

Romantic Love, Gender Imbalance and Feminist Readings in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*

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ABSTRACT

Even though Iris Murdoch's novels depict a profoundly patriarchal society, most scholars have generally failed to identify any feminist aspirations in her work. This article aims to reassess her legacy as a writer by analysing from a feminist perspective one of her most acclaimed novels, *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). The tension between the androcentric approach of a self-deluded male narrator and a female author whose worldview is strongly influenced by her gender results in a feminist critique which is not based on the recovery of a female voice, but on the exploration of patriarchy within the novel and the production of a feminist epistemology derived from a dialogue between Murdoch's fiction and philosophy.

KEYWORDS: care ethics, feminist epistemology, Iris Murdoch, patriarchy, *The Sea, The Sea*

Studies in contemporary literature took a new turn with the development of gender analyses in the second half of the twentieth century. Works like Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) contributed to radical feminists' interrogations of gender-power relations under the slogan 'the personal is political'. Within this framework, it may seem paradoxical that one of the most prolific female writers in Britain at the time has rarely been studied as a feminist author. According to Katherine Weese, 'because Murdoch is often considered a writer who happens to be a woman rather than a woman writer, little exists in the way of feminist criticism of her

work'.¹ Furthermore, while her role as a female philosopher has been examined by scholars like Sabina Lovibond,² the multiple ways in which her ethics are integrated in her literature have not [yet](#) been sufficiently studied.

Murdoch's reluctance to acknowledge the influence that gender had on her work led her to deny ever being discriminated against. As she herself expressed, 'I have never felt picked out in an intellectual sense because I am a woman; these distinctions are not made at Oxford'.³ The ultimate paradox is that the gender bias Murdoch and most critics failed to theorise [—](#) or even recognise [—](#) may be responsible for the fact that the story of her life has received greater scholarly attention than her writings. Some of the latest biographies, including her husband John Bayley's⁴ memoir and the film *Iris*,⁵ have determined the way Murdoch has come to be remembered. In the same vein, Marije Altorf contends that in the last decade, Murdoch's work has been overshadowed by the personal circumstances surrounding her life: 'Newspapers, books, and television programs have focused on her friendships, relationships, and affairs as well as her loss of mind when suffering Alzheimer's disease'.⁵

This article aims to reassess her legacy as a writer by analysing from a feminist perspective one of her most acclaimed novels, and Booker Prize winner, *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). This novel is narrated from the viewpoint of Charles Arrowby, a deceptive male narrator who approaches other characters, particularly female ones, as mere projections of his own selfish needs. The narrator's lack of reliability triggers a critical disparity that encourages the reader to search for new meanings outside of Arrowby's text; more specifically, within the parody of romantic love and the author's philosophical writing. In gender terms, *The Sea, The Sea* exploits the tension between the androcentric approach of a self-deluded male narrator and a female author whose worldview is strongly influenced by her gender. Murdoch engages in a feminist

critique which is not based on the recovery of a female voice, lost amidst a distorted self-centred male narrative, but on her exploration of patriarchy and the production of a feminist epistemology derived from a dialogue between her novel and her philosophical writings.

The Sea, The Sea

The novel opens when Charles Arrowby, a sixty-year-old actor and playwright, retires to Shruff End, a house by the seaside. Away from the bustle of London, he sets out to write either a diary or a memoir until he realises that the most appropriate genre for his story is, in fact, the novel. Charles's peaceful life by the sea is frustrated when he accidentally finds out that his girlfriend from schooldays, Hartley, lives in a nearby town with her husband, Ben. Although they have not seen each other for more than forty years, this encounter rekindles a flame of a first love he portrays as innocent and pure: 'a passion and ... a love of purity that can never come again and which I am sure rarely exists in the world at all'.⁶ Charles chases her, compelled to save her from what he believes to be an unhappy marriage and an abusive husband. After a series of unsuccessful attempts to win her back, he decides to kidnap and imprison her in an inner room at Shruff End, eloquently described as 'the chief peculiarity of the house, and one for which I can produce no rational explanation'.⁷ The novel reflects on the process through which Arrowby's mind falsifies his immediate reality to accommodate it to his own needs and expectations. Hartley's imprisonment is the most evident illustration of how Charles desperately clings to the fantasy he has created of his own history, which is continuously negated by his present reality. Past and present are also intertwined when he is visited by old friends, who finally persuade him to set Hartley free to return home to her husband.

