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Absurdity's grail : the adaptation of medieval themes in four of Iris Murdoch's novels

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**ABSURDITY'S GRAIL:
THE ADAPTATION OF MEDIEVAL THEMES
IN FOUR OF IRIS MURDOCH'S NOVELS**

A Thesis

Presented to

**The Faculty of the Department of English
San Jose State University**

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Emily Ann Wheeler

May 1995

Adviser: Professor David Mesher

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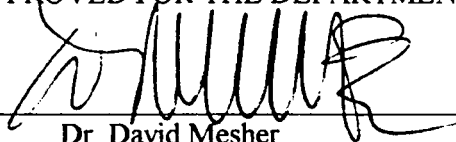
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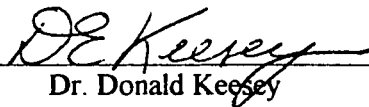
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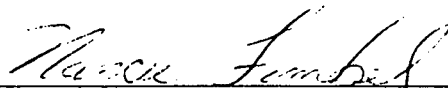


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ABSTRACT

ABSURDITY'S GRAIL: THE ADAPTATION OF MEDIEVAL THEMES IN FOUR OF IRIS MURDOCH'S NOVELS

by Emily Ann Wheeler

This thesis discusses Iris Murdoch's use of medieval themes in four novels: *Under the Net* (1954), *The Black Prince* (1973), *The Good Apprentice* (1985), and *The Green Knight* (1993). Murdoch adapts the traditional questing knight to the post-modern age with respect to existentialism, absurdity, and her own philosophy.

Study of these novels reveals three common adaptations of medieval themes: first, Murdoch's protagonists, like the questing knight, obsessively pursue material and spiritual goals. Next, each novel characterizes women as catalysts who urge the masculine protagonist to integrate the feminine qualities of the Jungian *anima* in order to fulfill his quest. Finally, each protagonist also confronts a character who embodies an absolute quality, such as goodness or suffering. This character plays a dual role as both alter-ego and Jungian shadow. Spanning the length of Murdoch's career, the four novels under discussion are particularly representative of these tendencies in her work.

*to Andrew,
whose belief,
laughter,
and cooking
sustain me*

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Introduction

Iris Murdoch's Intertextual Direction

Iris Murdoch: a great imitator of literary styles. Her novels reflect the spiritual search of the *Pearl*-poet, the inner struggle of Shakespeare, the minute detail of Dickens. But Murdoch does not simply copy the styles of these past geniuses; she also adapts their themes to reflect the complexity and confusion of her own post-modern era. The intertextual nature of Iris Murdoch's literary works has long been a starting point for many critics. Some have praised Murdoch for preserving and adapting traditional techniques to the twentieth-century novel, while others have lambasted her for what they feel is her slavishness to outmoded styles, and have thus labeled her a post-modern dinosaur.

Murdoch's pursuit of Shakespearian themes has been a particular favorite of literary scholars. Indeed, Murdoch's use of irony and bitter tragedy in such novels as *A Severed Head* and *The Black Prince* seems to invite such comparison. Her novels' ironic wordplay and biting humor, as well as their egotistical heroes, also resemble Shakespeare's art. Richard Todd has even suggested that Murdoch consciously models her style on the genius of Shakespeare: "Shakespeare's ability to master a kind of language which can be regarded as a matrix which does not 'cramp the style' of individual characters is, for her, miraculous, and to be aspired towards by the twentieth-century novelist, herself included" (47). Several other scholars have attempted to parallel her best-known work to date, *The Black Prince*, with *Hamlet*, based upon the protagonists' similarly obsessive, isolationist neuroses, as well as the novel's self-conscious analysis of the play.

