things that belong to you, to your children, and this work which you know is your work? [...] I should die if I were prevented from painting.⁹¹

Mor feels that all he has always wanted is going away from him, but, after having reflected for some time alone, he comes to Demoyte’s house in search for Rain and, finding out that she has gone without a word, he can do nothing but observing that “it was inevitable”. The old man, who has always been in favour of his strive for freedom and has always been hostile to Nan, replies that “Nothing was inevitable. You have made your own future.”⁹² Even though Mor has not consciously taken this decision, “Demoyte is surely right in that there is a sense in which it is the result of his life and his nature”⁹³. If, therefore, Mor ‘began to be’ when he fell in love with Rain, the events, Rain’s departure and what has happened to his son Donald, have pushed him back into that

⁸⁸ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 75.

⁸⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 214.

⁹⁰ A. S Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 75.

⁹¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* cit., p. 304.

⁹² *Ibid*, cit., p. 307.

⁹³ A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 76.

reality of which nature he cannot deform and back into “the moral virtues with the task of going on from there.”⁹⁴

The novel ends with the Mor family coming back to normality and the protagonist’s decision to leave his job as a teacher in order to candidate for the Labour seat. Changes not only affect the protagonist and his wife, but also the children. Donald, after having risked his life in an act of bravado (he tries, together with a friend, to climb up the highest tower of St Brides but fails and risks to fall) runs away from home as a desperate act to express his unease. He feels he has been forced into university by his family, and by Mor in particular, while all he has always wanted to do is training as an apprentice in Tim Burke’s workshop. Felicity as well, after having found out the relationship between her father and Rain, goes in for magic rituals in order to bring things back to the normal and in the end Nan accepts that she shall attempt to go to university.

1.8 Conclusion

In the end, as said before, though the difficulties remain (Nan and Mor’s union is far from being consolidated, and Mor’s lack of feelings for his wife will not probably change), “some kind of insight has clearly been achieved by both partners to their marriage”⁹⁵. Nan has had, through what happened, the chance to reflect and to think about Mor and their relationship in a new and different way, learning to consider him for what he is, and thus accepting his nature as an independent and different being. Mor, despite himself, has been forced to accept the limits of reality, and to understand the unreal nature of his idea of freedom; he comes back to what was his life before the encounter with Rain, with the awareness that real freedom involves ‘forgetting oneself and concern about the other’. So, as Byatt concludes,

⁹⁴ *Ivi.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

...at the end of the book, having progressed in different directions away from normality, the two come together again, to make, we are told, wiser decisions about the future of their children.⁹⁶

What Murdoch shows in this novel is how an apparently 'basic human problem', an ordinary story of unfaithfulness and unhappy marriage can instead reveal deeper questions, such as what can be considered as freedom and to what extent reality can be modified by merely desiring it. The author's concept of freedom as the absence of concern about oneself and instead the focusing on the other also emerges in her idea of good, which can be achieved only through "the continual expelling of oneself from the matter in hand"⁹⁷.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁹⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited* cit., p. 257.

Chapter 2:

The Italian Girl

2.1. The importance of recovering the past

The Italian Girl, published in 1964, is Murdoch's eighth novel and has been defined by some critics, Bran Nicol among them, as one of Murdoch's "retrospective novels", a term which well defines the importance of the past in some of her works and the need for her characters to face it. The fact of giving importance to the past affects not only Murdoch since, as Nicol points out in his *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction*:

After the trauma of the war there was the conviction among writers and intellectuals that 'some line of communication with the past had been severed' and the result was that it was all the more important to consider just what the past *meant* for those in the present.⁹⁸

In the socio-cultural environment of the post-war years, in which Iris Murdoch started off as a novelist, there was a particular and new interest in looking back to what had been, in a way, erased by the conflict. The importance of recovering and coming to terms with the past, for Murdoch, as for the other novelists of the post-war era, thus becomes fundamental. Once again, though, Murdoch's work is different; her fiction, as a matter of fact, "offers a fascinating counterpoint to the 'retrospective dominant' in the post-war novel"⁹⁹, also because it diverges from the work of other writers in its way of exploring the past. Her novels explore, as Nicol says,

What we might call the 'natural' forms of loss we all inevitably experience – time, love, other people – and also a more unexpected, tragic kind of loss, which features in the large number of her novels which are concerned with guilt.¹⁰⁰

Murdoch's approach in telling of this kind of nostalgia for the past shows that the theoretic counterpart of her work is, undoubtedly, psychoanalysis. Her writings, as a

⁹⁸ Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction*, London, MacMillan, 1999, p., 31-32.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁰ *Ivi.*

matter of fact, have to do with psychoanalysis much more than the works of other novelists of the same period. By reading the novels which form part of her so called “retrospective fiction”, it becomes clear that Murdoch’s work has in common with psychoanalysis two convictions:

The notion that the past will always find a way of making itself present [...] and that the subject is compelled somehow to make sense of it – in psychoanalytic terminology, to bring it into signification.¹⁰¹

This “bringing the past into signification” makes murdochian characters descent into their own past and, therefore, into “their own mind – a journey which is also analogous to the psychoanalytic process”¹⁰². Thence Murdoch’s appraisal of previous writers, the nineteenth-century realists who, in her opinion, succeeded in doing what is precluded to the twentieth-century novelists. In her thought, the nineteenth century represents a sort of “nostalgic zone, a home from which we in the twentieth century are sadly exiled.”¹⁰³ The reason why the twentieth century novelists are not able to reach the same results in writing is, for Murdoch, clear:

I think literature is about the struggle between good and evil, but this does not appear clearly in modern writing, where there is an atmosphere of moral diffidence and where the characters presented are usually mediocre.¹⁰⁴

Yet, despite Murdoch’s opinions on the primacy of the novels of nineteenth century and the presence in her books of a “kind of nostalgia”¹⁰⁵, she never actually sets any of her works in that period. Unlike some of her post-war contemporaries who clearly express this nostalgia for the nineteenth century style, in Murdoch’s novels nostalgia is “felt

¹⁰¹ *Ivi.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁴ *Ivi.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

implicitly rather than evoked directly [...] At its most basic, her preference for a previous age is conveyed as a subtle impatience with the present”¹⁰⁶.

2.2. Murdoch’s first person retrospective novels

Given the relevance of the retrospection and of the facing of the past in Murdoch’s fiction, there are two ways of dealing with the past in her novels. Either the novel tells of the characters’ precise will of recovering the past, or the characters “cannot help *re-*covering it”¹⁰⁷. As Nicol states talking about Murdoch’s novels concerned with the coming back of the past and the characters’ successful or failing attempts of handling it:

It is no surprise they are first-person novels, for there is something about the way Murdoch has harnessed the claustrophobic potential of this form, where everything is presented to us through the consciousness of one character, which makes the return of the past seem particularly insistent.¹⁰⁸

The two movements Nicol has identified, on the one hand the wish of recovering the past, and on the other the attempts of keeping it underneath the surface are, therefore, most visible and effective in the novels narrated in first person. *The Italian Girl* is not the only one in Murdoch’s production; other novels, such as *Under the Net*, *A Severed Head*, *The Sea, the Sea* are narrated in first person, and this renders the relationship with the past even more effective and meaningful, the protagonist being also the narrator. Besides the fact that the story is told by the protagonist, the important aspect of Murdoch’s first-person retrospective fiction is the “very experience of using a narrative to look back on his past.”¹⁰⁹ The fact that the protagonist tells of his own past, and thus gives to the

¹⁰⁶ *Ivi.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁰⁸ *Ivi.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

reader his own point of view reporting things through the filter of his consciousness, is seen by Nicol as:

a *net* cast over the real of the past, a way of imposing form on top of raw material, an attempt to symbolize what is unsymbolizable.¹¹⁰

What characterizes Murdoch's first person novels is, therefore, a peculiar synthesis between the content, the reality of the past, the so called "raw material", and the form, that is "the net" given by first person narration.

First person narration, though, also implies difficulties and problems of which Murdoch is well aware. As an admirer of nineteenth-century realism, of the kind of author who does not try to impose his opinions on the readers but on the contrary seeks to "*respect* the other points of view"¹¹¹ in his novel, Murdoch clearly understands that

To decide on first-person form is to confront a particular 'danger': 'it's harder then to create other characters who can stand up to the narrator, because they're being seen through his eyes'.¹¹²

From this perspective her first-person novels seem to be in conflict with her approach to fiction; the aspect she has always criticised, that is, the excessive introspection which characterizes modern fiction, runs the risk of invading her works, precisely because of the use of first person narration. The protagonists of Murdoch's first-person retrospective novels have in common what Hilda Spear calls "a self absorbed view of events which precludes the reader from being able at first in any way to assess a wider truth."¹¹³, and it is precisely by experiencing and living through the many twists of murdochian plots that they discover that, as Byatt remarks, "No single view of the world, no one vision, is

¹¹⁰ *Ivi.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹¹³ Hilda, D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 39.

shown to be adequate.”¹¹⁴ It becomes clear that the novels tell a truth which is ahead of the narrators’ oversimplified view and that they are, in the end,

[...] forced to understand that they are not at the centre of their world and, further, that what they had seen as the solidity of their world is built upon the quicksand of their own self-deception.¹¹⁵

The fact that, through the events of the novels, the protagonists discover the existence of other people in the world around them, and become aware that their perspective on things is not the only possible one, creates in the end the space for the other characters:

What she does, in other words, is allow her hero to undo his own point of view. Although he monopolizes the text he is forced to acknowledge the counter-words of others.¹¹⁶

This mechanism is evident in all her six first-person retrospective novels and the other aspect which of course all of them share is that they work on “two main temporal levels”¹¹⁷. The narrator in the novel, therefore, recalls the past and is forced to think back to what he was before and to what he is now, at the time of the narration. This is what happens to the protagonist of *The Italian Girl* as well, Edmund Narraway; the novel begins with his forced coming back to his childhood home and the meeting with his family, after quite a long period, in occasion of his mother’s passing away. Notwithstanding the introspection to which Edmund is forced by the recalling of past events and by his coming back to his childhood home, there seems to be no awareness achieved, at least at the very beginning of the novel. Edmund’s narration of what happened in his life in the past is not deliberate recalling, but instead “involuntary recovery” by someone who has been forced by the events of the plot to get his past back. Despite what happened in the section of his life described in the novel, his present self at

¹¹⁴ A.S. Byatt, *Iris Murdoch: A Critical Study* London, Longman, 1976, p. 19.

¹¹⁵ H. D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 39.

¹¹⁶ Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 59.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

the end of the narration is not very different from his former self and, as Nicol efficaciously underlines:

At the end of *The Italian Girl* and *A Word Child* it seems that the narrator has undergone something like the progression from illusion to enlightenment, from consonance to dissonance, that figures in *The Black Prince* or *The Sea, the Sea*. Yet where the latter texts do suggest that some kind of wisdom has been reached as a result of the experience undergone and the act of writing about it, the narrators of the former remain, to paraphrase their author, benighted creatures trapped in a reality they deform by fantasy.¹¹⁸

Nicol is surely right in underlining this lack of awareness, this sensation of lacking ‘intelligence’ in the protagonist. Being begged to stay in order to help his relatives, he gets involved in their problems, ends out being stuck and, therefore, unable to make any good to his family. Despite this, however, a substantial and meaningful change does indeed happen in Edmund. Through the forced, shocking recovering of the past, at the end of the novel the protagonist achieves something really important. While at the beginning he is an indifferent spectator of his family’s predicament and sufferings, he gradually becomes personally involved in the events, thus realizing he has to begin living his life. Starting from the role of the detached and cold external passer-by, indifferent to what happens to the people he had relegated into the past, Edmund first gets emotionally and morally involved in the events and then, finally, becomes a person that actually lives his life and does not only observe it passing by.

2.3. Nostalgia and the feeling of the uncanny in *The Italian Girl*

The Italian Girl may seem “an uncanny Gothic tale narrated in an anachronistic voice”¹¹⁹, which according to some critics, is far from convincing. Hilda Spear as well, in

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

her chapter on Murdoch's Romantic phase, even goes as far as defining it "probably the least successful of all Murdoch's novels."¹²⁰ Spear ascribes this lack of success to the fact that "the mythical and realistic elements" of which the novel is made of are, as she says, "insufficiently fused"¹²¹, thus creating a sort of empty space at the centre of it, which not even the first person narration and the figure of the protagonist is able to fill. Deborah Johnson shares this view, underlining that, in her opinion, one of the main reasons why the novel is so unconvincing is, precisely, "the handling of the male narrator, Edmund [...] the unsatisfactoriness and undeveloped nature of Edmund as *persona*."¹²² Johnson notices that, differently from other novels by Murdoch belonging to the same 'romantic phase', here the author is ambiguous, not making clear to what extent she is in tune with her character, since Edmund

lacks the rhetorical presence of Iris Murdoch's other dramatised narrators and has no clear relationship (of complicity or otherwise) with his readers.¹²³

Despite this difference between *The Italian Girl* and the other first person novels, there also are elements in common. As the other first person novels, this work is concerned with the philosophical themes, such as truth and love, which have always been dear to Murdoch and had already been treated in her previous novels too, as we have seen in the analysis of *The Sandcastle* in chapter One. Another element *The Italian Girl* shares with *The Sandcastle* is, as Spear states, "the responsibilities, impositions and ties of marriage":

[...] these problems had been touched on before, though the marital troubles of Mor and his wife in *The Sandcastle* appeared to be fairly straightforward.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ H. D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p.50.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹²² Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch*, Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1987, cit., p. 30.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹²⁴ H.D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 37.

