

The Characters in Relation to 'Rules' in Murdoch's *A Severed Head*

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Abstract. Although Iris Murdoch has enjoyed for decades a prestigious status in the world of fiction, her novel *A Severed Head* is strangely disturbing. One main source of this is the kind of characters the reader encounters, particularly the kind of relationships that exists among them. The present article proposes not only that these characters seem incorrigibly dissolute (with the exception of Georgie), but that the forming, severing, suspending and resuming of relationships seem, in their case, a game rather than real human experiences with all their emotional and moral implications.

The attempt of some critics to extenuate the characters as 'puppets' is rebutted. This cannot be true when at least one of the characters is an active promoter of 'caring less for the rules,' and the others are practically of the same conviction. The only ray of hope, represented by Honor Klein's 'uncivilized' admonitions of Martin, is too weak to counterbalance all the uncertainty that permeates the novel. It is admitted that the novelist does succeed in effectively dramatizing her main theme, related to the uniqueness of human beings. However, the characters' lack of involvement does detract from the novel's appeal.

There is a certain aftertaste of all great fiction which maintains your admiration for the best novels long after or even indefinitely after you have reached the end. Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head* cannot claim such an effect. One of the drawbacks is the characters' attitudes to 'rules'. To five out of the six main characters the forming, severing, suspending, freezing and resuming of relationships seem a game rather than real human experiences with all their emotional and moral implications. The exception is of course Georgie. She is the victim successively of Martin, his brother Alexander and, presumably, Palmer. It is a gross exaggeration to describe the others as "part of a stylized fictional representation of the ways in which we are all puppets of blind and incomprehensible forces."⁽¹⁾ Can this be true of Palmer Anderson who, in the words of Rubin Rabinovitz, "with the help of psychoanalytic jargon and his

(1) A.S.Byatt, *Iris Murdoch* (Longman Group Ltd., 1976), p. 27.

privileged position, is one of the chief instigators in this continual shift of sexual partners.”⁽²⁾ Is it conceivable that Palmer should be envisioned as a victim?

The society depicted in *A Severed Head* seems to be moving towards an utter loosening of marital ties, when ‘wife’ and ‘mistress’ become synonymous. All of the characters seem to accept this as an inevitable future, but it is only in theory that they accept it. Take the case of Palmer. His resentment of Antonia’s relationship with Alexander (if she is right about the reason for his sudden and sharp change of manner) is inexplicable in view of his teaching. He has always asserted to Martin: “‘do what you want’ costs others less than ‘do what you ought.’”⁽³⁾ And his whole conduct is an application of this rule. Why should he therefore resent that one of his disciples (an ardent one who has been psychoanalysed by him) should apply his principle of worrying “less about the rules.”⁽⁴⁾ Why should he feel offended at somebody’s being ‘free’ when being so is at the very basis of his method which consists in “a notion of permissiveness by means of which he hopes to free his patients”?⁽⁵⁾ The answer, I think, is that his resentment is psychological rather than moral. In other words, Palmer is prepared to defend his principle (or rather the lack of any principle indicated by the statement “all is permitted”) as long as it does not wound his self-image, but as soon as a faithful believer in his precept uses it to his mortification, he gives up his permissive attitude. His apparently inconsistent behavior should not surprise us, for the prophet of a selfish creed will never acquiesce in seeing his creed jar on his selfishness.

It is true of Palmer Anderson as of Martin and Antonia that he resents the other party’s disregard of the bond but not his own. If these people had been able to live without any recognition of ‘rules’ they could have enjoyed their vice, but somehow they cannot. They have the voice of morality with them all the time, not strong enough to guide their behavior, but resonant enough to alloy their pleasure. That is why Martin says that it is “very important that Antonia should think me virtuous ... I even felt virtuous.”⁽⁶⁾ He immediately realizes, however, that this representation is self-deception.⁽⁷⁾ He can behave basely, but cannot get away with it morally. Therefore, his claim “I was certainly capable of being cool and rational about adultery”⁽⁸⁾ is only a futile attempt on his part to evade the truth about himself.