Other critics, such as Christine Sizemore in *A Female Vision of the City*, fix Murdoch's intertextuality firmly in the nineteenth century, considering how her novels draw extensively on the style of Dickens. Contributing to this outlook is Murdoch's

obsession with the background of London: Peter Conradi says that the city “seems to figure sometimes as an extra character” (*Saint* 4). Murdoch’s creation of many grotesque, exaggerated character types—such as the utterly evil, depraved adulterer Otto Narraway in *The Italian Girl*, or the too good, too nice, too tolerant Lizzie Scherer in *The Sea, the Sea*—also inspires comparison to Dickens’s clear-cut villains and long-suffering heroines. Another basis for this comparison is Murdoch’s perfect, sometimes contrived plot structure, especially in her novels from the late sixties and early seventies. As in the Victorian novel, Murdoch’s early novels come to perfect conclusions that are often imperfect in their contrivance, what L. R. Leavis terms her “too ponderous thematics” (138).

Throughout her career as a novelist, Murdoch has also consistently referred to the philosophical, poetic questing of the medieval era. Her singular masculine protagonists, who pursue their all-important goals in search of what they perceive to be the truth, share much in common with the knights created by medieval artists centuries ago. These protagonists, modern and medieval, also share the influence of complex women who shape their quests. Finally, each of these heroes is often haunted by an absolute character who, in Murdoch’s novels, can play a dual role as both the hero’s sympathetic alter-ego and fearsome shadow. The hero’s recognition and integration of these characters play a crucial role in the fulfillment of his quest.

Murdoch pursues these medieval themes on several different levels. Her heroes’ pursuits are just as impossible as the medieval knight’s; however, in this post-modern age, Murdoch’s protagonists have lost the surety of Christianity and thus founder, confused and despairing. Unlike their medieval counterparts, the lives of Murdoch’s heroes cannot be fulfilled by the attainment of a single spiritual goal. Murdoch herself has rejected the idea that humanity is driven by a single guiding impulse: she cites as “alien and implausible” (*Sovereignty* 7) the notion that “we should aim at total knowledge of our

situation and a clear conceptualization of all our possibilities. Thought and intention must be directed towards definite overt issues or else they are merely day-dream” (*Sovereignty* 9). This linear view of life is commonly found in early literature: the traditional medieval knight knows what he is looking for and why he is looking for it. Beowulf pursues the dragon in order to save his kingdom; Roland pursues the Saracens in order to bring glory to his king Charlemagne; Gawain pursues the Green Knight in order to keep a promise.

Murdoch challenges the notion of the common questing hero, whose return to much post-war literature she criticizes. Establishing her disagreement with the notion that people have a philosophical need for “clear conceptualization,” she writes: “This ‘man,’ one may add, is familiar to us: he is the hero of almost every contemporary novel” (*Sovereignty* 7). Murdoch’s novels often begin with this type of character, who seeks to explain his world and create order in his life, but whose intentions are constantly undermined by unpredictable forces outside of himself. One example is Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, the Sea*, who retires to the seaside to discover peace and write, but finally gives up after being constantly pursued by his old London friends and rejected by his rediscovered first love. In *A Severed Head*, Martin Lynch-Gibbon suffers a similar fate: at first, his love life is quite tidy, with his young mistress at one end of town and his beautiful older wife at the other. However, Martin utterly loses his careful control as his mistress undermines him by befriending his wife, who in turn leaves Martin for his best friend.

At the same time she challenges the linear pursuits of the traditional hero, Murdoch uses the confused intentions of her protagonists to pursue themes relating to the search for truth. After frantically chasing his own idea of truth and order, the protagonist often experiences some type of traumatic reversal which causes him to re-evaluate the nature of his quest for meaning. Usually, this reversal results in the protagonist’s acceptance of the contingent, unpredictable nature of the world, and he usually alters the course of his life. For example, in *Bruno’s Dream*, Diana Greensleave is thrust into the

role of supporting her dying father-in-law, Bruno. Upon his death, she realizes that she must give up her pursuit of revenge against her cold husband. Witnessing the pain of Bruno's death and his final quiet surrender utterly changes her vengeful outlook at the end of the novel:

She tried to think about herself but there seemed to be nothing there. Things can't matter very much, she thought, because one isn't anything. Yet one loves people, this matters. Perhaps this great pain was just her profitless love for Bruno. One isn't anything, yet one loves people. How could that be? Her resentment against Miles, against Lisa, against Danby had utterly gone away. They will flourish and you will watch them kindly as if you were watching children. (*Bruno* 310)

Diana's reversal here is the result of the realization of her own life's insignificance after watching another's life slip away. Her surrender to forces greater than herself results in a gentler, more charitable outlook.

In many of Murdoch's other novels, the protagonists realize the futility of the aims they have pursued, and finally surrender to the inexplicable nature of the world. This idea resembles themes found in medieval literature: like the medieval knight after his successful quest, Murdoch's heroes realize how small they are in the face of something much more powerful than the self. But rather than citing religion or God as the driving force to which man must surrender, Murdoch instead insists upon the surrender of the self to contingency. "We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance" (*Fire* 79). Human beings are not physical shells of an immortal soul looked after by a caring God, but rather weak, temporary wills governed by absurdity and chaos. According to Murdoch's philosophy and novels, one is better off accepting this truth.

Murdoch adapts the ancient theme of the questing hero to the post-modern age with her use of absurdity and existentialism. The events that redirect Murdoch's protagonists away from their self-appointed quests often occur with great speed,

multiplicity, and confusion. *The Black Prince* illustrates this alarming sense of absurdity particularly well: Bradley Pearson, who is getting ready to retire to the seaside to write his great novel, is beset by a series of tumultuous events which result in his failure to reach the ocean. A sampling of the events which confront him in a few short days include his estranged ex-wife's return from America, a violent, murderous argument between his best friend and his wife, his sister's collapsing marriage and imminent suicide, and his own love affair with the nineteen-year-old daughter of the aforementioned best friend. However, Murdoch's wit and use of minute detail make the events believable, and they serve adequately to underline the unpredictability of human existence. Bradley is an obsessive planner, but his careful plans are completely obliterated by the events unfolding around him, which he cannot avoid despite his valiant effort to get away.

This use of absurdity is a decidedly post-modern development on the quest theme, as the knight in medieval tales always reaches his goal; he always manages to defeat whatever obstacles block his way. Beowulf does defeat the dragon despite his injuries. Gawain does find the Green Knight in the end, in spite of being sidetracked and delayed by the hospitality of the mysterious lord and lady (although Gawain suffers his own reversal at the end of the tale!). However, Murdoch's post-modern heroes never quite make it; their quests are fulfilled, but never, never in the way that they intend at the start. For Murdoch's heroes, life is indeed a quest, but often discovering the true nature of what that quest should be, as opposed to what the hero's selfish concerns wish it to be, is the point of the story. In this way, Murdoch continues to challenge the traditional questing hero, whose quest is clarified at the start of the tale; Murdoch's hero must not only seek to fulfill the quest, but must also dig through the absurdity of life to uncover the nature of the quest itself.

Murdoch also borrows from the existentialists. She has never completely agreed with them, rejecting the value they place upon the isolated human mind. However,

Murdoch does share their view of human life as pointless. This outlook is in line with her emphasis on the importance of accepting contingency, and her rejection of traditional religion. In *The Black Prince*, Bradley Pearson states most clearly which part of existentialism Murdoch can accept: "I have no religion except my own task of being" (*BP* 19). It is this task of being, and how to reconcile oneself with the unpredictability of the world, that Murdoch's novels and philosophy are concerned with. Unlike the medieval knight, who has the certainty of Christianity to bolster his quest, Murdoch's heroes must deal with a nonsensical world and strive to be good despite "the world of fear and horror" which "lies but a millimetre away" (*BP* 19).