According to Nicol, in addition to the concepts of truth, love and guilt, which are common to many Murdochian novels, what constitutes a particular and distinguishable aspect of *The Italian Girl* is “the sense of nostalgia”¹²⁵. This term, as Nicol observes, has perhaps been underestimated and used in a denigrating way, due to the fact that it recalls an excessive affection to the past, “yet we should not, I think, underestimate the positive value of nostalgia as a literary mood.”¹²⁶ What Nicol tries to assert is the fact that nostalgia is relevant because it represents the other face of a central theme in *The Italian Girl*, that is, the uncanny; both the sense of nostalgia and of the uncanny are aspects of the act of involuntarily recalling the past. In the case of Edmund, who has come back after being absent for many years from his house of origin and his family, the uncanny:

involves an unwilling return to a forgotten home. The uncanny is where the familiar resurfaces in an unfamiliar way, nostalgia is where unfamiliarity activates the desire to bring about the familiar.¹²⁷

At the very beginning of the novel Edmund comes back reluctantly, and the only reason why he does is that he has to take part to his mother’s burial. As narrated by his own voice:

[...] whatever happened I would probably never, after this one time, return. My mother’s existence here had been the reason for my not coming. Now her non-existence would provide an even stronger reason.¹²⁸

Edmund’s anxiety about returning to his house of origin, the reluctance he feels in seeing again the house are linked to his childhood and to the relationship with his family, and “the anguish and excitement he felt then” were caused in particular by “the suffocating

¹²⁵ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 123.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹²⁷ *Ivi.*

¹²⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1964, cit., p. 12.

love of his mother”¹²⁹. If the protagonist’s returning home expresses at first sight a sense of the uncanny, it is yet undeniable that a strong element of nostalgia is also present, hidden under the net of Edmund’s negative memories about the place. Nostalgia can be described:

A process brought on typically by accident, when something occurs which causes the mind to jump backwards to a significant time or place. As a particular form of melancholy triggered specifically by the feeling of being absent from home.¹³⁰

The “accident” that triggers in Edmund the sense of nostalgia, that is of the pain caused by his absence from home, is the encounter with David Levkin, his brother’s apprentice. When the protagonist reaches his house late at night, in complete darkness and silence, he finds nobody waiting for him, the only person awake is David, a stranger Edmund has never met before. This first contact with the weird man awakens in Edmund a different feeling toward the place, a sensation which exceeds the reluctance and the sense of ‘unfamiliar’:

A soft voice said, ‘Ah - you must be the brother.’
‘Yes. Who are you?’
‘I am your brother’s apprentice. My name is David Levkin. For a moment you frightened me. Are you locked out?’
‘Yes’ I hated saying this to him, and suddenly all my old love for the place, my old patriotism for it, filled me with pain. I was locked out. It was monstrous.¹³¹

The fact that he has come back to what once was his home, where he spent his childhood, and he finds a stranger waiting for him instead of his family evokes that notion of the “uncanny” Freud talks about in his works: “the uncanny as a kind of homecoming, a familiar yet unfamiliar experience.”¹³² The weird, uncanny sensation of coming back to

¹²⁹ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 124.

¹³⁰ Ivi.

¹³¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 13.

¹³² B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 124.

his house of origin and of being welcomed by a stranger mingles, thus, with the nostalgia triggered by his being again in a place full of memories he unconsciously longs to recover. Levkin himself is a personification, in this scene, of the double and ambivalent sensation felt by Edmund. He is a complete stranger for the protagonist, but Edmund realizes with nuisance and pain that he is actually part of the family, to the extent of being in possession of the keys to get into the house. The familiar and yet unfamiliar experience of meeting Levkin well symbolizes Edmund's attitude, split between the awareness of being back home and the uncanny memories related to the place.

The sense of the uncanny, though, appears to be stronger and more present than the nostalgic attitude, and as a matter of fact, immediately after his arrival, the protagonist is involved in another episode that confirms his homecoming as a "familiar yet unfamiliar experience". Thank to Levkin he is able to get into his old house, and in the dark, "he enters the room where his mother's corpse lies, and cannot dispel an eerie feeling that she may not be dead after all."¹³³

[...] I had not yet really conceived of her as dead. [...] The sense of her mortality invaded me now, and it became inevitable that I should enter her room.

[...]

Her long hair which had been bronze once, now a dark brown striped with grey, seemed vital still, as if the terrible news had not yet come to it.¹³⁴

Through this uncanny encounter with his mother's dead body, and by observing her face and hair, Edmund realizes that even though they have had no contact for years, there still remains a strong tie, the bond that used to unite them in his childhood. The unnatural sensation he feels mixes, here, with the nostalgia arising from the homecoming and from the resurfacing of his mother's remembrance:

¹³³ *Ibid.*, cit., p. 125.

¹³⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 14 - 15.

Of course I had never really escaped from Lydia. Lydia had got inside me, into the depths of my being, there was no abyss and no darkness where she was not.¹³⁵

2.4. The bond of marriage: Isabel and Otto

Although Edmund is the protagonist of the novel and he narrates the story in his own voice, therefore according to his own perspective and opinions, he has been defined as one of the least successful protagonists of Murdoch's first person novels. As already underlined, it is never clear to what extent the author "is in collusion with Edmund"¹³⁶, and this creates a sort of insecurity in the novel, a lack of clarity which obstructs and:

fails to blend convincingly the issues which dominate her philosophy (like the role of the contingent and the desire to be good) with the plot and the characterization.¹³⁷

In this novel there is a sort of distance between the personality of the characters, of the protagonist in particular, and the events happening in the plot, meant to symbolize the philosophical and moral issues Murdoch has always dealt with. If we take Isabel and Otto, for instance, it becomes clear that, in a way, they embody the bid for freedom which is common to several Murdochian characters. Imprisoned in a joyless marriage which has been damaged also by Lydia's intrusive and negative presence, Isabel cannot but express her malaise through the extra marital affair she has with David Levkin.

As Spear observes, one of the aspects Murdoch tries to show in the novel is the "terrible strength of inward conditioning"¹³⁸, the voluntary renunciation to assert one's freedom which arises from the supposedly unbreakable bonds imposed by society. The

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹³⁶ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 126.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹³⁸ H. D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 37.

marriage with Otto is felt by Isabel as a tie, both dictated by the sense of duty and by her own conscience, in the sense that she feels in a way tied to her husband, and this makes her remain with Otto:

At the end of *The Italian Girl*, when Otto and Isabel part at last, Isabel tells Edmund that she had gone on staying with her husband for so long because, ‘I kept being sorry for him in a bad way...it was just an obsessive sense of connexion with him...’¹³⁹

Things change all of a sudden when she meets Levkin. Isabel’s desire of affirming her freedom of being happy with the person she really loves recalls Mor’s attempts to leave his wife for the outsider Rain Carter in *The Sandcastle*. The same thing could be said about Otto, who instead, has a relationship with Elsa, David’s sister, thus creating a tangle in which Flora finds place as well, despite herself. Even though it is undeniable that “marriage is the dark bond”¹⁴⁰ in this novel, it would be reductive to consider *The Italian Girl* “as being merely concerned with the unconscious bonds of traditional morality”¹⁴¹, and the peculiar tie between Otto and Elsa, for instance, shows the presence of a very different love story. Unlike *The Sandcastle*, in *The Italian Girl* the characters, or at least some of them, finally reach the freedom they have been longing throughout the novel. Isabel “is left at the end of the story happily pregnant”¹⁴² by Levkin and Otto agrees to letting her go. Their parting, as a matter of fact, allows him to gain his own freedom as well. In addition to the idea of freedom and the strive to gain it, another concept the novel hints at, even though not successfully if compared to its treatment in other works by Murdoch, is the attempt of doing good. In more than one episode, the other characters associate ‘doing good’ with Edmund. Otto remarks it while confessing to

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁴⁰ *Ivi.*

¹⁴¹ *Ivi.*

¹⁴² D. Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 30.

him he has an affair with Elsa, and Isabel while asking him to stay with the family: “You would do good, good. Someone like you can’t help doing good.”¹⁴³

2.5. From detachment to involvement: Edmund and his family

What becomes visible about this difficult situation for the family, and is set in antithesis with the importance given to ‘the desire of being good’, is Edmund’s detachment. Murdoch’s intent is to underline his voluntary absence and indifference to the problems of his family, that instead leans on him and on his “good” presence. Edmund’s coldness could be “put down to the ‘rapacious violence’ of his mother’s devouring attentions”¹⁴⁴, an aspect that profoundly influenced his childhood and his later relationship with other people. Despite being relatively young he is single, lives what he himself defines as an isolated existence and he also seems to have a clear idea of the reasons at the bottom of this loneliness:

I lived a solitary life. It had not always been so. But my relations with women always followed a certain disastrous and finally familiar pattern. I did not need a psychoanalyst to tell me why [...] ¹⁴⁵

One of the aspects characterizing Edmund’s lonely and isolated life as a bachelor is the dislike he feels towards women. His abhorrence of women, the sense of vague disgust they provoke in him is a feeling which can be found in other protagonists of Murdoch’s first person novels, such as Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, the Sea* for instance. The slight misogyny which unites these two characters has been noticed by Nicol as well:

In common with many Murdoch characters (Charles Arrowby, for example) Edmund notes with distaste ‘female’ symbols such

¹⁴³ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 78.

¹⁴⁴ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 126.

¹⁴⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 24.

as open mouths (IG 79), and regards married people as ‘obscene animals’ (IG 107).¹⁴⁶

In several occasions, mostly during the dialogues with Isabel, Edmund’s prudishness becomes visible as a sense of distaste but also pity for her predicament, especially when she turns to him for help in solving the problems of the family and of her marriage. Immediately after Lydia’s funeral, as a matter of fact, Edmund is determined to leave the house and come back to his lonely life as a bachelor, but he is stopped by Isabel, who begs him to stay:

‘You must stay. Something will hold you here. You must stay on now and help us. Otto needs you. We all need you.
[...]
‘You are many things. You are a good man. You are a sort of doctor. You are the assessor, the judge, the inspector, the liberator. You will clear us all up. You will set us in order. You will set us free’.¹⁴⁷

Through the decision to help Isabel, his brother Otto and most importantly their daughter Flora, the protagonist’s refusal to live his past again turns into what we have defined “an involuntary recovery” of memories. Edmund is initially very hesitant, his only reason for being in that house again is the ceremony for his mother’s death. The several problems and mutual defiance which exist long since in Otto and Isabel’s marriage seem not to touch him at all. The feeling of detachment is clear in his observations during one of the conversations he has with Isabel, when the woman begs him to help them:

I was a little nervous of the note of appeal in her voice. I did not want any display of Isabel’s emotions. I had no wish to hear her confessions and complaints.
[...] I shrank instinctively from this. I was, after all, only a passer-by.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ B. Nicol. *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 126.

¹⁴⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 36.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

In a different occasion, once again, he underlines the role he thinks he has in the family while talking to Otto. It is interesting to notice how, even though Edmund pities the members of his family for their unhappiness, he is absolutely determined not to take part to their life: “After all, I was the one that watched.”¹⁴⁹ This observation clearly shows the will of remaining outside, detached from the reality of his family and, therefore, closed into his own perception of reality. The decision Edmund takes, despite himself, to stay and help his family clearly entails a sort of effort for him, symbolizing a regression to the past. The fact of being again in the house of his youth “involves a psychological return to his childhood”¹⁵⁰. Deborah Johnson, incidentally, writes that the protagonist’s prolonged stay represents the regression to the past he has always tried to avoid:

Edmund, initially seen as everyone’s advisor, [...] (a view of his powers which understandably alarms him), gradually and reluctantly becomes reinvolved in the Oedipal family drama.¹⁵¹

This coming back to the past, voluntarily or not, has a double significance for the protagonist; on the one hand, it causes anxiety and the instinct to shrink from what he lived in his childhood, mainly due to his mother’s obsessive and suffocating presence. On the other, though, there also is a sort of “anguish at having left childhood”¹⁵², as Nicol observes. From this point of view, therefore, Edmund appears as a character whose personality and choices are split into two different and opposed parts. The refusal to come back is shown through the protagonist’s reluctance and detachment when confronted with his family’s problems, but he seems altogether “riveted to the past, longing to remove himself altogether from the adult world.”¹⁵³ Unlike *The Sea, the Sea*,

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁵⁰ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 124.

¹⁵¹ D. Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 33.

¹⁵² B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 127.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

where Arrowby's desire to return to a world existing exclusively in the past is analysed and described in depth, in *The Italian Girl* Edmund's "longing to return to the absent world of his childhood"¹⁵⁴ is represented through what Nicol defines as "a form of transference."¹⁵⁵

2.6. "Return to childhood" and "awakened sexual interest": Flora and Elsa

Here, another important character gains relevance for the novel, that is, Edmund's niece, Flora. The girl, Otto and Isabel's daughter, represents at Edmund's eyes a projection of his own childhood, and he "conflates the idea of himself as a child with that of his niece"¹⁵⁶. This attitude towards the girl is shown by the fact that he always refers to her as "the child", although she is not one anymore, but is instead old enough to have the same problems as her mother and even to be involved in a sort of love triangle. As Richard Todd suggests, "Edmund seems obscurely to desire her"¹⁵⁷, and while this may be true to a certain extent, the strongest desire of the protagonist still remains "to return to the state of childhood which Flora represents."¹⁵⁸ There are several episodes representing the protagonist's longing for coming back to childhood, thus creating a sort of identity between himself and Flora. When Edmund first sets foot in his old bedroom he is stricken by the vision of the girl asleep on what was his former bed. Flora is described almost as a ghost, a spirit representing infancy, at whose view the protagonist is shocked. By seeing her in what once was his bedroom, he realizes how far and excluded he is from his past and his childhood:

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁵⁵ *Ivi.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ivi.*

¹⁵⁷ R. Todd, *Iris Murdoch*, New York, Methuen and Co., 1984, cit., p. 58.