The novel is structured around a series of patterns traversing the narrator's life. To start with, jealousy and rivalry are triggering forces that not only emerge in relation to Ben, but also, and more importantly, in relation to Arrowby's cousin and alter ego, James. Another pattern is the narrator's need to break up other people's marriages. A precedent is established when he steals his friend's wife, Rosina, 'out of desire for possession'.⁸ Irrational envy also prompts him to travel to London determined to break the arrangement that Lizziey, his former lover, has with a gay friend of theirs, Gilbert. Even if he is not interested in Lizziey, he feels the urge to put an end to their unconventional relationship. His jealousy is inextricably linked to a drive to control and manipulate other people, which is particularly noticeable when it comes to female characters.

The gendered nature of the unequal interactions between Murdoch's characters contributes to the representation of what Hilda Spear deemed the 'unfairness of a world'⁹ to women. Nevertheless, while Murdoch's novels depict a profoundly patriarchal society where women are deprived of their agency, most scholars have generally failed to identify any feminist aspirations in her work, a statement supported by Murdoch herself, as she denied on several occasions that her fiction was concerned with gender issues. In this sense, her preference for male narrators could be connected with her reluctance to be classified as a female author:

I identify with men more than with women, I think. I don't think it's a great leap; there's not much 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 kind 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.¹⁰

While Murdoch's use of male narrators has been given different interpretations,¹¹ this article questions the credibility of an account shaped by the protagonist's androcentrism and misogynist views of women. The theme of illusion and reality, considered by Murdoch as the subject of good literature,¹² is represented in *The Sea, The Sea* by Arrowby's pilgrimage through a state of illusion that is stripped away at the end of the novel. Once James is dead and Hartley and Ben gone to Australia, Charles realises that his love for Hartley was merely a failed attempt to recover his lost youth. The ending confirms that the narrator's lack of reliability is responsible for undermining his own authority and the accuracy of his whole account. This, in turn, points towards an alternate reading that is not found in Arrowby's narrative but in the dialogue the novel establishes with other genres and texts.

The Fictionalised Past

The Sea, The Sea blurs and merges different times through the use of various tenses in the three sections that make up the novel. The first part, called Prehistory, takes a diary form to frame in the present tense Arrowby's daily routine as he writes at his home in Shruff End. Even though the present tense renders the impression of immediacy, Charles is haunted by past memories that, according to Peter Mathews, dominate the action of the novel.¹³ This section also includes a profound meditation on the writing process that draws attention to the role of the protagonist as both an actor and the actual producer of the story. Bran Nicol describes this duality as inextricably intertwined with the metafiction that characterises Murdoch's fiction in the

following manner: ‘The authority of the narrator ... is therefore undermined by the existence of a second narrative triangle that envelops the first. The points of which are “author,” “reader” and “novel”’.¹⁴ The self-conscious narrative process opens two layers of meaning: the meaning produced by the narrator and the meaning implied by the author.

The use of a retrospective voice is the first aspect that casts doubts on the veracity of the events narrated by Charles. The History section revolves around the most immediate past and is narrated in the past tense. While memoirs are inherently retrospective, Arrowby’s account emphasises the impossibility to disentangle past and present, inasmuch as ‘the past and the present are after all so close, so almost one, as if time were an artificial teasing out of a material which longs to join, to interpenetrate, and to become heavy and very small like some of those heavenly bodies scientists tell us of’.¹⁵ The outcome is an insightful reflection on a past story that cannot be fully recovered or disassociated from the present in which the narration is taking place. This interlacing of past and present is also evinced in the Postscript, written in the diary form and narrated in the present continuous tense. This interplay between tenses and times leads Arrowby to put the past at the service of his present, so that his memories are accommodated to satisfy his current needs.

The erratic and even contradictory record of daily events coexists with memories that seem to fluctuate depending on the specific moment of recollection: ‘the past ... does not exist as knowledge to be straightforwardly elaborated, but must be staged instead in the form of a complex dialectical process between past and present’.¹⁶ The veracity of a narrative based on retrospection is questioned, as memory not only represents a fallible source, but it is also impossible for Charles to remember accurately all the conversations, dialogues and exchanges included in the novel. As his account advances, he realises that once his recollections are

translated into a writing channel, they are also rendered fictional. Arrowby's reflections on the writing process lead him to conclude that the most suitable genre for his writing is the novel. In this regard, *The Sea, The Sea* corresponds to a particular type of novel, referred to by Steven Kellman as [a](#) 'self-begetting' novel which 'projects the illusion of art creating itself ... it is an account, usually first person, of the development of a character to the point at which he is able to take up his pen and compose the novel we have just been reading'.¹⁷