A knowledge of Murdoch's philosophical writings gives fascinating depth to any study of her work. Not only does she adapt themes and styles from several different literary periods, but she also draws upon her rich knowledge gained as a Fellow of philosophy at Oxford. A study of her novels may certainly be enriched by a look at her philosophy; in fact, this study draws extensively upon the attitudes expressed in her philosophical works. However, it is restrictive to judge her works solely on the basis of her philosophy. This narrow view, such as the one Peter Wolfe espouses, must be rejected: "But the kind of criticism most essential to a sound appreciation of Iris Murdoch must examine concepts from their source in philosophy proper and determine how they cohere dramatically as social comedy" (7). Wolfe goes on to base much of his praise for Murdoch's work on her use of and adherence to her philosophical treatises, insisting that studies which focus on the artistic elements of her novels are "largely inadequate" (1). Some critics, after Wolfe, have rejected Murdoch's novels outright for failing to adhere to her philosophical precepts. Jack Turner, for instance, refutes the value of studying Murdoch's works because of this failure (121).

But why must the artist adhere slavishly to any philosophy, even if it is the artist who composed it? Murdoch writes novels that are more than simplistic parables of her

philosophy: they mirror the chaotic world which her protagonists inhabit. Murdoch's philosophy and novels often do not "cohere dramatically," as Wolfe suggests; for instance, Bradley Pearson does fulfill his own ambition to write a great novel, and also fulfills Murdoch's philosophical assertion that it is impossible for the individual to separate himself from society and hope to create valuable art. However, Bradley never quite gets over his solipsistic despair: "Any man, even the greatest, can be broken in a moment and has no refuge. Any theory which denies this is a lie" (*BP* 19). As this statement illustrates, Bradley continues to despair, despite his ability to abandon himself to benefit another who has wronged him deeply. That Bradley does not perfectly model Murdoch's philosophy does not diminish the novel. Instead, Bradley's failure to become Murdoch's philosophical ideal only serves to make him a more complex, more recognizably human character. If every Murdochean hero unflinchingly became a model for her idea of the good, we would be reading literature of the driest, most didactic and forgettable type; indeed, in this age, we most likely would not be reading it at all.

However, since this study will often refer to Murdoch's philosophy, a definition of some of its basic ideas is in order. The essence of Murdoch's philosophy is her idea of the good. Because human beings are basically free creatures, this good is indefinable precisely because it differs for each individual. What this idea of good has in common for all human beings is that, in order to be true, it must be pursued for its own sake, without hope for any individual gain. Thus Murdoch infers her rejection of traditional Christianity, in which good must be pursued in order for the individual to be granted eternal reward. "It is really only of Good that we can say 'it is the trial of itself and needs no other touch'" (*Sovereignty* 98). For Murdoch, true good is its own end; in fact, the agent often is unaware of his or her goodness. Goodness ultimately occurs when one is able to abandon the concerns of the self.

This abandonment of the self results in Murdoch's unique definition of love. Murdochean love does not translate into the traditional ideas of familial or romantic love, which she views as ultimately destructive. Murdoch defines love as the recognition of the true nature of the world beyond the self. Love is realizing that every individual, human or not, has his or her own needs and opinions. Murdoch defines love thus: "Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible work of imaginative understanding, of two irreducibly dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness" ("Sublime" 52). This "imaginative recognition" is essential to achieving goodness. According to Murdoch, if one cannot (or will not) see the world truly, he or she is incapable of good. "Of course Good is sovereign over Love, as it is sovereign over other concepts, because Love can name something bad. But is there not nevertheless something about the conception of a refined love which is practically identical with goodness? . . . Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves" (*Sovereignty* 102). Although she keeps the definition of each distinct, Murdoch makes it clear that without love—without the recognition of infinite difference, and respect for that difference—good cannot exist.