(2) Rubin Rabinovitz, “Iris Murdoch” Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, No. 34 (Columbia University Press, 1968), 29.

(3) Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head* (Triad Panther, 1961); a standard edition is not available here, p. 169.

(4) Murdoch, p. 6

(5) Rabinovitz, p. 29.

(6) Murdoch, pp. 20-21.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 20.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 14.

It is worth noting that what Honor Klein criticizes Martin for has nothing to do with faithfulness to a partner. Her own behavior belies any respect on her part for conventional morality. She just urges him to have the necessary solidity to defend what belongs to him. To her "everything in this life has to be paid for, and love too has to be paid for."⁽⁹⁾ If he wants his wife Antonia he should fight for her. Being civilized in the sense of letting people off morally brings, from Honor Klein's point of view, only harm and evil. "In such matters," she reminds Martin, "you cannot have truth and what you call civilization."⁽¹⁰⁾ She can see this lucidly as a successful anthropologist who has associated with primitive tribes long enough to see the weakness of the civilized. The Japanese Samuri sword, which Dr. Klein can use skilfully, perhaps symbolizes the same view, that without force you cannot defend your right.

We may formulate the difference between Martin's 'civilized' attitude and Honor's 'primitive' one as follows: to Martin fighting for what belongs to him is his right, and therefore it is magnanimous to forgo that right in favor of another; to Honor Klein, on the other hand, defending one's right is a duty and a social commitment. It is evil rather than generous to give up that right. She cannot be more different in this respect than her brother, Palmer, whose avowed philosophy is, as we have seen, very nearly the antithesis of Honor's.

The discussion above must have given the impression that at one level I am finding an advantage for Honor Klein over the rest of the characters, and at another I am not. And this is exactly how I see the position. Honor is superior in the matter of self-respect, solidity and steadfastness. It seems that the circumstances of her life with the primitives must have opened her eyes to the danger of unconditional surrender to others in the name of civilization. It is by being firm rather than by being spineless that she believes one can build a better society. If being 'civilized' means in one of its aspects loss of identity, then Martin represents an advanced stage of 'civilization,' Honor seems untouched by 'civilization,' while the rest of the characters are quite 'civilized,' though to a lesser degree than Martin. If Honor turns out to be the author's favorite (it is she, for instance, who initiates and puts into momentum most of the action that brings Martin to maturity), it is on account of this firmness in her character which is lacking in the others.

But on another level I do not find much difference between Honor and the rest of the characters. It is as true of her as of the others that they, as Rabinovitz has written, "indulge in lying, hypocrisy, adultery, incest, but always with a warm smile and a sincere wish for the rapid recovery of the victim."⁽¹¹⁾ They have equally failed to recognize any common 'rules' to refer to in their social life. And hence, even their

(9) Ibid, p. 66.

(10) Ibid, p. 29.

(11) Ibid.

love seems fickle and short-lived. Honor's conformity here comes from the simple fact that she is helpless in the matter of the right formula for organizing sexual relations. She seems to take it for granted, as the others do, that conventional morality is no good; but there is no suggestion of any substitute body of rules to replace the renounced ones.

Just how much we are justified in generalizing from a set of six characters must be a controversial question. One thing, however, should be made clear neither Iris Murdoch's seriousness nor her realistic purpose should be doubted. In one of her philosophical articles she wrote: "We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world."⁽¹²⁾ To be sure the 'cast' of *A Severed Head* represents the modern type of man, stripped of values. This modernity may be best exemplified by Palmer Anderson, the intelligent psychoanalyst. While in the process of seducing Antonia and disrupting Martin's marriage, and as the latter protests "Antonia and I have been very happy," Anderson replies: "Happiness, my dear Martin, is neither here nor there."⁽¹³⁾ If happiness itself does not count, one wonders, what good is all Anderson's knowledge and psychotherapy. Progress in this novel is certainly not conducive to happiness and peaceful life. These time-cherished ideals are almost forgotten by the characters here.