One of the aspects that distinguishes *The Sea, The Sea* as a novel rather than a memoir or a diary is precisely the inclusion of other characters' voices through dialogues and conversations. While Arrowby is the only narrator, the dialogues offer a multiplicity of voices and points of view of different characters with their own languages, illustrating [Mikhail](#) Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia. In his essay, 'Discourse in the Novel', Bakhtin defines dialogism and heteroglossia as the coexistence of voices of others within one's own voice.¹⁸ This conglomeration of voices plays [a](#) crucial role, as they complement, [and](#) in many cases contradict, Arrowby's account, particularly his self-portrait as a romantic hero. The whole narrative is problematised as Arrowby's perceptions prove to be inconsistent; in Angela Hague's words, Charles 'gradually reveals to the reader his incorrect evaluations of both himself and others ... and [there] is [...](#) a discrepancy between Charles Arrowby's interpretation of events and the reader's own conclusion'.¹⁹ The echoes of these other characters, along with the continuous discordance between Arrowby's discourse and the representation of his actions, cast doubts on a narrator identified as delusional, egotistical and manipulative, as well as on his account. Moreover, Charles's self-centred fantasy reaches its climax when [he](#) determined to rescue Hartley from an abusive husband, he kidnaps her, locking her in a room against her will. This episode draws attention to the influences of certain narratives and genres on Arrowby's approach to

women and gender relations, particularly discourses related to the construction of love in romantic literature. Therefore, the following section will examine the intertextuality between *The Sea, The Sea* and romantic genres, taking into account Gerard Genette's definition of intertextuality as 'a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts'.²⁰

Romantic Love Meets Parody

After a series of deliberations on his writing, Charles concludes that the novel is the most suitable genre for his story, inviting the reader to approach his narrative as a work of fiction. Besides fictionalising his past, the novel presents a love story where different genres, subgenres and patterns converge. *The Sea, The Sea* imitates and self-consciously reflects on the construction of love in romantic literature through the inclusion of motifs, devices and topics that are exaggerated, subverted and parodied. Murdoch deftly contrives a parody that 'imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject'.²¹

Charles draws on the conventions of those love stories in which a young couple is separated and forced to overcome a number of difficulties until they are finally reunited, living happily ever after. In this regard, the novel provides an insightful reflection on what Gary Goshgarian defined as 'the subtler effects of men's romantic projections'.²² He uses this plot as a framework to interpret the world around him and, more importantly, he ends up imposing it to his most immediate reality. Hartley's break-up years ago and her marriage with Ben are regarded as obstacles the couple has to undergo before their final reunion. Charles forces Hartley to become his heroine, imagining her as a captive princess trapped in an abusive marriage. The

trope of imprisonment is reminiscent of the particular subgenre of fairy tales. Nevertheless, the inconsistencies between the narrator's perception and the events that unfold throughout the novel cause a comical effect, turning Arrowby's love story into a parody of fairy tales. The princess, in this case, is an unattractive, middle-aged, married lady, who instead of being rescued by the hero, ends up being kidnapped and imprisoned by him. Furthermore, their love story is merely the chronicle of an obsession and the happily ever after is replaced by ultimate disillusion.

Moreover, the novel demonstrates how this illusion has material consequences, as the protagonist's 'egocentric attempt to impose form onto experience through his fantasy of love actually manifests a predatory attack on women'.²³ Arrowby's self-deluding tendencies reach a climax when, frustrated by Hartley's rejections, he decides to imprison her, expecting that she will end up confessing: "Admit it, say it, you've never really loved anybody but me, you have come home at last ... Say that you love me ... that we'll be happy" ... "Hartley, you love me, don't you, don't you?" ... "we're close, we know each other" ... "You know me, I know you".²⁴ The dialogues they have during her imprisonment oppose two conflicting viewpoints. Charles, on the one hand, is represented as too self-absorbed to realise that his actions are unacceptable and unethical. Furthermore, Hartley is not the innocent lady in need of rescue, but a middle-aged woman who knowingly decides to stand by her husband. She, on the other hand, believes that Charles simply wants to 'crash' her marriage²⁵ out of revenge for leaving him when they were young: 'It's resentment really, otherwise you wouldn't be so unkind'.²⁶ The paradox is that Hartley's complaints suggest that all the adjectives Arrowby uses to depict Ben could be applied to the narrator himself: a 'hateful tyrant', 'a thoroughly nasty man',²⁷ with a 'foul temper and foul jealousy'.²⁸