The development of this love is dependent upon the individual's overcoming what Murdoch calls destructive fantasy. Destructive fantasy consists of everything which obscures the individual's "imaginative recognition" of the world. Anything which values selfish needs and isolationism can be termed destructive fantasy, because these things inhibit the individual's ability to see the true world beyond the self. This is a Platonic concept derived from the myth of the Cave, where man is deceived by the shadows of the Forms which he sees flickering on the wall. According to Murdoch, art can play an important part in the discovery of fantasy, and she offers advice to the individual as well as the artist seeking the good:

The prescription for art is then the same as for dialectic: overcome personal fantasy and egoistic anxiety and self-indulgent day-dream. Order and separate and distinguish the world justly. Magic in its unregenerate form as the fantastic doctoring of the real for consumption by the private ego is the bane of art as it is of philosophy. Obsession shrinks reality to a single pattern. The artist's worst enemy is his eternal companion, the cosy dreaming ego, the dweller in the vaults of *eikasia*. (*Fire 79*)

According to Murdoch, this is the quest each human being pursues, artist or not. Her philosophy states that one's main pursuit in life should be to destroy selfish fantasy, which in turn will allow a true vision of the world and encourage the attainment of goodness.

A particular destructive fantasy which Murdoch seeks to reveal is humanity's obsession with creating order and thus failing to recognize the unpredictability of the world. When one is obsessed with creating order, one is not "seeing the world justly" as a place of enormous difference and contingency. The acceptance of this contingency is a very common theme in her novels. In fact, this acceptance of contingency, this surrender to loss of control, is at the heart of one's discovery of love: "It is the task of mortals (as artists and as men) to understand the necessary for the sake of the intelligible, to see in a pure just light the hardness of the real properties of the world, the effects of the wandering causes, why good purposes are checked and where the mystery of the random has to be accepted" (*Fire 80*). By "hardness," Murdoch means that the real, chaotic world is difficult to accept, and that one must work at abandoning the need to control it. Accepting contingency by abandoning rational man's obsession with self-centered control is a basic tenet of overcoming destructive fantasy and living a life dictated by the concept of Murdochian love. Human mortals cannot hope to control a universe so much bigger than themselves; surrendering to its chaos makes it much easier to abandon the self completely and live a good life in Murdoch's philosophical sense.

According to Murdoch, art and the artist play an important role in and the destruction of selfish fantasy. An avowed Platonist, Murdoch nonetheless challenges the

classical philosopher's negative assessment of the artist as a creator of illusions. She recasts the artist as a teacher, as one who is capable of revealing the true nature of the world through his or her work. "What is hard and necessary and unavoidable in human fate is the subject-matter of great art. . . . Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality (the subject of every good play and novel) and exemplifies in spite of Plato what his philosophy teaches concerning the therapy of the soul" (*Fire* 79-80). In Murdoch's view, then, art does not serve to deepen the illusion of the Cave, as Plato asserted, but rather uses fiction and illusion in order to demonstrate the true nature of the world. Good art does not create escape, but rather encourages the observer to realize the diversity of the world.

Murdoch incorporates this view in her novels and attempts to create a truly interdisciplinary oeuvre without didacticism. Elizabeth Dipple has described Murdoch's work thus: "Determined to separate herself from a limited didacticism [which] would reduce all worthy fiction to moral *exemplum* and primitive parable, Murdoch nevertheless through her sophisticated practice of the genre illustrates a strong sense of the powerful uses of fiction" (4). Murdoch's novels are complex and difficult, rarely offering the happy ending the reader expects for the protagonist, who is nearly ruined by neurosis brought on by the world's chaotic nature. Murdoch illustrates the absurd world discussed in her philosophical works by creating uncomfortable novels based on the human experiences of confusion, absurdity, tragedy, and failure. Her novels are realistic in a way that the works of Flaubert and Dreiser were never intended to be. While these two icons of realism have contributed, no doubt, to Murdoch's modern use of minute detail and vivid description, her work adds another level to realism: she presents the truly chaotic nature of the world, which does not exist on a linear, predictable plane. In her novels, nothing ever goes as planned for the protagonists, and it is through recognizing this truth that they are able to

realize that the self-centered quests they define for themselves are truly destructive fantasies.