¹⁵⁸ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 127.

For a moment it seemed like a hallucination, something hollow and incompletely perceived [...]
This was a magic of exclusion which was too strong for me. A moment later, like an evil spirit put to fly, I was stumbling away down the stairs.¹⁵⁹

The sense of nostalgia and the desire of the protagonist to recover, in a way, his childhood is clearly shown through the attitude he has towards Flora. As Nicol observes about the episode of the bedroom, the protagonist describes the scene using words like “hallucination” and talking about “something incompletely perceived”, thus underlining the fact that:

Both Edmund and the sleeping girl are, appropriately, compared to ghosts: he, the ghost of the adult the child will become, she the ghost of the child he once was.¹⁶⁰

The “mutual connection”¹⁶¹ Edmund has with his niece seems to come to an end, anyway, when she confides to him the predicament she is in. Not only she is no longer a child, but she has also had a relationship with a man, she got pregnant and all this without her parents’ knowledge. The girl, thus, turns to Edmund for help, and again he is torn between two different reactions to the event. At first, he is disgusted and shocked, but at the same time his relation with Flora ends out by being reinforced, their bond becoming even tighter. When the girl tells him that she has no intention to keep the baby, Edmund’s morality and ethical consciousness rises against her decision to have an abortion:

I felt as much horror and instinctive disgust at her pregnancy as if she had told me that she had some loathsome disease. Mingled with this was a moral nausea at her plight and at its suggested remedy.
[...]
It seems to me impossible to gloss over the fact that an abortion is a murder, the termination of an innocent life.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 18

¹⁶⁰ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 127.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁶² Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 52 - 53.

By coming to know what Flora has done, Edmund's perception of the girl changes, and he realizes that all the feelings of purity and innocence which he had seen surrounding her have suddenly passed to the helpless baby she wants to get rid of. Edmund, thus, refuses to help Flora getting an abortion and instead tries to convince her to keep the baby, but she refuses and, desperate, runs away and leaves him alone in the garden. Interestingly enough the dramatic conversation between the two takes place outside the house, in an overgrown part of the garden. Edmund is guided into the vegetation by Flora – as Nicol observes, “the name appropriately suggests the blossoming of youth”¹⁶³ – and while walking he realizes that “the place had me now under some sweet compulsion, and I followed”¹⁶⁴. Flora leads him to a little waterfall surrounded by flowered shrubs, the place where Edmund as well used to hide during his childhood. By seeing his niece in that place, he remembers the time he spent there as a child with his brother Otto, also realizing, though, that the cascade “had been my place. Now it belonged to Flora.”¹⁶⁵ The numerous scenes which are set in the garden clearly show the importance of this place for Edmund, in that it represents the protagonist's nostalgia about a time of his life that, he knows, is finished and cannot be recovered. As Nicol underlines, “though nostalgia may really be about time, space remains a crucial element in the equation”¹⁶⁶ and even though the time of childhood has gone for good, the garden still represents something important:

For us children had formed a vast region of romance. I sighed. I could not remember being happy in childhood, but now it was as if the woods remembered it for me.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 127.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁶⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 35.

The scene of Flora's confession surrounded by vegetation and flowers has a strong symbolic value. Whereas, before their exchange of views, Edmund still considers her as a child, someone who embodies youth and innocence, this perception changes suddenly. Through the shock caused by the revelation of her pregnancy, he starts to 'see' her in a different way, to see her for the first time as an adult, it could be said. While they are immersed in the vegetation he is even able to distinguish clearly her dress: "in all this I saw Flora clearly, saw that her great-skirted dress was not white, as I had seen before, but a very pale blue and covered with little black sprigs of flowers."¹⁶⁸ This new, clear vision symbolises the shift of perception of Flora, from child to person:

It suggests a parallel moral focusing upon Flora as Edmund sees her step out of the pretty picture frame and confront him as a person who is damaged and angry.¹⁶⁹

This shifting of perception, this change in the consideration of Flora Edmund used to entertain is clearly shown since the very beginning of the chapter which, as a matter of fact, is entitled "Flora and Experience". As underlined by Johnson, in this chapter the girl "moves from innocence to experience against a background of flowers and vegetation"¹⁷⁰, almost like a modern Eve, to whom she is associated in the novel, although implicitly. The vividness of Flora's description introduces another interesting and important aspect. Throughout the entire novel "the details of Edmund's visual perceptions are vividly rendered"¹⁷¹, in order to create a sort of voyeurism characterizing the figure of the protagonist. There are many other episodes in which he sees, observes and watches, thus "giving the whole narrative something of the heightened colouring and economy of a dream."¹⁷² One of these scenes involves the third female character of the

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁶⁹ D. Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 31.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32

¹⁷² *Ivi.*

novel, that is, Elsa. In the chapter entitled 'The magic Brothel', immersed in a very unreal and dreamlike atmosphere, a mysterious woman catches the protagonist's attention. On his first encounter with Elsa, as when he sees for the first time his niece Flora, he exchanges her for a ghost, for a sort of spirit haunting the house in the middle of the night. Edmund immediately thinks about his dead mother and then about his niece, thus clearly showing the link between Elsa and Flora

my first mad thought was that it was Lydia coming back to the house. Then I thought it might be Flora, Flora despairing, Flora running mad.¹⁷³

Edmund is drawn by Elsa towards the summer-house in the garden, where he finds out Otto fast asleep on a sofa. The protagonist's reaction is, again, double. On the one hand he feels embarrassment and disgust at seeing "Otto open-mouthed and snoring, Otto huge, shaggy, deplorably and shamefully present and fast asleep"¹⁷⁴ as if to underline the contrast between the ethereal, unreal figure of Elsa and his brother. Then, observing her more closely, Edmund's perception changes from the vision of her as a solemn, cool and almost magical being to someone who is much more human. He realizes that "she was far from immaculate"¹⁷⁵ but at the same time, even though disgusted by what he sees, he finds her "...extremely attractive. I was filled with a repulsive excitement and shame..."¹⁷⁶ Here, again, returns an element which is rendered visible throughout the entire novel, that is, Edmund's voyeurism. This aspect characterizing the protagonist's perception of the events is important in that it is the answer to:

... the crucial question, why does Edmund forget his breakfast appointment with Flora who has desperately sought his advice...¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 56.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁷⁶ *Ivi.*

¹⁷⁷ D. Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 33.

The protagonist's air of voyeurism while watching young Flora, the weird, uncanny encounter with Elsa and the close look he gives to her, all cause a precise effect on Edmund. As Johnson states:

...the seductive behaviour of Elsa and the 'voyeur-like complicity' with which her brother, 'the delinquent Levkin' speaks of her all have the effect finally of causing Edmund reluctantly and implicitly to confront his own sexuality, the instinctual side of his nature which he has been conveniently ignoring for so long.¹⁷⁸

First the acknowledgement that Flora is no longer a child and that she is even pregnant, then the dreamlike, uncanny and however sensual encounter with Elsa trigger in Edmund sensations he has always hidden and ignored. From the indifferent and detached role of "the one that watched" the protagonist thus becomes 'voyeur', the one who enjoys 'looking at', and therefore, he begins to feel the same passions and instincts which affect the other characters. The "instinctive disgust and moral nausea"¹⁷⁹ that he feels when confronted with Otto and Elsa's relationship or with Flora's pregnancy remain, yet his excitement and attraction towards both women are "signal of awakened sexual interest"¹⁸⁰.

2.7. Innocence, experience and freedom: female characters in *The Italian Girl*

These three female characters have been compared to one another in various ways by Johnson, who maintains in her analysis that the character of Flora, for instance, "has a double in the overtly sexual, half crazed Elsa"¹⁸¹. As she notices, moreover, in some parts

¹⁷⁸ Ivi.

¹⁷⁹ Ivi.

¹⁸⁰ Ivi.

¹⁸¹ Ivi.

of the novels “Flora is implicitly associated with Eve (as are Elsa and Isabel explicitly)”¹⁸². This introduces the question of the representation and the role of female characters in *The Italian Girl*. There is, as a matter of fact, a sort of structure, of order created by the events of the plot, in which female characters have to insert not without difficulty and contradictions. The aspect that almost all the women have in common, except for the Italian girl Maria Magistretti, is the fact of finding themselves in a sort of frame, which is

shaped by the dialectic played out in the novels between constraint (the bonds of love being hard to loose) and freedom with all its ambiguities.¹⁸³

If we consider the character of Isabel, this dualism is particularly evident. She is imprisoned in a marriage with a man she does not love, and finds happiness in her pregnancy and in the fact of being finally free to leave the house and start a new life. The freedom she gains at the end of the novel clashes even more sharply with her initial unhappy condition, and as Johnson observes, she represents “the character who is most conscious of her imprisonment”.¹⁸⁴ Her unease is also expressed through the disdain she feels for the north, where she lives. Despite being Scottish, as a matter of fact, she cannot stand the house and the place she lives in, and she even comes to the point of hating her husband’s work as an engraver, defining it as a Gothic, gloomy art:

‘We are all prisoners here. We are like people in an engraving. God, how I hate engravings! Sorry, Edmund, but there’s something about those black cramped things – it’s a Gothic art, a northern art. [...] God, how I hate the north!’ She tapped her wedding ring with exasperation on the mantelpiece.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁸⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 33.

Isabel's awareness of being "entrapped" into a life she does not want resembles, in a way, Elsa's situation. If the freedom finally achieved is, for Isabel, "a discovery of new, more personal and demanding connections with the world and others"¹⁸⁶, for Elsa it is "a collapse of the self into moral and psychological chaos"¹⁸⁷. The positive connotation of freedom in Isabel's case, thus, becomes a source of desperation and unhappiness for Elsa. When she realizes that, like Isabel, she is put before a sort of liberation, of separation and independence from the man she loves - because Otto has dismissed David and sent them away - the fragility of her mind reveals itself. The air of mystery and sadness Elsa has built around herself with the tale on their Russian escape is another symbol of her detachment from reality, according to her brother. David, unlike his sister, is determined to clutch at this supposed normality, and he does it by telling Edmund what he claims is the real, and far less fascinating story, about where they come from. It is only after Elsa's tragic death that David finally admits his sister had said the truth:

'You thought I was born in Golders Green and that my father was, I forget what, a fur merchant? No. Those were lies. We came from Leningrad like she said, just like she said.'¹⁸⁸

What Elsa exhibits and tells everyone in order to exorcize her suffering and to take refuge from the reality of the world surrounding her, is instead hidden and denied by her brother as a painful and gloomy truth which prevents him from being free in a new country:

'Why did I lie. Well, why should I tell the truth, *such* a truth, to anyone who asks? Why should I wear such a story round the neck and be such a figure to the world? [...] I did not want to be a tragic man, to be the suffering one. I wanted to be light, to be new, to be free-'¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ D. Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 62

¹⁸⁷ Ivi.

¹⁸⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 150.

¹⁸⁹ Ivi.

The female character who is completely different from the figures of Isabel, Flora and Elsa, who are compared to one another from many points of view, is Maria, the Italian girl. As Edmund tells at the very beginning of the book, “we had had in the house, ever since we were small children, a series of Italian nursery maids”¹⁹⁰ as to underline the constant and silent presence of this figure in the family throughout time. Especially in the first chapter, in the episode of Edmund’s coming back home late at night, the uncanny, unfamiliar atmosphere of the house is also given by the sudden appearance of Maria. As for what happened with Flora, taken for a spirit, and with his dead mother, taken to be still alive, Edmund sees something unreal in the Italian girl as well. The “constant stream of Italian housekeepers”¹⁹¹ he has had during his childhood is the reason why, when he sees Maggie for the first time in years, he gets confused:

...some previous Carlotta, some Vittoria merged here with her image; they were indeed all in our minds, so merged and generalized that it seemed as if there had always ever been only one Italian girl.¹⁹²

The figure of Maggie acquires two different meanings in the novel. If Edmund defines himself as “the one that watches” and Otto is called in more than one occasion “the one that eats”, not only literally but also figuratively, Maria is perceived by the other characters as “the one that judges”:

The most authoritative figure in the novel is the virtually invisible and long- exploited maid, the Italian girl, Maria Magistretti, and she judges no one, although for various reasons the others are all afraid of her judgement.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁹¹ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 125.

¹⁹² Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 19.

¹⁹³ D. Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 34.

This authority given to Maggie and the fact that the other characters are afraid of her judgement also shows, according to Johnson, “an implicit feminist perspective”¹⁹⁴ in the novel. Maggie’s opinion and supposed condemnation, as a matter of fact, is most feared by the male characters, Otto and Edmund, almost to show a reversal of roles. If, at the beginning, it seems that the women are to be blamed as the only ones guilty for the predicament they are in, the later events and twists of the plot force Otto and Edmund to become aware of their own mistakes and to face their own faults. Edmund’s insane sexual attraction for Flora, Otto’s extra-marital affair with Elsa and the episodes of violence against his wife Isabel reveal, therefore, that “the men prove to be without authority to judge the women.”¹⁹⁵ Hence the feeling of being ‘condemned’, in a way, by the only person who watches without taking part to the complicated mechanism of relationships. Maria, in reality, does never express any judgement on the other characters, but they feel judged all the same for their lives, that are all but morally exemplary.