While Charles represents a parody of the romantic hero, he identifies himself with ‘crazed Orpheus’, responsible for rescuing his ‘dazed Eurydice’²⁹ from the realm of Hades, where she is trapped by a three-headed dog. The narration of his first encounter with Hartley refers to the myth of Orpheus, when he describes her following him to the church, while he keeps ‘looking back at her and stumbling’.³⁰ But this is not the only classical myth that is parodied and rewritten; when he visits the central gallery, he is captivated by Titian’s painting of Perseus and Andromeda. Charles is admiring Andromeda’s beauty when he suddenly takes notice of the sea monster, which alludes to a hallucination he has at the beginning of the novel and which recurs as a leitmotif representing jealousy. Unable to stare at the monster, Charles decides to focus his attention on Rembrandt’s picture of his son Titus. The fact that the narrator uses Titus to hide the horror evoked by the monster presages the events that will take place later [in](#) the novel when Charles uses Hartley’s adoptive son, also called Titus, to manipulate her. His scheme to take advantage of Titus to win Hartley back ends tragically when the boy drowns in the sea. Blinded by the myth of romantic love, Charles drags Hartley into a situation of helplessness and submission that stems from the egotism inherent in Arrowby’s romantic ideals. The gallery episode also suggests that virtuous feelings like the contemplation of beauty in a painting may be debased and degraded due to egotism.

This is analogous to the way in which Arrowby’s romantic feelings conceal jealousy, possessiveness and an eagerness to exert control over a female other, echoing Peter Conradi’s contention that the protagonist’s attitude towards Hartley is not motivated by love, but by ‘rapacious egoism and will-to-power’.³¹ Within this framework, his narration mirrors his own dominating personality, as it becomes the channel through which he aims to persuade the reader that his distorted perceptions are factual. The fact that Charles refers to Hartley by her middle

name, while her family calls her Mary, manifests a duplicity between the novelistic version created by the narrator and the way in which other characters portray her. Nevertheless, her appearance differs from the prototypical image of princesses in fairy tales. Instead of a fair and innocent maiden, Hartley is a middle-aged lady looking eighty years old³² with a beard and a moustache, caricaturised as an 'old bag'.³³ Unable to make her conform to his fantasy, Arrowby proposes his own version of a transcendent and idealistic love, described as 'blind as a bat'.³⁴ Wary of external and material elements, he goes as far as to negate Hartley's body in passages in which she is referred to as 'a pale partly disembodied being, her face hanging always just above my field of vision like an elusive moon'.³⁵ The metaphor of the elusive moon points out how Arrowby's self-absorption blurs his vision to the extent of impeding recognising the subjectivity of female characters. In Diane Capitanì's words, 'this deficiency prevents him from seeing what others really are or what they really need. Therefore, Charles imposes his private fantasies upon other people, destroying them in the process'.³⁶ The sexist prejudices underlying Arrowby's superficial approach to women is a first step in a pathway that ends with the denial of their humanity. As a result, Hartley's reality remains absent from the novel; in James's words: 'She is real, but what reality she has is elsewhere'.³⁷ Similarly, his transcendental and genuine love for her is also challenged and ultimately unmasked as an illusion.

Through Charles, Murdoch not only parodies the traditional approach to love in romantic literature, including some of the main tropes in fairy tales, but she also offers a critical examination of its detrimental consequences. The disparity between reality and perception causes the ironic effect captured by Angela Hague's observation: 'his attempt to force real events into a falsely romantic shape has both comical and disastrous results'.³⁸ The novel surfaces the ideology underlying the romantic plot, along with the subtle ways in which narratives shape the

construction of gender. Therefore, while Murdoch stated that *The Sea, The Sea* 'is about the nature of power in human relations',³⁹ her fiction goes one step further, revealing how power is invariably criss-crossed by gender. More specifically, the narratives that serve as a source of Arrowby's fantasies are deeply grounded in an ideology that perpetuates the existing power imbalance between men and women. The following section will examine the ways in which representations of his relationships with women and, particularly, with Hartley, feed directly into the construction of Arrowby's misogyny, as well as the patriarchal society depicted by Murdoch.

The Second Sex

Arrowby's drive to control and manipulate others is particularly noticeable when it comes to women and, more specifically, his relationship with Hartley, which according to Weese, 'is based less on love than on power'.⁴⁰ His approach to female characters is dominated by narrow prejudices and stereotypes that erase their nuances, preventing him from taking women seriously.

Gabriele Griffin argues that 'on the whole Murdoch's characters tend to be cast in the conventional moulds of femininity familiar in this culture as helpless, dependent, sexy mistress, boring, podgy housewife, mother figure, or virginal, unattached female'.⁴¹ Within this framework, Hartley is described as a victim of an abusive husband, abandoned by her adoptive son and doomed to occupy a submissive role: the 'female victim of a male-dominated society'.⁴² Hartley's passivity is emphasised when she seems to resign [herself](#) to Charles's harassment, while her choice to stay in an abusive marriage also represents her as subordinated and controlled by her husband. Moreover, this attitude demonstrates Hartley's acceptance of violence and abuse as inherent components of romantic relationships.

