

## **Self-actualization on Women's Pilgrimage to Goodness in the Good Apprentice**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper reveals the difficulty in the formation of female self by portraying female characters' personal growth through increased awareness of themselves and the relationship with others in *The Good Apprentice*. Murdoch illustrates that blind hatred and revenge as well as the lies all hinder women from the integration of female self and from reaching the state of Goodness. Meanwhile, Murdoch endows the female character with an unusual trait that is seldom found in her other female characters: the consideration of others' welfare and attention to others' life. This is just what Murdoch advances in her philosophy as the way to achieve goodness. Apart from the integration of female selfhood, Murdoch has also explores how women could achieve happiness and reach the state of goodness in her later period to a greater extent than in her early period. While Murdoch conveys her philosophical thoughts in her novels, her creation of characters and plots in turn enriches and deepens her philosophy. The paper focuses on the reconstruction of female selfhood through Murdoch's elaboration of the multiple ways that the women use to integrate their female self by actualizing themselves on their way to Goodness in the Good Apprentice.*

**Keywords:** Iris Murdoch; *The Good Apprentice*; Selfhood; goodness

Murdoch deepens her exploration of the reconstruction of female selfhood in her later novels with the development of the society and the advancement of women's rights though she holds the consistent attitudes to women's liberation and the role of female characters in her fiction. Unlike the women in *The Flight from the Enchanter* who have an fragmented female selfhood and those in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* who mainly focus on the growth of female self-consciousness, the women in *The Black Prince* start not only redefining but also repositioning themselves in the patriarchy society in order to establish the female identity. In her following novels, Murdoch continues to explore the formation of female self through the description of modern women's life and their self-improvement along with the changes of the times and social development.

Murdoch's view on women's problems and the realistic way to reflect them in her fiction doesn't change a lot in her decades of writing career. When being asked in her interview with Michael O. Bellamy in 1976 about the women problems in her novels, Murdoch responds:

I identify with men more than women, I think. I don't think it's a great leap; there's not much of a difference, really. One's just a human being. I think I'm more interested in men than women. I'm not interested in women's problems as such, though I'm a great supporter of women's liberation – particularly education for women—but in aid of getting women to join the human race, not in aid of making any land of feminine contribution to the world. I think there's a kind of human contribution, but I don't think there's a feminine contribution. (Dooley, 2003, p.48)

She puts the main focus of her novels on the general human problems rather than the specific women's problems and she believes that the mission of women's liberation is to help women be a part of human race but not a special part of being feminine. Moreover, years later in 1987, when inquired about her characterizations of the female characters in an interview with Barbara Stevens Heusel, Murdoch admits that few women in her novels lead the stories and lists the reason for not writing about women's problems as follows:

Women's problems are problems among other problems, and I write about them also. I just don't write only or mainly about them. Unfortunately, it's still a man's world. A man doesn't have to explain what it's like to be a man but a woman has to explain what it's like to be a woman. (Dooley, 2003 p.207)

Fully aware of the gender inequality, Murdoch commits herself to describe truly the general human predicaments of both men and women without the partiality since she believes that:

If you portray an intellectual woman, part of her role in the book is to be an intellectual woman, but an intellectual man can be just a man. The same question arises for black writers. People expect black writers to write about blacks and black problems, and some are persecuted by their fellow blacks if they don't. I think this is very unfair. In literature writers may want to write about their own problems of being black or being Jewish or being female, but they may also want to write more generally about human problems. (Dooley, 2003, p.207)

Despite Murdoch's insistence that she is not a feminist for her disagreements with the doctrines that feminism proposes and her announcement that her main focus is not on women's problems, she truly describes the women's plights and their struggle to grow and survive under different circumstances, in different eras or with different backgrounds because of her belief that women's problems are part of human problems.