This absence of authority, in the sense that nobody among the characters can be said to lead a blameless existence and, therefore, can judge the others, is underlined by Lydia’s own absence. Since she has always represented the head of the family, the only one entitled to judge and decide, “the blame for the monstrous emotions which stalk the house is carried by Lydia”¹⁹⁶, and it could not be otherwise because, as Johnson states, “Lydia is dead, and therefore *must* take the blame; she cannot defend herself.”¹⁹⁷ The character of the Italian girl, the closest to Lydia for authority, thus acquires here another meaning. She not only represents the one that observes and judges, but, for the protagonist, she also seems to become a substitute of the dead mother. As narrated in chapter Thirteen, significantly entitled “Edmund runs to Mother”, despite the coldness of Maggie, her air of judgement and her detachment from the situation, the protagonist feels

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁹⁵ *Ivi.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ivi.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ivi.*

the need to confide to choose her as the person with whom to talk about the problems of his family he is anguished about:

Her eyes, with that damp strange animal look, seemed forbidding and suspicious. I felt troubled by a sharp need to talk to her, together with a paralysing absence of wit. I felt extremely upset, ill-used, lacerated, I wanted comfort: yet how could I ask for it here?¹⁹⁸

Maggie, thus, might symbolize Lydia's substitute for Edmund. According to Nicol, the protagonist's decision, in the end, of going to Italy with Maggie "means Edmund has decided on nothing other than a mother-substitute"¹⁹⁹, but the decision might have a different meaning as well. Maggie is not only a substitute in moral and authoritative terms of his mother Lydia, but she also is the clear demonstration of the important change undergone by the protagonist. Through the upsetting, painful events of the story and through his becoming aware that he is in love with Maggie, Edmund realizes he is no longer the one that watches, but he has become the one that lives. The Italian girl is not the symbol of an uncanny, negative past which comes back to haunt the protagonist, but instead she represents all the possibility of freedom and happiness the future implies.

2.8. Conclusion

Critics have underlined several flaws in this novel, the most important and evident being the figure of the protagonist. As some critics have noticed, the novel gives the idea of incompleteness:

compared with the other novels *The Italian Girl* lacks a body and a heart; it is a poetic curiosity, a 'severed head'.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 113.

¹⁹⁹ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 125.

²⁰⁰ D. Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 35.

This is due to the already discussed detachment of Murdoch from her protagonist. Edmund, as a matter of fact, is haunted by his past and at the same time longs to recover it, he seems indifferent towards his family but then he gets involved in a twist of lies and deceptions he is unable to manage, thus resulting vague and irresolute. Initially seen as the “good man” the one who is supposed to heal and save the rest of the family, Edmund soon falls himself, involuntarily, in the drama going on in the house, and like the other characters he is subjected to the twists and turns of events in the narration, ending out by being overwhelmed by them. His attempts at “doing good” to his family reveal themselves ruinous, but despite this, in the end he manages to make something good, even though for himself. By becoming aware that he is in love with Maggie, as a matter of fact, he also feels that he is beginning for the first time to live his life for real. He finally realizes he was a cold spectator, somebody who just observed the other people’s lives, always shrinking from living his own. The painful, shocking events of the plot force him to come to terms not only with the past he has always tried to escape, but also with his unconscious refusal to actually live his life :

I had had no powers here to heal the ills of others, I had merely discovered my own. I had thought to have passed beyond life, but now it seemed to me I had simply evaded it.²⁰¹

The novel deals, moreover, with interesting and typically murdochian themes, such as the longing for freedom of Isabel and Otto for instance, or Elsa’s desperate search for peace, ending in the tragic decision to take away her own life. Another important theme is of course the protagonist’s tormented and double attitude towards the past, described through the pure but also sensual bond with Flora. As explained by Nicol, the substance of the novel stays in Edmund’s dualism:

²⁰¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 170.

Its hero attempts to run away from the forward movement of the past while simultaneously trying to reach back into his own history and find something to hold on to.²⁰²

It can be concluded that *The Italian Girl* is undoubtedly an ambivalent novel, and this is visible in Edmund's conflicting relationship with the past, a time of innocence he would like to recover, but at the same time a period of his life which "is also full of things he fears and must escape."²⁰³ What critics often failed to consider, and which is instead significant in the novel, is Edmund's change of attitude and perspective on the events of his own life. If the protagonist can be considered undecided and insecure about what to do and how to act, when he is supposed to help and "heal" his family from their problems, it is also true that he ends out by doing something good indeed. The final decision of going to Italy with Maggie symbolizes the start of his own new, real life, an existence of which he is the active protagonist, and no longer a distant, detached observer:

Whatever joy or sorrow might come to me from this would be real and my own, I would be living at my own level and suffering in my own place.²⁰⁴

²⁰² B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 129.

²⁰³ Ivi.

²⁰⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* cit., p. 170.

Chapter 3:

The Good Apprentice

3.1. Introduction

Another novel by Murdoch in which the nature of guilt is thoroughly explored and analysed is *The Good Apprentice*. It was published in 1985, after Murdoch had been awarded the Booker Prize for Fiction for *The Sea, The Sea* in 1979. Like *The Italian Girl* analysed in Chapter two, this novel deals principally with the guilt caused by the characters' mistakes and awful decisions and their subsequent desperate attempts to seek for a redemption which does not come, at least not in the way the readers expect. In this chapter we will therefore analyse the novel, underlining Murdoch's concepts and thoughts about guilt, redemption, religion and love, and we will also try to argue that, in the author's intentions, the individual can really say he has achieved redemption only when he begins to look outside himself, to see and focus on the other people. As in the previous novel, the past, both recent and remote, plays a fundamental role. What Nicol stated about *The Italian Girl* is, therefore, true and important for *The Good Apprentice* as well:

One way or another, the past cannot be ignored; it insists on being taken into account, on being interpreted, and signified.²⁰⁵

In the case of this novel, the protagonist has a very complex and anguishing relation with his past. He is haunted by the sense of guilt for having done the most awful and stupid thing to the detriment of his best friend, and desperately seeks redemption in order to ease the remorse and distress he feels. As said before, this is not the only novel concerned with guilt, and as Nicol observes, "...the sheer number of guilt-ridden characters in the pages of Murdoch's novels is quite striking."²⁰⁶ Such a theme would not raise any questioning, if not for the fact that it is quite unusual that a "Protestant

²⁰⁵ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 44.

²⁰⁶ Ivi.

British author - a puritan as she described herself – should return so frequently, almost obsessively to the question of guilt.”²⁰⁷ Nicol has efficaciously provided two reasons why Murdoch is so interested in the concept of guilt and redemption in her novels; since guilt involves two concerns which have always been dear to the author:

the disruptive intrusion into our lives of contingent and accidental forces, and the question of the status of spirituality in the late twentieth century.²⁰⁸

At the centre of *The Good Apprentice* there is Edward, the protagonist, what Nicol defines as the “murdochian example of the ‘accidental man’”²⁰⁹, the representation of a person who sees the course of his life changed forever by a tragic accident.

3.2. The sense of guilt and the need for redemption: Edward

Edward Baltram represents, therefore, Murdoch’s concept of the disorderly intrusion of the contingent in life, his existence being tragically shocked by an event of which he is the only responsible. The protagonist’s life, as a matter of fact, changes suddenly and painfully from the quiet, bored existence of a young college student to a hell of guilt and suffering for having caused, out of a foolish prank, his best friend’s death. Edward feeds his friend Mark with a sandwich filled with drugs, and then leaves him alone for a while. On his way back, Edward discovers that Mark jumped out of the window of his room and died. This is the “pivotal event”²¹⁰ which opens the novel, and which affects Edward’s existence from now on, haunting him with the awareness of being guilty of his friend’s death. Desperate for what he has done, shocked and obsessed with feelings of death, Edward tries to come to terms with what happened and

²⁰⁷ *Ivi.*

²⁰⁸ *Ivi.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

to face it, in order to find peace, “but neither is able to forget the past, or to redeem himself.”²¹¹ The continuous, unrelenting letters full of hatred and contempt that Mark’s mother sends to Edward represent the impossibility to change or redeem the past:

Think what you have done. I want you to think of it every moment, every second. I would like to stuff it down your throat like a black ball and choke you. [...] May you pay for this with your life’s happiness. [...] I curse you, I condemn you to a haunted life.²¹²

Edward’s predicament, his desperate need for atonement is, as Murdoch progressively shows in the novel, almost useless; Nicol underlines in his analysis that Edward tries to find redemption “in a world where God does not exist”²¹³, and this is stated by Edward’s step-father, Harry Cuno, in the novel. Harry’s comments “offer a neat picture of the moral world that all of Murdoch’s characters inhabit.”²¹⁴:

...the fact about human nature is that things are indelible, religion is a lie because it pretends you can start again, that’s what’s made Christianity so popular.²¹⁵

This statement clearly expresses Murdoch’s idea of religion, a fundamental concept in the author’s moral philosophy. The question of how to identify, and therefore achieve, a “moral framework in the absence of one provided for us by Christianity”²¹⁶ is fundamental not only in novels such as *The Good Apprentice*, but also in *The Sovereignty of Good*, one of her clearest and most concise philosophical works. What Murdoch states in her work is that the idea of God should be replaced with that of Good. This does not mean to erase or disown the importance of religion, she is certain

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²¹² Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1985, p. 9.

²¹³ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 45.

²¹⁴ *Ivi.*

²¹⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 441.

²¹⁶ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 47.

of the importance of preserving the divine being as a metaphysical guide to morals. Nonetheless, what represents a guide to morals in real, empirical terms, according to Murdoch, is:

...the good at work – especially love, which involves a clear respect for the alterity of another, and is visible in its ‘highest’ form in the greatest art.²¹⁷

The validity of religion remains, but the sovereignty of good is, for the author, undeniable and it is precisely this the concept contained and analysed in *The Good Apprentice*. As Murdoch explains much later in her last novel, *Jackson’s Dilemma*, religion is important, and has to remain a theoretical, metaphysical guidance to morals, in that it represents:

... the giving away of oneself, the realization of how small, like a grain of dust, one was in the vast mystery of the world – and yet how vast the power of goodness, of love like a great cloud, lifting one up of the meanness, the deadliness, of the miserable ego.²¹⁸

The ‘miserable ego’ can be, in this case, identified with Edward and the anguish of having ruined his friend’s life, and his own life, forever. Notwithstanding the tragic turn he gives to his life, and after having gone through several events, also for Edward there is some kind of redemption, a sort of recovery which enables him to go on with his life. It is precisely in this “vast power of good”, in the possibility of freeing oneself from the prison of the ego that Murdoch shows the protagonist’s recovery. When he stops dealing exclusively with himself and his grief, stops being obsessed by his predicament, and turns towards the other people, starts to see their sufferings and despair, and therefore he begins to feel better, to regain the peace of mind he had lost.

²¹⁷ Iris Murdoch, *On ‘God’ and ‘Good’* in *The Sovereignty of Good* London, Chatto and Windus, 1970, cit., pp. 46-76, p. 74.

²¹⁸ Iris Murdoch, *Jackson’s Dilemma* London, Chatto and Windus, 1995, p. 207.

Before achieving this awareness, though, Murdoch shows in the novel the lowest point a person haunted by such grieving can reach. In his despair, Edward even goes to the point of considering suicide, but as Nicol well explains, “his author will not allow him the comfort of committing it.”²¹⁹ As Thomas McCaskerville, Edward’s psychiatrist, tells him during one of their conversations:

Your endless talk of dying is a substitute for the real needful death, the death of your illusions. Your “death” is a pretended death, simply the false notion that somehow, without effort, all your troubles could vanish.²²⁰

In this way, not allowing her characters to choose the easiest solution to ease their sufferings, Murdoch affirms her “anti-consolation ethic”²²¹, showing a notion of redemption which is very different from the one provided by popular Christian mythology. Nicol observes, as a matter of fact, that “all the obvious paths of redemption are cut off for Edward. Christian mythology is too much like a fairy tale for him to believe in.”²²² What Murdoch does in this novel, therefore, is “to complicate the whole notion of redemption”²²³, asking her readers to comprehend it in a context which is different from the purely religious one. Hence the importance, once again, of psychoanalysis, “the secular version of redemption”²²⁴, since to redeem also means to recover, to restore, in other words, to come to terms with what happened in our past in order to make sense of it. In this sense, redemption in Murdoch’s intentions acquires the value of facing one’s own past and deal with it, a process which was, as Nicol underlines, made possible by psychoanalysis:

²¹⁹ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 48.

²²⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 71.

²²¹ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 48.