The omnipresence of violence is ostensibly manifest when, unable to convince Hartley to run away with him, he desperately subjugates her through the use of force. Jamil Khogeer characterises his attraction to Hartley as ‘a regressive force that aims to keep her completely in his power’.⁴³ Furthermore, the recollections of past relationships and the visits of former lovers to Shruff End indicate that this behaviour is not exceptional, but rather responds to a pattern of male dominance. Rosina and Peregrine are some of the voices that corroborate Arrowby’s ‘possessiveness’ and ‘jealousy’.⁴⁴ According to them, Charles broke up their marriage just to satisfy his ‘beastly impulses’; Rosina goes as far as to affirm that he enjoys ruining people’s marriages.⁴⁵ The gendered nature of the unequal interactions between Arrowby and the female characters is also illustrated by his attitude towards his former lover, Lizzie. While she is deeply in love with him, Arrowby diminishes her by asserting that it was ‘surprisingly easy to leave her when the time came’.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Charles not only regards Lizzie as a pastime whenever he feels lonely, but he also keeps a feeling of ownership that triggers a furious reaction when he finds out about Lizzie’s friendship with Gilbert and with his cousin James. Highlighting how the narrator’s egotism runs parallel to his lack of consideration for women, Lizzie complains: “‘you don’t respect people as people, you don’t see them, you’re not really a teacher, you’re a sort of rapacious magician’”.⁴⁷ Charles’s misogyny entails a rejection of female sexuality that leads him to confess that after spending a night with a woman, ‘In the morning she looks to me like a whore’.⁴⁸

The fact that Charles is the one who controls and dominates all his partners, while women appear subordinated either to him or to other men, reveals how human relationships in *The Sea*, *The Sea* are criss-crossed by power dynamics that are essentially gendered. Murdoch demonstrates the crucial role that gender plays through the representation of a protagonist who

approaches female characters as mere means to fulfil his own ends. Hartley, Rosina and Lizzie are, in Griffin's words, 'externalizations of male needs'⁴⁹ that allow him to assert his own power. As will be examined later in this article, Arrowby's subjectivity bears a strong resemblance to Sartre's construction of a subject that can only be conceived of as male: 'certainly Murdoch's well-known sketch of the man, or moral agent, presented in the existentialist-behaviourist model she criticises – free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy – seems to show a certain gender-related acerbity: this "man" must necessarily be the hero, not the heroine'.⁵⁰ While men are expected to transcend their situation, women take on the role of the object, defined exclusively in opposition to a subject that is necessarily a male self. This interplay places Charles as subject, while women are relegated to the category of what Simone de Beauvoir referred to as 'the other, the inessential, the object'.⁵¹ Relationships between men and women in *The Sea*, *The Sea* are defined by the same lack of reciprocity the French philosopher analysed more than twenty years earlier. The outcome is a relational theory of femininity that identifies women as relative to men, but not the other way round: 'what peculiarly signalises the situation of women is that she ... nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilise her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego'.⁵² Blissfully unaware of the subjectivity of women, Charles reduces them to the category of objects, which translates into a pressing need to hold a position of power.

This lack of consideration for women, particularly for Hartley, fuses with a sexism that is explicitly criticised by James. In the following dialogue he exposes the way in which Charles has used Hartley as a projection of his own needs.

You've built a cage of needs and installed her in an empty space in the middle. The strong feelings are all round her – vanity, revenge, your love for your youth – they aren't focused on her, they don't harm them at all. You are using her image, a doll, a simulacrum, it's an exorcism. Soon you will start to see her as a wicked enchantress. Then you will have nothing to do except forgive her and that will be within your capacity.⁵³

James's words turn out to be prophetic once Charles grasps that the real Hartley has nothing to do with the character his imagination has created. The novel interrogates the process through which what was once considered as an everlasting transcendent love is gradually diminished to feelings of infatuation and delusion. This transformation culminates the moment Arrowby starts to see her in a very different light: 'I began, with the half-conscious cunning so characteristic of the self-protective human ego, to see her as a poor hysterical shrew'.⁵⁴ Arrowby's concept of love is based on the fabrication of delusions that prevent him from recognising any reciprocity with female characters. Therefore, love in this case becomes a self-centred and narcissistic process in which the ego searches for validation of its own self. Arrowby's reflections on love end up revealing a solipsism that is emphasised when he confesses that his love for Hartley was motivated by the hope of recovering his own youth: 'Yes of course I was in love with my own youth ... Who is one's first love?'.⁵⁵ *The Sea*, *The Sea* exhibits how the narrator uses female characters as projections that reflect back at his own self.