"The concept of the self is the starting-point for Murdoch's broader philosophical vision, which depends on the capacity of the individual to have meaningful inner experience and to recognize and experience different levels of consciousness" (Widdows, 2004, p.22). Murdoch is concerned about how both men and women could form the "self" and how they could achieve the Good once they establish the complete self. In conflicts with the contemporary notion of the self, Murdoch considers the self in her fiction as a fixed entity:

Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision. (Murdoch, 1970, p.40)

Murdoch's emphasis on the individual as a self-in-relation is coherent with Levenson's assertion that women's experience promotes the human qualities of co-operation and an awareness of self in relation to others, essential in nurturing relationships. Levenson summarizes that Murdoch's preferred model of the individual is not the isolated self but a community of selves, a plurality of persons, who are quite separate and different individuals and who have got to get along together (Levenson, 1994, pp.337-344). Besides, Waugh argues that the individual is capable of acting the world as a "partially autonomous" (Waugh, 1989, p.14) agent and elaborates his view on the identity in the contemporary feminist fictional writing as follows:

Contemporary feminist fictional writing ... has accommodated humanist beliefs in individual agency and the necessity and possibility of self-reflection and historical continuity as the basis of personal identity. It has modified the traditional forms of such beliefs, however, in order to emphasise the provisionality and positionality of identity, the historical and social construction of gender, and the discursive production of knowledge and power. What many of these texts suggest is that it is possible to experience oneself as a strong and coherent agent in the world, *at the same time* as understanding the extent to which identity and gender are socially constructed and represented. (Waugh, 1989, p.13)

Waugh's conception of self relies on "a sense of identity which consists of accepting both connection and separation, so that neither is experienced as a threat" (Waugh, 1989, p.86). In Waugh's relational "both/and" situation, an individual can simultaneously merge with and be independent of others. Although Murdoch cares less about the influence of the social and historical conditions on her characters in her fiction, she is in agreement with Waugh on the in-relation self which includes "an active inner life and a substantive conception of consciousness" (Widdows, 2004, p.22). Furthermore, for the female characters in Murdoch's novels, the integrated self could be interpreted as the combination of female self-consciousness that enables them to know their differences from others, especially from the male, and the female identity that makes their self-position possible in the male-dominated interpersonal relationships.

As far as the formation of female self is concerned, Murdoch reveals the difficulty in achieving it by portraying female characters' personal growth through increased awareness of themselves and the relationship with others and the plights of failing "to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own" (Murdoch, 1997, p.216). Murdoch elaborates the multiple ways that the women use to integrate their female self by decentralizing the patriarchal household, reconciling with the real world and actualizing themselves on their way to Goodness in her novel *The Good Apprentice* published in 1985 and leaves space for the reader to conclude what's the best way for the female to complete the self, reconstruct the female selfhood and then finally approach the Good that Murdoch uses to replace God with in this Godless world in her moral philosophy.

While Murdoch spends a lot of time focusing on the leading heroines and their ways of self-reconstruction, she also depicts some female supporting roles in *The Good Apprentice*, who "are much better than the leading female characters as far as individuation is concerned" (Khogeer 131). In the characterization of these female supporting roles, Murdoch explores the formation of female self on a deeper level, considering "[t]he existence of spiritual power and the nature of goodness" as "the two dominant themes" (Rowe and Martin, 2004, p.140) in this novel.

As the central concept, goodness is the human's ultimate state of being good in Murdoch's philosophy. In her book *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch first took the notion of the good "as the central element of her moral philosophy" (Widdows, 2004, p.71) and revealed it as "the guiding principle of the moral life and the ultimate reality" (Widdows, 2004, p.71). Years later, in her best illustrated philosophical work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch interprets the good again. As for Murdoch, "[t]he good is the reality which, though difficult to define, is the determining principle of human life and proved by all aspects of life" (Widdows, 2004, p.71). In an interview with Jonathan Miller in 1988, Murdoch explained the importance of goodness and how to achieve it as follows,

[T]he more positive notion of goodness and virtue ... is the duty of the human being, it is the function of the human being, his form of being demands, a kind of change, a pilgrimage (like the pilgrimages in Plato's cave where the people go through a period of realizing that what they took to be real objects are actually shadows or icons or images, and then they emerge into the daylight, into reality), this image of the human pilgrimage, which is a pilgrimage from illusion to reality, and falsehood to truth, and evil to good, and that this tension in human affairs is something which cannot be explained by science and can't be dismissed by philosophy and ... cannot [be] explained by theology, Christian theology, because it is still bound to the idea of personal God which I regard as an image. (Dooley, 2003, p.212)

Murdoch's main idea on how human being could achieve goodness is that people should "pass beyond egoism towards more open recognition of the reality of other people and the importance of other things, and beyond illusions to reality, and beyond falsehood to truth" (Dooley, 2003, p. 213).