²²² *Ivi.*

²²³ *Ivi.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

The aim of the psychoanalytic process is to find a way of making the past fully present, of releasing into full consciousness the trauma which has previously been locked in the unconscious. [...] The buried experience is thus transformed into a language which will make sense of it; by being re-enacted properly, time is effectively redeemed.²²⁵

One of the most important concepts lying behind *The Good Apprentice* is precisely the importance of ‘remembering’ the past in order to face it, confront it, and achieve greater awareness. This is the main reason behind Edward’s decision of going to seek out his real father Jesse, in the firm belief of being absolved and redeemed by this encounter. Since his mother died when he was a child, Edward has grown up in London with his step-father Harry Cuno and his son Stuart, and has never met his natural father, Jesse Baltram. Jesse is an eccentric and visionary artist who lives in a manor called Seegard together with his wife May and their two daughters, Edward’s step-sisters. During a séance to which he participates in London, Edward hears a voice telling him to look for his roots, and thus decides he has to go and meet his natural father. He also receives a letter from Jesse’s wife, May, who invites him to Seegard and so he leaves London to meet his father, find out more about his roots and try to recover. In *The Good Apprentice*, therefore, the need for redemption from the tragic mistake Edward made and the importance of coming to terms with his past mix together. Edward, as a matter of fact, is “partly driven by mysterious Oedipal feelings which demonstrate that he is motivated by more than just the tangible events of the recent past.”²²⁶ At Seegard, the protagonist faces the most remote part of his life, coming to terms with the separation from Jesse, and with the tragic event of his recent past. The stay at Seegard is characterized by weird sensations, magical atmosphere and strange, supernatural episodes. The manor is shrouded in an old, pastoral environment, a sort of enchantment. The peculiar atmosphere pervading Seegard is visible in several episodes,

²²⁵ Ivi.

²²⁶ Ivi.

describing both the magic nature of the place and of the people inhabiting it. Out for a walk, for instance, Edward bumps into a clearing in the wood and peeks at his step-sister Ilona dancing:

Ilona was lifted from the ground by some superior force... and was conveyed to and fro over the grass, the tips of which her feet were barely touching.²²⁷

He is also awakened at night by weird noises and is told the house is haunted by spirits; throughout all the time he spends at Seegard, the suspect that he is having hallucinations and that Mother May and his step-sisters are putting drugs in his drinks never abandons him. The hallucinations also concern his father Jesse, and as a matter of fact going for a walk by the river, the protagonist has a vision of his father staring at him from underneath the water, and he “is engulfed by guilt and paranoia.”²²⁸:

Edward thought, my God, it’s an *hallucination*. [...] What a horrible vision. I’m coming to pieces. *This* is what I’ve come to, this is where I’m being *driven*. And I thought I was recovering, I was getting off. But of course the punishment is automatic.²²⁹

Edward’s stay at Seegard can be considered as a journey into his past, and this experience is rendered possible by the very nature of Seegard, a place that awakens magic, uncanny sensations. “Coming to pieces” is precisely the process the protagonist needs in order to find redemption for what he has done, and for this reason the final section of the novel is eloquently entitled ‘Life after Death’:

Like Orpheus, he has to descend into the underworld of his unconscious and confront both his feelings for his father and about himself before he can begin to recover.”²³⁰

²²⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 157.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²²⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 307.

²³⁰ B. Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* cit., p. 50.

The protagonist's visions take him into a different dimension, that has the characteristics of an hallucination, and it is almost as if Murdoch wanted to underline that Edward's journey towards atonement had to get through this sensorial experience. The recovering of the relationship with his father in such a weird and magical place as Seegard, the revelation of a past he barely suspected, therefore, are necessary for his redemption and rebirth. From this point of view, Seegard itself is not the fundamental part of the process, notwithstanding its magical, spiritual atmosphere. Seegard constitutes the framework, the place where this regression can happen, but the real, actual change in Edward is produced by the decision to come to terms with his past: "rather than any 'magic' solution to his problem, he must truly revisit his past in order to approach redemption."²³¹

3.3. Trying to be good and to do good: Stuart

As Edward is involved in a personal journey towards redemption and towards an increasing awareness of his past, his step-brother Stuart equally embodies very important questions for the author, concerning the central idea of goodness. As Suguna Ramanathan states, "Goodness is not just one of her preoccupations, it is the central preoccupation of her later novels."²³² What Murdoch's novels, and this one in particular, do, therefore, is "to present the social, ethical and philosophical lives of the unabashedly bourgeois characters who inhabit her pages"²³³, but at the same time she presents and questions the notion of good as that selfless process of forgetting oneself and doing something positive for other people. What becomes immediately clear about Stuart is that he is the embodiment of this attempt to be good, or at least to do good.

²³¹ Ivi.

²³² Suguna Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch – Figures of Good* London, MacMillan, 1990, p. 2.

²³³ Elizabeth Dipple, *The Unresolvable Plot. Reading Contemporary Fiction* London, Routledge, 1988, p. 187.

Compared to Edward, who represents the suffering self, only able to see and feel his own grief, Stuart is the exact opposite, and precisely represents the unselfish process of goodness Murdoch talks about in *The Sovereignty of Good*. As a figure of good, Stuart is marginal in the plot, inasmuch as he is present in the main scenes and often involuntarily involved in the twists of the plot, but does not act concretely. With regard to this kind of characters in Murdoch's writings, Ramanathan observes:

The marginality of these figures is crucially connected with the nature of good. It is as if good can be itself only if it is on periphery of the world of behaviour.²³⁴

Visibility and relevance are thus left to Edward, in that his distress and sense of guilt represent "the importance of self"²³⁵, while marginality and minor importance can be compared to the denial, or effacement of the self, and therefore to Stuart. During a conversation with the psychiatrist Thomas, Stuart stresses that his choice of life, the effacement of oneself and focusing on helping other people, cannot be done with partial commitment or part-time:

'It's got to be everything, my whole being, not something part-time, not something optional – Just to try to be good, to be for others and not for oneself. To be nothing, to have nothing...²³⁶

One of the points Murdoch underlines is that figures of good such as Stuart should represent, potentially, the most important theme, the centre of her novels, but from another point of view they are not central at all. Despite being the character to whom the title of the novel refers, Stuart always remains outside the twists of the plot, but nevertheless "those who blunder up against him are changed"²³⁷. Stuart's brother Edward, remarks it clearly:

²³⁴ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch – Figures of Good* cit., p. 3.

²³⁵ Ivi.

²³⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 140.

²³⁷ S. Ramanathan *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 148.

He's not part of the thing at all, he's just an external impulse, a sort of jolt, a solid entity, something you bump into.²³⁸

Ramanathan says that figures of good, Stuart in this case, "...make nothing happen."²³⁹, stressing the fact that he is indeed powerless and that he actually does not manage to change anything in the novel. Despite this, however, "the important thing is to go on trying. That seems to be her 'message', but the 'text' evokes the futility of such effort."²⁴⁰ The importance to 'go on trying' is restated many times in her later novels, precisely through the presence of these figures of good. The fact that there is no ultimate eradication of evil or no definitive victory for those who want to do good does not mean there is no hope:

...the very fact of a continuous, undetermined life makes openness to this good a perpetual possibility, and that points to hope. That the good is frustrated is sad; that it is never arrested is a matter of joy.²⁴¹

The author's attitude towards good in her novels is, therefore, double. On the one hand she states the importance to see good, then to be good, and finally to do good, but on the other hand, she also underlines the huge, endless effort this demands, and also its uselessness. There is a sort of implicit attack against good in the plots of her late novels, and this can be observed clearly in the very beginning of *The Good Apprentice*. One of the first scenes, as a matter of fact, represents a dinner party where the main characters discuss several subjects. Under exam is, indeed, Stuart's decision to leave university in order to dedicate himself entirely to the pursuit of goodness and to help people, a sort of giving away of all worldly success and fulfilment to live a spiritual life. Stuart's father's reaction is, predictably, harsh:

²³⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 469.

²³⁹ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 7.

²⁴⁰ *Ivi.*

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

‘Don’t you see you can’t do this all alone? Human nature needs institutions. You can’t do it by yourself, without a general theory or an organisation or God or other people [...] A religious man has to have an object and you haven’t one.’²⁴²

The other characters taking part to the conversation as well state their opinions on science, morality and religion. Stuart’s father Harry and his aunt Midge are against his vision of things. They assert their belief in the neutrality of science and in the power of technology (Midge: “A machine can be cleverer than a man now.”²⁴³, and Harry: “Even now a machine can see infinitely more than we can. We are puny, we are imperfect, these things are gods.”²⁴⁴) As underlined by Ramanathan, in the opinions stated by Harry, Midge and the others characters to contest Stuart’s vision:

The respect for facts, the supremacy given to a valueless, blank and neutral investigation of the external world are precisely what Stuart, student of mathematics, the most abstract and valueless of all subjects, resists.²⁴⁵

Confronted with such arguments, therefore, Stuart’s reply seems hesitant and unconvincing, as he tries to assert the importance of human beings as the only agents able to distinguish between good and evil:

Human minds are possessed by individual persons, they are soaked in values, even perception is evaluation.
[...] Making right judgements is a moral activity, all thinking is a function of morality, it’s done by humans, it’s touched by values right into its centre...²⁴⁶

Their refusal of Stuart’s opinions and choices represent what Ramanathan calls “the challenges from materialistic and scientific reductionists”²⁴⁷, and shows, therefore, “the

²⁴² Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 40.

²⁴³ *Ivi.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁴⁵ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 149.

²⁴⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 29.

implicit attack on good contained in the bulk of the later novels.”²⁴⁸ Harry, in particular, does not share, or accept, the visions of his son, and accuses him of being blinded by this useless sense of morality:

‘You want to make everything moral, that’s your version of religion, you want to push what’s really objective and factual into a corner. But the lesson of our age is opposite, modern science has abolished the difference between good and evil...’²⁴⁹

Stuart’s defence is, once again, weak and conflicting. When attacked with apparently undeniable arguments:

Stuart can only assert a consciousness that cannot be explained or bound by empirical scientific method, a consciousness that points to something above and outside the machine even of the human brain.²⁵⁰

If, on the one hand, he asserts the importance of recognising and doing good, and therefore the relevance of religion in human life, on the other he underlines the fact that his concept of religion has to be freed from the idea of God as a supernatural, absolute creator:

Something that keeps love of goodness in people’s lives, that *shows* goodness as the most important thing, some sort of spiritual ideal and discipline, like – it’s so hard to see it – it’s got to be religion without God, without supernatural dogmas...²⁵¹

This concept represents both Stuart’s assertion of what really matters for him in life, and also the main obstacles he has to face. His difficulty in replying to his father and the others is that “he has nothing concrete and immense, no institution with a

²⁴⁷ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch – Figures of Good* cit., p. 5.

²⁴⁸ *Ivi.*

²⁴⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 29.

²⁵⁰ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 148.

²⁵¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 31.

history, not even a spiritual being with a name he can use.”²⁵² When Thomas makes him notice that what he wants to do is not so different from the precepts of religion or any other sort of spiritual dogma, Stuart clarifies that he only wants to do good, and he wants to manage it alone, “I just mean without the old supernatural scenery.”²⁵³ The refusal of religion shows that Stuart hangs on to a simple notion of good as “something to be intuitively grasped, standing above analysis and definition.”²⁵⁴ In Stuart’s opinions we can find Murdoch’s own understanding of religion and God, clearly expressed in *The Sovereignty of Good*. Like the character she has created, Murdoch does not believe in the existence of God as absolute creator, but instead she states, even more emphatically, her faith in contingency:

... there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense... Our destiny can be examined but it cannot be justified or totally explained. We are simply here.²⁵⁵

The fact that, according to Murdoch, there is no God in the traditional sense of the term, and that contingency, the fact of ‘simply being here’, is the ultimate reality we can cling to, does not mean she denies the very principle of good. Through the figure of Stuart, his refusal of religion but at the same time his dedication to understand and do good, Murdoch wants to show to her readers that “it is entirely possible to live without religious belief and still acknowledge the force of values usually projected by religious tradition.”²⁵⁶

Yet what distinguishes Stuart from the other ‘figures of good’ in Murdoch’s novels is the fact that he is the only one who does never talk about religion, in the sense of a tradition giving religious form and meaning to the world. As Ramanathan

²⁵² S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 151

²⁵³ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 140.

²⁵⁴ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 151.

²⁵⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts* in *The Sovereignty of Good* cit., pp. 77-104, p. 79.

²⁵⁶ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 147.

underlines, “Alone of all the characters of good, he speaks of *goodness*: not Christ, or *nirvana*, or the healing goodness of God, but simply the quality goodness itself.”²⁵⁷, even though this proves to be hard for him. In the scene of the dinner party and often throughout the entire novel, he is even accused of manipulating the other characters with his concepts of what is right and what is good. There are several episodes telling of his attempt to make the other characters act for the good, as for example when he asks Mark’s mother to stop sending letters full of hate to desperate, guilt-ridden Edward. The woman outbreaks against him:

‘We’ve heard about you, pretending to give up sex and going round being holy. Don’t you realise what a charlatan you are? What you really enjoy is cruelty and power.’²⁵⁸

Midge as well accuses him to “influence the feelings and attitudes”²⁵⁹ of her teenage son Meredith, with whom, however, Stuart has an unclear, controversial friendship: “You want him in your power, and you dress it up as morality, as if you were a kind of moral teacher or example.”²⁶⁰ Midge’s words show an important and difficult aspect of Stuart’s selfless pursuit of the good, that is the risk of degenerating into arrogance and complacency through the very process of trying to help people in such an unselfish way. Stuart runs the risk of crashing into excessive satisfaction, the celebration of oneself for being good and for helping other people. What Murdoch wants to underline through the role of Stuart is that the balance of doing good stays in the middle between the excessive assertion of the ego and its total denial. If being and doing good implies recognising the existence of the other people and virtually forgetting the self, this does not mean, however, that one has to annihilate himself completely in order to focus on

²⁵⁷ Ivi.

²⁵⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 387.

²⁵⁹ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 153.