On the other hand, Arrowby's infatuation with Hartley and Rosina runs parallel to an obsession with their husbands, which in Lizzie's case also affects Gilbert and James. His

relationships with women hint at a triangle that entangles him in a homosocial connection with men, in which male friendship, rivalry and erotic love are conflated. In ‘Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles’, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick draws upon Rene Girard’s *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* to elaborate on representations of Oedipal triangles where the beloved one functions as the link between two rivals: ‘the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of “rivalry” and “love”, differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent’.⁵⁶ Arrowby’s feelings of jealousy over Rosina and Hartley’s marriages elicit a male rivalry that reinforces his approach to female characters as mere means.

Romantic jealousy and male rivalry coalesce throughout the novel with Charles’s vision of a monster rising from the sea: ‘At first it looked like a black snake, then a long thickening body with a ridgy spiny back followed the elongated neck ... I could also see the head with a remarkable clarity, a kind of crested snake’s head, green-eyed, the mouth opening to show teeth and pink interior’.⁵⁷ Even though he ends up concluding that it is a hallucination, the omnipresence of this vision has multiple meanings. Referred to as ‘the sea-serpent of jealousy’⁵⁸ some scholars like Peter Conradi, Roula Ikonomakis and Julia Jordan have focused on its role as a metaphor for Arrowby’s envious feelings and egotism, as well as a symbol of Arrowby’s neurosis, which surpasses all comprehension. My reading, on the other hand, connects it with the sea, as both the monster and the sea where the monster rises are represented as enigmatic forces that Charles unsuccessfully attempts to control through his swimming, ‘an expression of Charles’s individuality, and of his individual exercise of power, which he imposes on the sea’.⁵⁹ She connects this motif with the sense of will and purpose foisted upon the chaotic ocean. The passages where Charles describes himself swimming reflect how the dominion he might obtain

over the water is threatened by the ominous presence of a sea monster that escapes all power and knowledge.

The tension between swimming and the sea monster is related to a second form of negotiation: the construction of Arrowby's masculinity. The control and dominion associated with swimming in *The Sea, The Sea* identifies it as an expression of masculinity that ends up having tragic consequences. The fact that Titus is drowned [while](#) swimming at the same spot where Charles used to take him causes the narrator to admit his responsibility. He even confesses [that](#) he failed to warn him of the dangers of these currents because he wanted to look strong and fearless in front of the boy, concluding that 'my vanity destroyed him'.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the monster reminds Arrowby that his masculinity relies on an exertion of power that turns out to be illusory as well. In the same way that Charles could not foresee Titus's fatal drowning, his eagerness to impose his point of view on the reader is also frustrated. In this regard, the inclusion of a narrator who fails to persuade the reader to believe his version also leads to the deconstruction of male authority in the novel. Even though the boundaries between narrator and author, fiction and reality may seem problematic, the possibility of establishing an intertextuality between *The Sea, The Sea* and Murdoch's philosophy throws some new light on both the novel and the author. Even though Arrowby's account differs from Murdoch's philosophical writing, her theories are also represented in the novel through the discourse of one of the main characters, James. This presence turns the novel into what Elizabeth Dipple describes as 'a sustained questioning of the spiritual life, a study of the devastation of magic in all its forms and a profound psychic landscape whose symbolic quality very slowly, in small, subtle steps, unfolds. James is its vehicle, and on him rests the deep infrastructure of the book'.⁶¹

Care Ethics

The central role that philosophy [plays in](#) Murdoch's fiction is particularly noticeable when it comes to the construction of characters who, according to Milada Franková, represent 'conscious, serious studies in their own right'.⁶² *The Sea, The Sea* reveals a constant dialogue between Murdoch's philosophical influences and the elaboration of her own concepts and theories, which is not surprising, as 'Iris Murdoch comes to literature as a philosopher; her own novels reflect her philosophical interests and her general statements about the novel connect it, not with literary tradition, but with the history of philosophy'.⁶³ Reminiscences of the cave myth surface when Arrowby refers to his new home as a cave where he is trapped by a world of shadows and illusions that isolate him from the outside reality. Through the representation of the protagonist's delusions the novel mirrors the deceitful process Murdoch criticises in *The Sovereignty of Good* when she contends that: 'our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world'.⁶⁴