However, in an interview with Barbara Stevens Heusel, when asked about the differences between "the ethical standards" in her essays as opposed to those in her novels, Murdoch said that

The essays reject egoism, and command openness to what is other than oneself. That is what ought to be. The novels deal with what is: the selfishness which is more natural to us, together with how this is sometimes overcome. The novels are not moral tracts. They are works of art. But obviously there is a moral orientation, which is the same as in my moral philosophy. Any story, any traditional novel is about such conflicts, about how to treat other people, about power, about understandings, about authority, about love. (Dooley, 2003, p. 199)

Questioned that her essays "voice only the rejection of solipsism" (Dooley, 2003, p. 199) while "separation and recognition of another as a separate reality is impossible" (Dooley, 2003, p. 199) in the novels, Murdoch responded that the "moral orientation" in both the essays and the novels are the same in spite of the different emphasis between "moral tracts" and "works of art" (Dooley, 2003, p. 199).

Then, Barbara explored further on this issue by asking Murdoch whether there are few people in the novels who achieve goodness since the novels mainly deal with the selfishness. Murdoch responded that very few people could achieve goodness, saying: "Even so-called saints are imperfect. But to come back to the ideal, the human task is to become unselfish, to unself" (Dooley, 2003, p. 200). As for her, unselfing is "something that's got to become a way of life" (Dooley, 2003, p. 200). Furthermore,

[T]here is something self-regarding in this pursuit. What is to be “destroyed” is one’s egoism, not oneself. The problem is to cease having selfish desires. This is very difficult. In the novels this problem is sometimes in the foreground, sometimes not. Sometimes there are goodish people in books. More often there are various kinds of egoists, as in life. (Dooley, 2003, p. 200)

In Murdoch’s novels, regardless of the difficulty in unselfing to achieve goodness, there are still some male characters who live a saintly life in pursuit of being good as well as some female characters who have the consciousness to pay attention not only to their own concerns but also to others in the process of integrating themselves. In *The Good Apprentice*, Murdoch also takes effort to illustrate the truth of life and goodness as well as the difficulty in achieving them as follows,

Life is a whole, it must be lived as a whole, abstract good and bad are just fictions. We must live in our own concrete realized truth and that’s *got* to include what we deeply desire, what fulfils us and gives us joy. *That’s* the good life, not everyone is capable of it, not everyone has the courage. (Murdoch, 2001, p.91) Among the female characters in this novel, Brenda Wilsden is the one who earnestly practices what Murdoch advocates and advances towards goodness in her process of self-actualization.

Addressed by people around her as Brownie, with “[v]irtues of being helpful, courteous, and caring” (Khogeer, 2005, p.131), Brenda Wilsden is “a mature and absolutely realistic young woman who plays an important part in Edward’s quest for purification as Mark’s sister” (Khogeer, 2005, p. 131). At the first time meeting with Edward, Brownie just inquires about what happened that night when her brother died “in a firm clipped no-nonsense tone” (Murdoch, 2001, p.226) instead of reprimanding him as the murderer of her only brother. Refraining from grief, “Brownie absolves him from complicity and urges him to stop ruining his own life, a useless deed of remorse which does not bring back her brother” (Murdoch, 2001, p.226). Besides, she exhorts Edward to “go back, get on with your work, ... help other people in the future, stop just brooding about yourself, and feeling guilty” (Murdoch, 2001, p.230). When they say goodbye to each other, the enormous grief of losing her brother forever makes her burst into tears. Besides the pain of losing her brother, Brownie has to open herself up to suffering from her mother’s hatred of the sight of her “for being alive while Mark is dead” (Murdoch, 2001, p.382) since her mother always loves Mark more.

Unlike Mother May and Midge who are indulged in their own world and only concern about their own sorrow and happiness, Brownie could consider the welfare of others, just as Murdoch advances in her philosophy. Eager to know more about the truth, Brownie requests Edward to meet with her for the second time. The full understanding of her self makes Brownie know clearly what she wants and how she could survive the tragic event. Though the pain that is inflicted on her by the death of her brother makes Brownie look “older and shabbier, her hair less bright, her face somehow disorganized by tiredness or sadness” (Murdoch, 2001, p.308), she only asks Edward three questions with great care and alleviates his psychological burden of others’ censure and hatred because “[h]atred kills the hater” (Murdoch, 2001, p.311). The “painful necessary extraordinary relationship” (Murdoch, 2001, p.410) between Brownie and Edward is rather consolable for both of them to escape from the shadow of Mark’s tragic death. “They were secret homeless lovers, not even yet lovers, and that homelessness and deprivation was somehow too a part of their relation, their pact, something which made it for the moment in an essential way provisional and innocent” (Murdoch, 2001, p.410).