²⁶⁰ Iris Murdoch *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 329.

the reality around him. What Murdoch seems to suggest is, therefore, that the self has to be constantly put aside, but not erased. In other words, only decentred:

neither extreme withdrawal (for that is inadequate and guarantees nothing), nor self-conscious, dramatised dedication (for self enters too much there), but a narrow path, very difficult to find and tread, on which one is and acts, but almost invisibly.²⁶¹

The decentred nature of Stuart as a character, we have said, is rendered visible by Murdoch especially through his relationship with Edward. One of the aspects that stands out for first is Stuart's lack of charm, his clumsiness and weirdness if compared to his step-brother. The precise description of Stuart's looks and physical characteristics seem to underline that what he represents is clearly opposed to what Edward embodies: "the aesthetic is *separate* from the moral; purity and holiness are not to masquerade in beautifying appearances."²⁶² What Murdoch wants to make clear is, therefore, that real perception of the good is only possible when the veil of the beautiful is put aside: hence Stuart's unattractiveness and lack of charm. Stuart plays a crucial role in the novel also as far as the question of the nature of love, the other great theme connected to the theme of good, is concerned. During a conversation he has with the psychiatrist Thomas, Stuart says he does not want "ordinary attachments, intimate friendships or relationships, what's usually called love"²⁶³. For him, to fall in love is "to go in at the shallow end"²⁶⁴, to spoil, in a way, the purity of real, selfless love with desire, the will to obtain something for oneself. Stuart, instead, means something different, he is devoted to that kind of love that is impersonal, not bound to the desires of the ego, free and limitless:

²⁶¹ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 154.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²⁶³ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 144.

²⁶⁴ *Ivi.*

‘I think it has to look after itself, I mean it sort of has to cancel itself.’

‘Cancel?’

‘It has to un-be itself, so it can’t exactly be aimed at.’²⁶⁵

What he means with this statement is that love in the sense of desire and will to stay with a person has a selfish nature, its essence being far from the unselfish concept of the good as acting for the others’ sake. For Stuart “love is rooted in the ego. It rises from the need of the self; its desire for the other includes a desire to bind, absorb and assimilate the other...”²⁶⁶ Hence, in order to be truly unselfish and pure, love has to ‘un-be’, to ‘cancel itself’ almost to the point of becoming impersonal. This is the only way not only to see and understand what good means, but also to act accordingly, forgetting all what concerns the self. For Stuart, as a matter of fact, “it is not enough to be good, or, by contemplating goodness, to have it in some measure. He wants to *do* good, go about doing good, not officiously like a do-gooder, but quietly and without fuss.”²⁶⁷

Despite the numerous obstacles, critiques from his family, accusations and scorn, his determination in doing good is finally repaid. Through his words and example, Stuart succeeds and convinces Edward to turn attention away from his personal tragedy and to help his aunt Midge in her predicament. The woman, married to Thomas, has an affair with Harry, and is thinking to leave the psychiatrist. By listening and supporting her, Edward begins to come out from his own despair and thus fulfil his recovery. All this thanks to Stuart:

As his tormented consciousness gradually calms down towards the close of this long novel, Stuart’s advice (‘Ed, I wish you’d go and see Midge, she likes you...you could help her’: GA 378) at last begins to act. In talking to Midge and helping her to see

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²⁶⁶ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 156.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

where her duty lies, Edward for the first time stops thinking obsessively about himself.²⁶⁸

So, it is not only thanks to the encounter with his natural father Jesse and his roots, that Edward achieves his complete redemption. Real recovering from the persistent feeling of guilt for what he has done only comes when he starts to 'get out' from the isolation of his grief and anguish and he begins to see and feel the sufferings of the people surrounding him. This change, this coming out from the exclusive perception of his own private despair, precisely represents not only the vision and the acknowledgement of the good, but also acting concretely.

3.4. Midge and Harry's selfish love vs. Stuart's self-denial

The character of Midge does not only represent Edward's chance of doing good, she also embodies a concept which has always been important for the author. Midge represents the strive for freedom, the pursuit of personal satisfaction and happiness we have already found in other characters such as Mor in *The Sandcastle*, Otto and Isabel in *The Italian Girl*. Like Isabel, Midge is involved in an extramarital relationship with Harry, and like Mor, she is thinking to leave her husband Thomas and start a new life with her lover. Here, again, we have the love triangle and marital infidelity which are present so often in Murdoch's novels, but the novelty is that:

This time the erotic tangle is represented with extraordinary fidelity through Midge's meandering yearnings, hesitations and regrets.²⁶⁹

Midge is, as a matter of fact, torn by doubts and uncertainties about her decision of leaving Thomas and their son Meredith, despite the relationship with Harry has been

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁶⁹ D. Johnson, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 73.

going on for two years. Her sense of guilt for having an extramarital affair and also for remaining with a man she no longer loves, is representative of Murdoch's "ambivalent attitude towards her female characters and their experience."²⁷⁰ It has to be said that, as usual with her other female characters, Murdoch here aims at depicting a small-scale type of woman, who cares a lot about her high level of life and social status – she is part of the well-off London bourgeoisie - but at the same time is insecure and full of uncertainties about taking her responsibilities and leave Thomas. Midge, as all the other characters in the novel, are described with "elaborate concreteness of detail as to their precise physical appearance, dress and possessions"²⁷¹. Thorough the accurate description of Midge, Murdoch expresses the fullness of her being, making her a round, even though superficial and 'small-scale', character. What becomes clear, therefore, is that the precise description of all gestures, the accurate portrait of physical looks are necessary and fundamental to construct even a rather inconsistent and small character as she is.

What becomes clear from the detailed description of Midge, her lover Harry and their discussions about the possibility that she might leave her husband, is that "as she often does in depicting egoistic, idle, middle-aged women, Murdoch gives too many pages to Midge's repetitive ruminations on her "sufferings"²⁷². In the same way, the relationship between Midge and Harry is described as superficial, blind, not willing or perhaps unable, to consider its consequences on the other characters, not only on Thomas and Meredith, but also on Harry's sons Edward and Stuart. As Dipple underlines, Midge and Harry "are important here for the roles they play in terms of the more central characters and for the basic selfish deception of their affair."²⁷³ The superficial, selfish celebration of their love results even sharper, therefore, if compared

²⁷⁰ Ivi.

²⁷¹ E. Dipple, *The Unresolvable Plot. Reading Contemporary Fiction* cit., p. 191.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

with Stuart's self-denial and unselfishness. While Stuart's only aim is to put aside his own ego, to be nothing and have nothing and help other people indeed, Midge and Harry's affair represents the opposite. Their relationship is the clearest example of the purely self-centred love, only concerned with personal satisfaction and freedom, careless of the other people involved. The kind of love Stuart means is, instead, what Murdoch herself has defined as "the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real."²⁷⁴ For what concerns Midge, the awareness that her choices will affect also other people and not only herself and Harry, is achieved after the episode at Seegard. During an illicit weekend in the country, as a matter of fact, Midge and Harry find themselves in Jesse's house at Seegard, where they meet Edward and Stuart. During this encounter their affair is discovered. Stuart shares the travel back home with her and Harry, and in that moment Midge realises the predicament she is in. As Ramanathan says, she

...is awakened to an awareness of goodness by Stuart's mere *presence* in the car. [...] Stuart's floodlike invasion of Midge's being is a remaking of her poor fallen soul, sensed physically, 'her whole body being remade as if by radiation, the atoms of it changed' (GA 369).²⁷⁵

The presence of Stuart, therefore, strikes Midge insomuch as she thinks at first to be in love with him. Back in London and after having reflected on her situation, Midge realises that the presence of Stuart has helped her to "see the moral mess she is in"²⁷⁶, thus considering for the first time her husband and her son as a real part of the choice she has to make. Through Stuart's presence, Midge "comes to see clearly where her duty lies and what her only good course of action can be."²⁷⁷ In the end, helped and advised by Edward, she decides to remain with Thomas and ends her relationship with

²⁷⁴ Iris Murdoch, *On 'God' and 'Good' in The Sovereignty of Good* cit., pp. 46-76, p. 70.

²⁷⁵ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 159.

²⁷⁶ Ivi.

²⁷⁷ Ivi.

Harry. Not only is Stuart responsible of Midge's first reflection and acknowledging of her situation, but he is also the cause of a deep change in the woman's inmost feelings and certainties, so much so that: "... she wants now to follow *him*, do anything to be somehow connected with him."²⁷⁸ By listening to Stuart's words before and Edward's advice later, she realises that "...all the good things she felt sure she was destined to do would perhaps turn out to be the dull old familiar things, the duties of her family and her home."²⁷⁹

Midge, in a way which is similar to Edward's personal journey, has to go through a sort of death, a process of purgation that enables her to recognise what is most important for her. Hence the meaningful dream she has of a white horseman turning and looking at her, a symbol of death but also purification: "I saw a man on a white horse passing and looking so balefully towards me as if he would kill me. Then he went on."²⁸⁰ It is no surprise that, after her confrontation with Stuart at Seegard and then back in London, Midge associates the figure of the white horseman with him. As Ramanathan stresses about Midge's dream, "Stuart is associated with death, the death of falsehood and wrong."²⁸¹ It is undeniable, that even though Stuart rejects religion as a necessary element in the pursuit of his goal, he can instead be compared right to the figure of Christ. Especially if we consider his attitude towards Midge, Stuart embodies all the virtues and concepts of Christian mythology, and is, therefore, adored by her:

When Midge, fallen Magdalene and afflicted woman, is aroused from her state of sin by the simple fact of Stuart's presence, she broods over his image in an act of adoration.²⁸²

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

²⁷⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 490.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁸¹ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 160.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 159.

3.5. The conflict between art and morality: Jesse and Stuart

The principal character who is set against humble and selfless Stuart is Edward's real father, Jesse. If Stuart represents the choice of putting aside the ego to do good to someone 'other' than himself, Jesse is the clearest expression of the centralizing ego, around which everything revolves. Once a famous artist, Jesse lives at Seegard, a sort of manor he himself planned and built. The place, full of towers, long corridors and enormous halls, has its own logic, and is pervaded by a weird, unusual energy: "Seegard, where Jesse lives, is described with the sort of lyrical power and intensity Murdoch reserves for the deliberate evocation of the extraordinary."²⁸³ The place, therefore, represents a sort of reflection of Jesse's personality, of that raw, spiritual energy which characterizes his figure. The magic emanations of Seegard affect Edward soon after his arrival, creating illusions in his mind; he is never sure of being totally alert, and in several occasions he is unable to distinguish reality from hallucination or imagination. He hears weird noises at night and is told by Mother May they are spirits wandering in the house, poltergeists whiz past him, but nobody is able to give him plausible accounts of these events. After having peered at his step-sister Ilona dancing and magically lifting her feet from the ground, as if she was flying, Edward wonders:

Could that have been simply an optical illusion? Had he here, at Seegard, come to a place where he imagined things that didn't happen – or where things happened which did not usually happen?²⁸⁴

Despite this, however, the place seems to Edward a pastoral shelter, populated by seemingly ageless women – Mother May, Ilona and Bettina - wearing medieval garments, living a life of manual labour such as weaving and carpentry. Jesse is

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁸⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 165.

considered, initially, as the enchanter, the source of this magic, the sovereign of this world:

Jesse is a powerful enchanter and an ambiguous figure – the painter of obscurely ominous pictures, the architect of a bizarre house and a magician who creates and manipulates the lives of those around him.²⁸⁵

In his search for redemption and forgiveness, Edward hopes that the encounter with his natural father will free him from the sense of guilt and the suffering of his life. At the beginning, he sees Jesse as a leading figure, “a prophet or sacred king whose presence would purify the state, making what seemed good be good, and what was spiritually ambiguous into something altogether holy.”²⁸⁶ In his presence, Edward feels like “a favoured visitor, a necessary acolyte, someone summoned.”²⁸⁷ Influenced by the spiritual energy of the place, Edward is convinced that at Seegard he will make amend for Mark’s death, but soon he is forced to acknowledge that Jesse cannot do anything for him. His real father no longer paints, lives in a state of trance, of senile dementia, and has lost the energy that, in the past, made him “so alive and full of power and *wonderful* as he used to be.”²⁸⁸ Jesse is now a feeble reflex of the great painter and leader he once was, he makes illogical conversations and is kept locked in a room by Mother May, to avoid him wandering around Seegard in trance. Edward’s step-sisters and Mother May as well, reveal themselves as very different from the first impression he had of them at his arrival:

The illusion wears thin quickly enough: Edward discovers that the homespun medieval garments of the women are thoroughly darned and mended and their once active loom heavy with dust,

²⁸⁵ E. Dipple, *The Unresolvable Plot. Reading Contemporary Fiction* cit., p. 207.

²⁸⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 165.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

the house is dirty and the women for all their industry sloppy and careless in their housekeeping²⁸⁹

All the illusions, therefore, collapse when he realises that Jesse is not a deity and the power of forgiveness Edward thought him endowed with, is nothing more than “a product of the Seegard atmosphere.”²⁹⁰ His step-sister Ilona confirms the impression that all the magical energy and atmosphere of the place is, by now, lost:

There was something... long ago...like a kind of magic...beyond good and evil, and *natural* and *free* – that’s what’s so tragic, it was something beautiful, but the spirit’s gone, it’s gone bad...²⁹¹

The primordial energy coming from Jesse and pervading the entire place is set against the character of Stuart in a fundamental, powerful scene. Stuart has come to Seegard to help Edward getting out of his predicament. Soon after his arrival, Midge and Harry also turn up at the manor, looking for help with their car. Out for an illicit weekend in the country, they are mysteriously driven towards Seegard, where their relationship is discovered. Thus, Edward, Stuart, Midge and Harry find themselves in the hall at Seegard, when Jesse enters unexpectedly. Staring at Stuart, he cries out:

‘There’s a dead man, you’ve got a corpse there, it’s sitting at the table. I can see it.’ He pointed his stick at Stuart. Stuart got up. Jesse went on raising his voice further, not hysterically but in a tone of urgent command. ‘That man’s dead, take him away, I curse him. Take that white thing away, it’s dead. The white thing, take it away from here.’²⁹²

Jesse’s inexplicable and enraged reaction when he sees Stuart shows to which extent the boy is alien, even antithetical to Jesse’s world. Edward’s father represents the artistic, spiritual power that devours and controls every person on its way, just as he did

²⁸⁹ E. Dipple, *The Unresolvable Plot: Reading Contemporary Fiction* cit., p. 206.