Furthermore, the metafictional reflection on the fictive nature of Arrowby's narration corresponds to Plato's approach to fiction as an instrument to create false images of the world. In the same vein, the novel illustrates how art and, more specifically, Arrowby's 'own dream text',⁶⁵ becomes a medium liable to being fantasised and degraded. The Platonic influence is ratified when Charles ends up confessing that his novel was merely a projection of his own imagination, an instrument to falsify reality so that it suits his egomaniac ends: 'I had deluded myself throughout by the idea of reviving a secret love which did not exist at all ... I had accused Hartley of being a "fantasist" ... but what a "fantasist" I had been myself. I was the dreamer, I the magician. How much, I see as I look back, I read into it, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality'.⁶⁶ The theme of illusion and reality is raised through the construction of a

narrator that represents, in Murdoch's words, 'a place of illusion'⁶⁷ frustrating the awareness and recognition of anything outside the realm of the ego. Arrowby's account exemplifies the consequences of nourishing a self-centred illusion, particularly what Barbara Heusel refers to as 'the confusion and disorientation a character can experience if he ignores reality and "dream-test"'⁶⁸. This denial of reality adopts different shapes and forms that can be traced to a common source: self-deception and egotism. Both converge in a process through which reality is supplanted by fiction, and memory is ultimately replaced by fantasy.

As a self-absorbed and extremely egotistical character, Charles personifies Murdoch's reading of Plato from a psychoanalytic perspective. The portrait heavily influenced by Freud of the bad and mediocre man she offers in *The Sovereignty of Good* bears a strong resemblance to Arrowby's characterisation as 'naturally selfish ... The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. In some ways it resembles a machine ... The area of its vaunted freedom of choice is not usually very great. One of its pastimes is daydreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities'.⁶⁹ Murdoch's ethics explore the dangers of selfishness and egotism through the representation of a love story that turns out to have one sole recipient: Arrowby's youth.

His inability to go beyond the realm of the self reflects a solipsism that Murdoch identified at the core of a predominant philosophy at the time, existentialism. Even though Murdoch never discussed it explicitly, gender plays a central role, not only within the novel, but also within existentialism. While Sartre considers his own experiences and circumstances as the norm, they should be understood as the result of his male condition. The existentialist subject conceived of as a free agent who projects himself to the world by making his own choices is necessarily male, as it displays 'a male-centred view of an inter-subjective world which

emphasises action, responsibility, free will, choice, agency all of which women have shared in only marginally, if at all'.⁷⁰ The previous section of this article, on the other hand, delved into the gendered nature of the interplay between a male subject and his female object. Regarding her philosophical writings, Murdoch's main objection to existentialism, particularly to Sartre's epistemology, is the lack of reciprocity, perceived by Genevieve Lloyd as the absence of 'reciprocal recognition between transcendent selves'.⁷¹ which is in fact a lack of reciprocity between men and women. In 'Against Dryness' she defends a series of arguments that contradict the existentialist approach to subjectivity:

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. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons.⁷²

As this passage suggests, Murdoch's work not only challenges existential values; she also opposes them to a different set of principles based on the idea that self-knowledge and the pursuit of Goodness rely on three interconnected concepts: the concept of truth, the concept of attention, and the concept of love. These three concepts urge the subject to go beyond the fantasies and delusions created by its ego in order to become aware of a reality outside itself. Her theory is informed by French philosopher Simone Weil, and her definition of attention as 'the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality'.⁷³ Their understanding of attention is dependent upon the annihilation of the subject's selfishness as a first step on the

pathway towards the recognition of the reality outside the self. This process through which the self transcends its ego is referred to as ‘unselfing’ or ‘decreation’, and is closely connected with Murdoch’s approach to love, which she portrays as ‘the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real’.⁷⁴ Love implies an attenuation of the ego so that the self is projected as a transcendent force veering towards the reality of the other. And the other way round, love necessarily requires unselfing as a first stage in the process of ‘attention’.

Arrowby’s attitude towards Hartley contradicts Murdoch’s understanding of love. Unable to get rid of his selfishness, he fails to transcend his own ego and recognise the subjectivity of the other, illustrating Murdoch’s criticism that ‘human love is normally too profoundly possessive and also too “mechanical” to be a place of vision’.⁷⁵ Love, a central concept in the author’s philosophy, is frustrated in the patriarchal society that Murdoch’s novel depicts, particularly because of the intricate ways in which androcentrism prevents male narrators from recognising women as autonomous beings. Arrowby’s realisation that he never saw or loved Hartley confirms the fact that the construction of romantic relationships within the patriarchal society represented in *The Sea*, *The Sea* is based on a gender inequality that annihilates the possibility of love.