As to Murdoch's realistic purpose it can easily be documented. In an interview with Michael O. Ballamy she declared: "I'm attempting to be realistic ... The novel is a marvelous form in that it attempts to ... explain people to themselves in a way."⁽¹⁴⁾ Besides, she is known to have found her ideal in the great masters of realism of the nineteenth century: "with Dickens, George Eliot or Proust, I feel I'm in *the* world, where great are belongs."⁽¹⁵⁾

But having emphasized Murdoch's seriousness and commitment it remains to ask: what does she set out to achieve in this novel? At the center of her concern here is an exposition of the failure to recognize the otherness and uniqueness of others "a belief in the realness and opacity of other persons."⁽¹⁶⁾ Iris Murdoch successfully develops this theme through various stages in which Martin gradually matures. His brother Alexander, through his art, and Honor Klein, through her experience among primitive tribes, are most valuable in opening his eyes to "the 'hard truth' of complex relations with dissimilar beings."⁽¹⁷⁾ Iris Murdoch then sets out to reveal

(12) Iris, Murdoch, "Against Dryness," *Encounter*, 16 (January 1961), 16.

(13) Murdoch, *A Severed Head*, p. 29.

(14) "An Interview with Iris Murdoch," *Contemporary Literature*, 18 (Winter 1977), 137.

(15) *Ibid.*, 130.

(16) Frank Baldanza, "Iris Murdoch and the Theory of Personality," *Criticism*, 8 (1965), 185.

(17) Baldanza, p. 183.

through symbol and comedy certain human shortcomings and she does it effectively. But despite her remarkable art the reader is unable to fully enjoy this novel. Could the reason be that the characters, one and all, recognize neither convention nor any acceptable substitute in the matter of the regulation of love for as L.K. observes unless there is "a sense of involvement,"⁽¹⁸⁾ of the kind he finds in for instance D.H. Lawrence, action and rhetoric will never touch the reader's heart.

(18) Leonard Kriegel, "Iris Murdoch: Everybody through the Lookingglass," in *Contemporary British Novelists*, edited by Charles Shapiro (Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), p. 79.

الشخصيات وعلاقتها بالقواعد الاجتماعية في رواية الرأس المبتور لإيريس ميردوك

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ملخص البحث . لقد تمتعت إيريس ميردوك لعدة عقود بمكانة مرموقة في مجال القصة، ولكن بالرغم من ذلك فإن روايتها «الرأس المبتور» تبعث الاضطراب في القاريء . ومن أهم أسباب ذلك نوع الشخصيات التي يصادفها القاريء في الرواية وخاصة نوعية العلاقات القائمة بينهم، وهذا ما يعالجه هذا المقال . يلاحظ كتاب المقال أن الشخصيات فوق كونهم متحللين بطريقة لا علاج لها (ما عدا جورججي) فإن تكوين العلاقات وفصمها وتعليقها واستئنافها تبدو في نظرهم لعبة أكثر من كونها أحوالا إنسانية حقيقية تشتمل على ما تشتمل من مضامين عاطفية وخلقية .

ويدفع المقال محاولة بعض النقاد الدفاع عن الشخصيات على أنهم «دمى .» فلا يمكن قبول هذا القول عنهم مع كون أحدهم على الأقل داعية نشطا لفكرة «تقليل الاهتمام بالقواعد الاجتماعية»، مع كون الباقين مؤمنين بالمبدأ نفسه من حيث واقعهم . وير الكاتب أن شعاع الأمل الوحيد وهو المتمثل في التقريع «المتخلف واللامتمدن» الذي توجهه اونر كلاين لمارتين، هو أضعف من أن يوازن كل ما يتخلل الرواية من شك . ويقرأ المقال بأن الروائية قد نجحت في التعبير الدرامي عن فكرتها الرئيسة، وهي فكرة تتعلق باستقلال كل فرد بشخصيته واختلافه عن غيره . ولكن نقص دوافع الالتزام العاطفي عند شخصيات الرواية له تأثير سلبي على تجاوب القاريء مع الرواية .