²⁹⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 165

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁹² Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 162.

with the women of his life, Edward's mother, May and his daughters as well. This sort of divine power over the people ("He is the source of everything we do," said Ilona solemnly."²⁹³), enables him to obtain what he wants, regardless of the others: "Jesse is raw primal energy which takes what it wants."²⁹⁴ Stuart is, instead, the opposite. He represents "the directed moral sense, checked and disciplined spirit, calling for the death of certain kind of energy"²⁹⁵, and it is no surprise, therefore, that his unselfish dedication to help other people results incomprehensible and deadly for Jesse. The figure of the artist, with his uncontrolled amoral spirit and the affirmation of the self, is set in opposition to Stuart's disciplined energy at the service of other people. From this perspective, as Ramanathan underlines, "Stuart and Jesse exclude each other."²⁹⁶

Jesse's "raw primal energy"²⁹⁷ represents the creative power of art and the fact that he is an artist is, therefore, significant. Jesse's nature is beautiful and fascinating, in that his way of being and of living "feeds the creative fire; the artist lives by virtue of his shaping, organising ego [...] But such energy... is demonic and finally decays."²⁹⁸ Thus, art as unbridled energy is source of corruption and Jesse's realm, as a matter of fact, is crumbling into pieces. When Edward discovers his father's studio, he realizes the place has not been used for long time, and the old paintings in it are "...discoloured by dust. The studio was desolate, unused, abandoned."²⁹⁹ This sense of decay is also remarked in the scene of Jesse's death. After the encounter with Stuart, the old man suddenly disappears from Seegard and his body is only found some days later. According to Ramanathan:

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁹⁴ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 163

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁹⁷ *Ivi.*

²⁹⁸ *Ivi.*

²⁹⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 183.

The horror of Jesse Baltram's end, the body caught in the weeds of the river, glimpse through the translucent waves but left for days, is a comment of the horrors attendant on an undirected life.³⁰⁰

Murdoch's view of the "degenerative power" of art is, therefore, efficaciously expressed through the character of Jesse. Murdoch shares Plato's view on art, and in *The Sovereignty of Good* she observes that "he seems to have come to believe that all art is bad art, a mere fiction and consolation which distorts reality."³⁰¹ A sort of corrupting energy, therefore, in that to make art is merely to copy reality, and by imitating real life the artist inevitably distances himself from it, while "art is for life's sake, ... or else it is worthless"³⁰² Thus, if it is true that art is energy and power, it is also true that, when this energy is mere imitation of reality, art becomes mediocre, corrupted. Even though Murdoch sustains the platonic concept of art as degenerative energy, she also makes some distinctions. In a platonic dialogue about art entitled *Acastos*, as a matter of fact, "she connects art with real understanding and illumination"³⁰³ and she explains:

Good art tells us more truth about our lives and our world than any other kind of thinking or speculation.³⁰⁴

There is, therefore, a kind of art which is not corrupting; it is that art "... good and beautiful, in which spiritual discipline has not lessened the energy but taken it in the right direction towards truth."³⁰⁵ By showing the unsolvable contrast between the artist Jesse and the 'good apprentice' Stuart, Murdoch is once again stating the importance of an in-between possibility, "the in-between path... which must exist between art and

³⁰⁰ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 162.

³⁰¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts* in *The Sovereignty of Good* cit., pp. 77-104, p. 88.

³⁰² Iris Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Good*, Chicago Review Vol. 13, No. 3, cit p. 44.

³⁰³ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 163.

³⁰⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1986, p. 57.

³⁰⁵ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 164.

morality.”³⁰⁶ The pursuit of the good and the creative energy of art do not exclude or erase each other but are, instead, intimately related. If the raw, spiritual energy of art is controlled and directed towards the truth, then it becomes good and worthy of consideration. Jesse as representation of uncontrolled artistic energy that is impossible to harness, ends up a senile, sick man who does not distinguish reality from dreams, and Seegard comes out to be his virtual prison which is falling into pieces:

Jesse, his house and his family, present a world of unchecked spirit, beautiful in parts, but decaying, gone to the bad.³⁰⁷

For Murdoch, therefore, the forgetting of the self in order to do good to the other people and good art are both strictly related to the concept of reality. Thus, for her, both art and the ‘apprenticeship to goodness’ are intimately connected with real understanding, with the comprehension of truth and reality:

Being good and doing it and the accompanying peace and joy are dependent on seeing clearly.³⁰⁸

3.6. The control over action as affirmation of the ego: Thomas

Thomas, the psychiatrist, plays an important role in Edward’s journey towards self forgiveness and redemption. As Edward finds out towards the end of the novel, Thomas is more involved than he thinks and knows. It is Thomas who, knowing about the predicament and the suffering of Edward, writes to Mother May suggesting an invitation to Seegard, and it is him, again, who secretly plans the séance during which Edward hears Jesse’s voice telling him to come to his place. Thomas is “the magus, a

³⁰⁶ *Ivi.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³⁰⁸ *Ivi.*

wise man who understands almost everything... His understanding gives him great power and... he cannot help using it.”³⁰⁹ It can be said that the figure of the psychiatrist hovers behind both Edward and Stuart, influencing their decisions: “Thomas’ power over the action is enormous ... he is a magically manipulative artist whose opening out of space for action allows the fiction to take place.”³¹⁰ His power over the action is, therefore, given by the fact that he knows more than the other characters, because he is a psychoanalyst and knows the deepest secrets of Edward, for example, and thus manipulates him. The strict control Thomas exerts on the events and the people is a clear and decided affirmation of the self on the world around him. In his desire to effect amelioration to Edward, he enters in his life as a sort of all-powerful authority that secretly guides and influences his decisions. Thomas’ action, though, is ambiguous: his aim to help Edward reveals negative and not without evil consequences. If, as a matter of fact, the artist Jesse pays for a life dedicated only to himself and his personal pleasure, the psychiatrist Thomas pays for his excessive control and meddling into the lives of the others. As Ramanathan underlines, he “pays for subtle thought with the loss of simplicity.”³¹¹ Being too conscious of his power and knowledge, too much concerned with enticing the others’ existence, Thomas is unable to see the people around him in a clear way, and for this reason he does not realise Midge’s unfaithfulness, nor the problems in their marriage. Not differently from what happens to Jesse, who is the main example of the affirmation of the self regardless of the other people around him, also Thomas’ control over reality proves to be an egotistical, satisfied focusing on himself and his power, rather than a true, sincere attempt to help Edward or Stuart. This is what Ramanathan means when she observes that notwithstanding Thomas has enormous power over the action of the novel, he “lacks

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³¹⁰ E. Dipple, *The Unresolvable Plot. Reading Contemporary Fiction* cit., p. 204.

³¹¹ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good*, cit., p. 169.

unselfconsciousness.”³¹², that is the quality of being unselfish. Once again, the partial lack of the clarity of vision, of the clear perception that someone exists outside one’s own ego, for the artist Jesse as well as for the psychiatrist Thomas, is fundamental.

3.7. Edward and Stuart, the two good apprentices

It has been said that there is not only one ‘good apprentice’ in this novel, but two, precisely identifiable with the two brothers Edward and Stuart. At the beginning of the novel, Edward is a young, bored college student, who decides to play the trick of the drugged sandwich to his friend out of mere curiosity and fun:

Mark, who had so loftily disapproved and so peevishly refused, now lay a helpless victim, giggling and bubbling upon the lamplit divan bed in Edward’s small bedsitter...
Edward, no trip for him that evening, clad in his magician’s robe of sober power, stood looking down. He had concealed the drug in a sandwich, and watched the metamorphosis with wicked triumph.³¹³

As Ramanathan underlines, “Edward’s ‘murder’ is *wholly* accidental, irrelevant and unnecessary”³¹⁴, and this renders the event particularly tragic. Edward’s experience of guilt before, and of desperate search for redemption after, can be compared to a journey from life to death, and then back to a new, different life. In all this, Murdoch clearly underlines and narrates the evolution of the character. After the horrible thing he has done to Mark, he lets himself sink into despair and self-pity, unable to see anything except his own grief. All the events Edward goes through in the novel (the stay at Seegard, the encounter with Jesse and the help he gives to Midge) leave a mark on his path towards redemption and self-forgiveness, enabling therefore, the evolution of his

³¹² Ivi.

³¹³ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 1.

³¹⁴ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 167.

character. When he finally gets his life back, he is a different person, changed deeply by the events he has faced in search of redemption. For the first time after Mark's death, and in his life, he begins to see the other people around him, he turns away from his own pain and starts focusing on them, thus forgetting his own self and getting closer to his brother Stuart's concepts and choices.

During the descent into deep suffering in search of atonement and new life, Stuart is a constant presence beside Edward. If frenzied, tormented Edward can be seen as the Prodigal son of Christian mythology, then Stuart embodies his eldest, unselfish brother. It is no surprise, therefore, that the novel opens with a quotation from the parable of the prodigal son: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father I have sinned before heaven and before thee, and am no mere worthy to be called your son."³¹⁵ The two brothers are opposite not only in religious terms, but also in terms of action and meaning : Edward's journey leads him from despair to atonement, thus entailing a deep change, while Stuart does not undergo any evolution, for instance. Stuart's decision of dedicating his entire life to goodness and to help other people is taken at the very beginning and never loses intensity, lest of all changes. While Edward, through the decision of helping Midge, actually changes his life and comes out from his predicament, Stuart apparently remains "outside the maelstrom of events."³¹⁶, since he tries to help his brother from a decentred position. As Ramanathan underlines,

The Good Apprentice has two distinct centres. Edward... is the centre in terms of the action. Stuart, his stepbrother, is the centre in terms of significance."³¹⁷

Another fundamental difference stays in the very nature of these two characters: despite being brothers, they do not even seem to live in the same reality. Stuart's aim in life is

³¹⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 1.

³¹⁶ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 148.

³¹⁷ Ivi.

“to fix his eye on virtue, define it, and discipline himself to live according to it”³¹⁸, while Edward’s journey starts from “a world where virtue is a lost irrelevancy”³¹⁹. The discipline of virtue, the dedication to do good and help the other people becomes in the end, the aspect that associates Stuart and Edward. Each one in different ways, and for different reasons. Edward out of a sort of purification and atonement, Stuart out of a choice of life achieve in the end the same goal.

Even though Stuart remains outside the action and never influences the events, it is evident that he manages to alter them in some way. As Dipple underlines, despite Edward’s negative reaction to his attempt to help, in the end Stuart is successful. Edward initially “refuses to listen to his good advice”³²⁰, because what he ignores is that:

Stuart understands intuitively the importance of not being separated. [...] Edward, on the other hand, separates himself and gives himself over to his suffering.³²¹

This is the reason of Stuart’s relentless attempts to help Edward. Stuart is perfectly conscious of the fact that the only way for his brother to achieve redemption, and therefore recover, is to remain united with the reality and the people around him. Edward’s separation from the world, his isolation into his own grief, the inability to see someone other than himself represent the separation Stuart wants to avoid at any cost. Also Thomas McCaskerville tries to make him understand that his grief represents a sort of “desperate cherishing of the damaged self”³²², as he is concentrating exclusively on his personal suffering and does not see what exists around him. Edward replies in a way that undoubtedly shows his ‘blindness’:

³¹⁸ E. Dipple, *The Unresolvable Plot. Reading Contemporary Fiction* cit., p. 204.

³¹⁹ *Ivi.*

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

³²¹ *Ivi.*

³²² *Ivi.*

‘The whole of creation is innocent as far as I’m concerned, I forgive it, everything except me.’
‘So you think you’re alone in hell?’
‘You want to interest me, to make me think of other people, but I don’t want to be cured, and have it all turned into cheerfulness and common-sense by your magic. Your magic isn’t strong enough to overcome what I have, it’s weak, it’s a failing touch. I am permanently damaged.’³²³

It is clear from these words, that Edward’s tormented situation, his sense of guilt is caused not only by Mrs Wilsden’s persecution through enraged letters, but also and primarily caused by himself. Once back from Seegard, when he gets closer to Midge, helping her, he comes out from his isolation. As underlined by Ramanathan:

It is only towards the end, after a long period of expiation, when Edward ceases to nurse his separation and lets himself be reintegrated into the human fold, that healing begins for him. This ‘absolution’ comes, finally, from himself, as he turns to Midge and concentrates in her plight instead of his own.³²⁴

3.8. Conclusion

As the novel ends, then, Edward finds redemption in helping Midge, who decides to remain with her husband and son, while his father Jesse is buried at Seegard and Mother May decides to write a book of memoirs on his work as an artist. *The Good Apprentice* ends with a symbolical scene, Harry, his son Stuart and his step-son Edward sitting at the table and raising their glasses to “the good things in the world”, careless of the fact that, as Edward remarks, “We might all mean different ones.”³²⁵ In the final dialogue between Harry, Stuart and Edward, the protagonist also tells his family he is reading *La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, by Proust, and is amazed by how similar it is to his experience:

³²³ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 70.