Nevertheless, while Arrowby stands as the antithesis of Murdoch’s ideals, her ethics are personified in the novel through the construction of the narrator’s alter ego, James. His discourse, actions and, more importantly, his disciplined spiritual approach mirror Murdoch’s principle that the pursuit of Goodness relies upon awareness, recognition and love of other human beings. It is worth noting how James explicitly associates Buddhism with the urgency to transcend personal egotism by abating selfishness, or as he himself explains, ‘giving up power and acting upon the world negatively. The good are unimaginable’.⁷⁶ James’s spiritual

transformation corresponds to Simone Weil's definition of unselfing as 'the slow attenuation or destruction of the ego, which itself requires a quiet environment'⁷⁷ which he found in the monastery in Tibet where he studied. The contrast between Arrowby and James allows Murdoch to oppose two models of masculinity. Charles represents the conception of the individualist, self-made man, ultimately challenged by his cousin, who advocates for selflessness, spirituality and humanitarianism. James's spirituality defies the male-centred approach to ethics that has commonly given priority to principles like competitiveness and individualism. His understanding of goodness resembles the principles upheld in Murdoch's philosophical writings, which revolve around values like affection, altruism and the willingness to attend [to](#) the needs of others.

The approach to morality personified by James in the novel and theorised by Murdoch on her philosophical writings is reminiscent of the care ethics that emerged within the context of difference feminism in the [1980s](#). American psychologist and one of the founders of Ethics of Care (EoC), Carol Gilligan⁷⁸ delves into the differences between men and women in their moral development, paving the way for a paradigm shift that differed from justice-based ethical approaches, while emphasising the role of interdependence: 'The ethics of care respects rather than removes itself from the claims of particular others with whom we share actual relationships'.⁷⁸ The ethics of care rendered value to characteristics, expectations, values and spaces traditionally associated with women, like the domestic sphere. This implied that qualities like empathy and benevolence were privileged over abstract principles like justice. The fact that these values are represented in *The Sea, The Sea* by a male character can be interpreted as an example of what Lorna Sage defines as the process through which 'men are pulled by the text's gravitational field into a domestic orbit'.⁷⁹ Within this same framework⁷⁹, Margaret Rowe concludes that 'Murdoch's creation of a feminized landscape is her most radical gesture toward

emancipation'.⁸⁰ This article, on the other hand, contends that the intertextuality between *The Sea*, *The Sea* and Murdoch's philosophical writings confirms an approach to ethics that defies the male logics by celebrating certain qualities, behaviours and spaces that have been traditionally associated with the female realm, including care for others, altruism and compassion. Moreover, instead of circumscribing them to the female sphere, Murdoch theorises them as universal values that should be shared by both men and women. Therefore, her production of an epistemology founded on the principles of Goodness and Virtue can be regarded as a valuable, albeit overlooked, feminist legacy.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, Iris Murdoch's gender blindness prevented her from acknowledging the impact that gender had on her work. Her husband Bayley even denied that her gender influenced her in any way, as he stated that she 'was never "female" at all, a fact for which I sometimes remembered to be grateful'.⁸¹ Ironically, Murdoch's legacy has been shaped by gender bias, sexist prejudices, misconceptions and a number of analyses that have failed to identify feminist readings that go beyond the author's goals. While it is unlikely that Murdoch's use of a male narrator in novels like *The Sea*, *The Sea* was intended as a feminist critique, the unexpected result is an insightful exploration of the protagonist's misogynist views and the ideology in which they are ingrained. The patriarchal society represented in the novel exposes the gendered nature of the unequal interactions between the male protagonist and the female characters. Drawing on Beauvoir's framework, Charles takes on the role of the sovereign subject, turning the beloved other into a manifestation of his own needs. This lack of reciprocity between the male subject and his female other leads to Murdoch's approach to love as an 'unreachable

goal'.⁸² The novel problematises how Arrowby's construction of romantic love entails a series of beliefs and concepts that perpetuate the subordination of women, and which ultimately prove detrimental for them. Furthermore, the intertextuality between the novel and Murdoch's philosophy reveals the production of an epistemology that resembles the ethics of care that emerged as a feminist response to male-centred approaches, including utilitarianism, Aristotle, Kantian deontology and existentialism. Murdoch's feminist significance encompasses her analyses of patriarchy along with the production of an epistemology that challenged the conception of the individualist, self-made man by opposing it to a set of principles based on Goodness and Virtue. As Murdoch herself concludes, 'nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous ... Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness'.⁸³

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Notes

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