Brownie believes that vengeance has a way of rebounding upon itself and “[t]he consequences of anything can go on and on” (Murdoch, 2001, p.311). She is determined to stop the meaningless and fruitless hatred to others’ fault and have a consideration for them even though they make miserable mistakes, which is illustrated in her comforting words to Edward: “I can a little imagine what a dreadful time you must have been going through, not only with people blaming you, but with you blaming yourself” (Murdoch, 2001, p.280). Finally, Brownie writes to Edward a letter full of “loving forgiveness” (Rowe, 2004, p.145) and her best wishes for him. And I hope you too, dear Edward, will be at peace, feeling no guilt or self-destructive distress about the past. No one was to blame. Life is full of terrible things and one must look into the future and think about what happiness one can create for oneself and others. There is so much good that we can all do, and we must have the energy to do it. (Murdoch, 2001, p.506)

Brownie’s tolerance and attention to others, which is rooted in her love to the people around her, help both Edward and herself out of the difficult position and survive the tragedy of losing the beloved Edward.

Murdoch endows her with a complete self and the capacity for love to transcend egoism and recognize the reality of other people and the importance of other things, which makes her pilgrimage to goodness possible. At the end of the novel, Murdoch assigns her a happy marriage that she deserves with Ursula's son, a promising youngster whom she has loved a long while.

Although the struggle to be good shows up in all of Murdoch's work, along with the question of how to cast that struggle in a post-theistic age, very few characters, the male or the female, could step on the right way to approach goodness and achieve it. In *The Good Apprentice*, Murdoch uncommonly depicts a male character Stuart, a brilliant mathematician, who is not only striving in rather unusual ways to find goodness – a sort of self-imposed monasticism without God but also finally achieve it. Meanwhile, Murdoch endows Brownie with an unusual trait that is seldom found in her female characters: her consideration of others' welfare and attention to others' life. This is just what Murdoch advances in her philosophy as the way to achieve goodness.

In this novel, Murdoch presents the reader three typical ways for women to integrate female self which lead them respectively to different state of life and different level of happiness as well as different level of morality. In portraying both Mother May and Midge, Murdoch consciously points to the limitation of their female self since they only concern about their own needs, desires, and feelings after they became fully aware of themselves and their status in the family and in the society. Meanwhile, what's new for the reader is Murdoch's characterization of Brownie as a female character who is able to unself with a complete female self, which seldom appears in her previous novels. In Murdoch's novels, the changes of women's reaction to the male domination reveal her insight into women's changing position as time passes and her attempts to find solutions to correlative female problems on how to reconstruct female selfhood in the deconstructive era. Murdoch illustrates the manner in which social influences have an impact upon the behavior of the female, as well as upon the choices she makes. Murdoch's description of women's situation is dispassionate and realistic while her reflection on women's problems is close to the essence of human characteristics. Meanwhile, in novel after novel Murdoch explores philosophical ideas, concepts and theories and puts their validity to a test. In the characterization of female characters, Murdoch conveys her philosophical views on self, attention, love and goodness and expresses her concerns about women's issues, for instance, the importance of education in women's liberation, the likely ways to be independent and so on.

Murdoch, highly focusing on women's deconstructive situation and self-improvement, conveys her unique philosophical views on the reconstruction of female selfhood. Murdoch's elaboration of the progressive reconstruction of female selfhood and her distinctive ways for her female characters to survive their plights inspiring perspectives on female selfhood and provides new insights into women's issues. Due to her dispassionate reflection on and objective accounts of women's situation and women's problems, Murdoch has reservations about the feminism and women's movements, especially those that advocate the superiority of the female over the male or the substitution of the male-dominant position. Instead, considering education as an essential way for women to improve themselves and achieve sexual equality, Murdoch also explores the women's new plights after being educated since the male-dominated ideological changes obviously lag behind. So the more freedom of choice, more economic independence, and more control over the life that are brought by education also results in the new male discrimination against these educated women. Meanwhile, Murdoch points out the necessity of moral and spiritual growth for women's self-improvement in spite of the importance of education.

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