³²⁴ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 168.

³²⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 522.

What a lot of pain there was in those first pages. What a lot of pain there was all the way through. So how was it that the whole thing could vibrate with such a pure joy?³²⁶

As for what happened in his past, Edward realises that true redemption and atonement for the tragedy he has caused can only come from doing good to the others, and also that, in order to forget his personal sufferings and turn to the others, it is fundamental to see. As underlined also by Ramanathan:

Being good and doing it and the accompanying peace and joy are dependent on seeing clearly. [...] In moments of clear seeing all things fall beautifully into place and then seem beautiful and joy bearing.³²⁷

It is interesting to notice how Murdoch's concept of being good and doing good in this novel is strongly based on the ability to see, on the ability of clear mental perception. The inability of some characters, such as Midge and Harry, but also Thomas and Jesse, to really know the true existence of other people is the concept that stays behind the representation of love in *The Good Apprentice*. In the case of Midge and Harry's selfish affair, love is perceived and narrated as a feeling rooted in the ego, an egotistical fulfilment of the desires of satisfaction of the self. Through the character of Stuart and his example, love is transformed into self forgetfulness, into the gift of seeing the others and of helping them in an unselfish way. It is precisely through the figure of Stuart, his blankness, his inactivity in the plot that Murdoch conveys her message to the readers. Although never determining in action, criticized and even opposed by his family, Stuart does not give up and finally succeeds in doing good, even though he always remains a bystander. As Edward has to go to Seegard and meet Jesse, Stuart as well has to face ordeals, accusations and scorn before he manages to effect some good. But, as Murdoch

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

³²⁷ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 165.

well shows at the end of the novel, it is thank to Stuart's direct or indirect intervention that things come to place again, for Edward, Midge, Harry and Thomas as well. It is also thank to his plea that Mark's mother stops persecuting Edward with her letters and finally accepts the death of her son. One of the most important aspects, therefore, is the relationship Stuart has with Edward, and in particular the way in which Murdoch has been able to demonstrate how being and doing good, in the end, works:

By setting Stuart against the story of Edward's dark guilt and suffering, Murdoch makes room for all that escapes the attempt to control or modify. Edward's world of action and feeling, driven by deep forces from the subconscious, is the world as it is, accepted in its disorderliness by the artist's imagination. Stuart is the religious impulse aspiring upward from that disorder.³²⁸

Through the opposition between Edward (the suffering self, the prodigal son) and Stuart (the disciple of the good, or, better, the good apprentice), Murdoch thus leads the reader into "a full examination of human consciousness"³²⁹, a consciousness that, through guilt and suffering, "progressively follows a path toward inward and outward awareness."³³⁰ Edward can be considered the true good apprentice, in that he represents the real progression towards the inward and outward awareness. What Stuart already knows from the beginning of the novel, that is the importance of decentering oneself and act for the other people's sake, is achieved by Edward through a hard, even dramatic, process, and this makes him an "apprentice" of the good in real, concrete sense. This is one of the two most important and significant themes of the novel. The other, as argued in this analysis, is the meaning of being and doing good, and all the obstacles on the way to the accomplishment of this 'mission'. The author, therefore, has narrated and described "the striving for the good as an endless affair of small beginnings"³³¹, the

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

³²⁹ E. Dipple, *The Unresolvable Plot. Reading Contemporary Fiction* cit., p. 208.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

³³¹ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 165.

process of achieving clear vision, perception and focusing on the others that is never easy or assumed, and precisely for this, becomes fundamental. Thus, what Murdoch states in her philosophic writings is also true for *The Good Apprentice*. Her belief in the non-existence of God, a concept that has to be replaced with that of good, and her steadfast faith in the contingent are fundamental part of the never ending power of the good, which is shown and described in this novel, especially through the figures of the good apprentices, Edward and Stuart:

There is no hope [...] Life is horror; suffering and meaningless pain are real. But despite that, a pure good walks through the world, broken by it over and over again, but not degraded or changed.³³²

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 161.

Conclusion

Murdoch's novels have been frequently regarded as upsetting and awkward for their complicated plots. Her works are often characterized by weird, deceptive episodes, supernatural events, unfaithfulness and sexual interactions of any kind. As Byatt underlines, this has produced "a perpetual debate about the probability, or improbability of Miss Murdoch's plots"³³³. She defined herself as a realist writer, yet despite this, a large number of readers and reviewers "find the elaborate, in some ways intensely artificial, world of her novels difficult to take."³³⁴ This intensely artificial world, contained in the structure of a realistic novel, unsettles her readers and critics. The fact that Murdoch goes beyond the conventional showing what lies beneath the surface of everyday, ordinary life is, I think, important. The improbable possibilities she chooses to narrate represent the innermost part of human beings, the density and contradictions of human life she has always been concerned with. As we analyse her novels closely, we shall find that many of them may appear slightly artificial but at a deeper level "there are real people suffering real human emotions"³³⁵. The apparent banality of her plots is thus overturned by an imaginative presentation of reality. What Murdoch is really interested in doing is to convey through her novels visions of the world, visions of reality:

The novels are metaphors of life and consciously presented as art, so that the reality of life is subsumed into the theatricality of an invented world.³³⁶

It is clear, therefore, that Murdoch sees herself both as a realistic writer and also as an author who wants to write about life, persons and the relations between each other.

The most important component of reality is what she defines as "the real, impenetrable human person", that has been neglected by twentieth-century novels.

³³³ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, op. cit., p. 297.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

³³⁵ H. D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, op. cit., p. 9.

³³⁶ D. Gerstenberger, *Iris Murdoch*, op. cit., p. 26.

According to Murdoch, “we need to turn the attention... away from the dry symbol, the bogus individual, the false whole towards the real, impenetrable human person.”³³⁷

This is the reason why the characters are the most important parts of her novels. By using characters in the full opacity and density of their being, by creating individuals instead of types, Murdoch gives them an existence which is separate from hers. The aspect of nineteenth-century literature she admires the most, is precisely the fact that:

... the individuals in the novels are free and independent from their author, and not merely puppets in the exteriorization of some closely locked psychological conflict of his own.³³⁸

The richness she reveres in nineteenth-century novels seems to her to be lost in the twentieth century, in which she feels that reality is kept away, penalized in favour of fantasy. It is almost as if, Spear claims, “the difficulties of knowing the real world are altogether escaped”³³⁹ and the complexity of persons is replaced by an easy surface of rational plainness which, in Murdoch’s opinion, “denies the human potential for growth.”³⁴⁰ This is the characteristic of dryness, to which she refers when she analyses the work of Sartre, for instance. Sartre lacks, according to Murdoch, a clear grasp of the irrational, illogical, uniqueness of human beings and of their relations with each other. In one word, what takes the name of contingency.

Murdoch’s characters, and in particular the protagonists of the novels discussed in this dissertation, live in a world which is immersed in contingency, in a reality that inevitably involves relationships with each other. The novel analysed in chapter One, entitled *The Sandcastle*, represents “the recreation of a fictional world in which separate individuals meet, change, communicate.”³⁴¹ For different reasons *The Sandcastle* is not

³³⁷ Iris Murdoch, *Against Dryness* op. cit., p. 34.

³³⁸ Murdoch, Iris, *The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited*, op. cit., p. 50.

³³⁹ H. D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch* cit., p. 19.

³⁴⁰ Ivi.

³⁴¹ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, cit., p. 310.

considered entirely successful in its attempt at dealing with a normal but difficult moral problem. Yet even though the relations between the characters are said to be barely sketched, thus resulting incomplete, and the conflict between Mor, his wife and Rain is never made quite real to the reader, from a certain point of view the novel is successful. *The Sandcastle* is Murdoch's first attempt to show "the efforts, failures, partial failures, to apprehend the distinct being of other people."³⁴² The novel is based on the protagonist's selfish bid for freedom, on his desire to liberate himself from the bonds of marriage, the impositions of family and society. In the end, though, Mor, his wife Nan and young Rain are forced to see and accept the limits of reality and the burden of the existence of other people around them. The acceptance of the limits of reality, of the other people's existence and the resulting shift of focus from one's own self, make *The Sandcastle* the first endeavour to treat what Murdoch calls, quoting Simon Weil, the question of "Attention". This term constitutes one of the most important themes of Murdoch's writings, both literary and philosophical; it is not different from what the novelist calls "clarity of vision":

the constantly renewed attempt to see things, objects, people, moral situations, truly as they are, uncoloured by our own personal fantasies or needs for consolation.³⁴³

Attention is, in this sense, a decided selfless contemplation, the awareness of the other people's existence and of their importance. This is why *The Sandcastle* has not completely failed in expressing Murdoch's ideas. In her thought, such attention to the other people enables Mor to achieve real freedom, that is the voluntary, thoughtful choice of 'attending' to the other people in the first place, thus showing that:

³⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 311.

³⁴³ Iris Murdoch, *The Idea of Perfection in The Sovereignty of Good* cit., pp. 1-45, p. 34.

Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action.³⁴⁴

The concept of attention as ‘accurate vision’ which enables action is one of the themes of *The Italian Girl*, analysed in chapter Two. Here, the protagonist Edmund, through the twists and shocking events of the plot, achieves the clearness of vision which leads him from passive inactivity to real action. Edmund is forced to come back to his childhood house and to his family due to his mother’s passing away. He inevitably has to face his own past, a complex mixture of nostalgia for his childhood and uncanny sensation of being back in a place that is familiar yet, at the same time, unfamiliar to him. By dealing with these feelings and by trying to help his family in trouble, he finally achieves the awareness, the clarity of vision which occasions action. When he really begins to see his family, and not only to observe their sufferings from a detached, indifferent perspective, he becomes able to act. In this case, the action occasioned by ‘attention’ affects both his family, and himself. Even though Edmund is not successful in doing good to his family, the acknowledgement of their problems and the attempt to help them change him deeply. From passive spectator of the others’ lives and of his own, he begins to live actively, to commit himself to live and to love. In *The Italian Girl* as in other novels, Murdoch shows her idea of morality as an act of clear vision, principally. Being good and doing good inevitably implies to recognize the existence of other people outside oneself, and by doing this, real action is made possible. As she herself states:

One might start from the assertion that morality, goodness, is a form of realism. The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable. Of course a good man [...] must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Idea of Perfection* in *The Sovereignty of Good* cit., pp. 1-45, p. 23.

³⁴⁵ Iris Murdoch, *On ‘God’ and ‘Good’* in *The Sovereignty of Good* cit., pp. 46-76, p. 59.

The main aim of a “good man”, that is goodness, also shows Murdoch’s concern with Christianity, with what she sees as a contemporary need for a religion. The need for religion, though, does not mean to her a need for God. Murdoch’s concept of new Christianity is indeed centred on the “acceptance of a mythical Christ who is goodness, or the good man”³⁴⁶, who, in order to be such, has to attend to care for the people.

Murdoch’s works, both philosophical and literary, not only deal with finding out what is really held to be ‘Good’, they also explore the relation between art and morals. This is one of the themes of *The Good Apprentice*, analysed in chapter Three. By telling the story of guilt ridden Edward and of his brother Stuart, determined in doing good to the other people at any cost, Murdoch shows two different attitudes. Stuart’s ability of putting himself apart and of focusing on the others’ problems represents the attention, and therefore, goodness. Edward’s exclusive focusing on himself, instead, prevents him from seeing the other people around him, in other words, from seeing reality. As Murdoch underlines in her essay *On “God” and “Good”*, if the exercise of morality is a form of realism, in the sense that “we cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need”³⁴⁷, then “the chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy... which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.”³⁴⁸ The essence of good art and goodness is the same, it is precisely the act of clear vision, the acknowledgement of the other people’s existence. When the vision of external reality is disturbed by the interference of the self, then goodness and therefore art, become mediocre, as the character of Jesse shows in *The Good Apprentice*:

We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy,

³⁴⁶ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 330.

³⁴⁷ Ivi.

³⁴⁸ Ivi.

the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world.³⁴⁹

To the quality of seeing clearly the other people regardless of oneself, Murdoch gives the name of love. For her, love is the “extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real”³⁵⁰. It can be said that love as realization of the other people’s true life is the common theme of the three novels here analysed, together with the absurd, unutterable nature of reality, i.e. of that contingency we, according to Murdoch, must respect. As Edward observes in *The Good Apprentice*, reality is a mixture of “things which happen by pure chance” but at the same time it is “a whole complex thing, internally connected”³⁵¹ and perhaps, as he concludes, “important things are always like that, so that you can think to them in both ways.”³⁵² In different ways, by dealing with the concepts of freedom, love, art and religion Murdoch has investigated reality as, according to Byatt, the “unutterable particularity of experience in general, and of individual human beings in particular”³⁵³. Murdoch’s novels show a complex picture of the world and “a human condition of indelible selfishness”³⁵⁴. She sees and describes the human being as he is – blind and selfish, careless of the other people because of his inability to see. At the same time, though, the presence in her novels of authentic selflessness and love, the demonstration that goodness exists and is possible, even though difficult, suggest a way out of the chaos. To know and tell what the human being is, but also what he can be. This means, ultimately, to have faith. It all depends on seeing clearly, and undoubtedly, “her clear, loving and attentive gaze turned on the world is an act of faith.”³⁵⁵

³⁴⁹ Ivi.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁵¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 512.

³⁵² Ivi.

³⁵³ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* cit., p. 301.

³⁵⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* cit., p. 143.

³⁵⁵ S. Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* cit., p. 38.

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