Like the medieval knight, then, Murdoch's heroes seek to discover the truth of their confusing world. In creating this parallel between the heroes of the Middle Ages and those of the twentieth century, Murdoch refers to the storytelling techniques of the pre-Christian era, before the linearity of Christianity overtook the philosophical mindset of society. In tune with the magic and uncontrollable forces found in pagan myth, Murdoch's novels continuously refer to the impossibility of controlling one's surroundings as the universe spins out of control around the protagonist. However, Murdoch's post-modern characters are like fish out of water, still clinging to the need for control and predictability while the world collapses about their heads. William Slaymaker cites this mixture of myths as a driving force behind the author's work: "In her fiction, Christian, Celtic and classical myths play an important role in her fictional interpretation of freedom. . . . Murdoch has adapted the pagan world of irrational forces to modern life, not only as a literary device, but also as an explanatory system which emphasizes the mystery and opacity of human existence" (19). Freedom, for Murdoch's heroes, is a daunting, overwhelming concept which they try to narrow by limiting their expectations. Jake Donaghue, the protagonist in *Under the Net*, is one example of a hero overwhelmed by the post-modern, existential definition of freedom. He tries frantically to control the heaving world around him through language, as he garrulously explains everything—or at least attempts to. However, his attempts at linguistic mastery fail, and eventually he is left only with the contingency of the world, and only by abandoning his need to explain himself and everything else does he succeed at becoming an artist himself.

Like a fish which swims calmly in deep water, I felt all about me the secure supporting pressure of my own life. Ragged, inglorious, and apparently purposeless, but my own. . . . These things [his rediscovered writings] were mediocre, I saw it. But I saw too, as it

were straight through them, the possibility of doing better—and this possibility was present to me as a strength which cast me lower and raised me higher than I had ever been before. (*UN* 250-51).

It is only when Jake is able to abandon his false “purpose” that he can give himself over to art and play the role of the true artist. By abandoning the need to control and explain, Jake is able to see and admit the average nature of his writings, and also to move on to something better.

A clear example of this post-modern confusion is, again, Bradley Pearson, who expresses early on his desire to reach his seaside cottage to set free the novel which has resided inside him for years; he simply needs the isolation of the seaside in order to release it. He is packed and ready to go, pattering around his obsessively organized home, when chaos ensues: his friends and relatives engage him in their little tragedies and massive upheavals, preventing him from reaching the seaside and doing any writing. Through this series of events, Bradley eventually learns the futility of his obsessive need for control, and thus finally composes his great work—but only after suffering through an ordeal of disillusionment. Like the traditional knight, Bradley begins his quest innocently, with great faith and optimism in his own ability. But Murdoch pulls the stable spiritual rug out from under the traditional questing knight, giving him existential doubt and Ionescian absurdity to deal with instead. It is the hero’s journey from confusion to acceptance that this study will seek to discover: the trek of the post-modern knight on his quest for freedom and meaning in an absurd world.

Along with the obvious theme of the knight and his quest, Murdoch also employs other devices common in medieval literature in her novels. For example, the novels employ female characters as foils to the hero. These women bring an element of unpredictability to the knight’s linear, obsessive quest; it is often the feminine characters who cause the hero to re-examine his meaningless quest and discover the true nature of his life. However, unlike the medieval heroine who, after helping the knight to his realization,

lives a life of quiet subservience as the knight's wife—such as Enid in *The Mabinogion* who, after years of teaching her husband Gereint the importance of romantic love, ends the tale meekly following her husband back to his kingdom—Murdoch's heroines have moved firmly into the twentieth century, establishing their own agendas and making their own decisions. For example, in *The Black Prince*, Julian Baffin walks away from Bradley after helping him to release his muse when she discovers him to be a self-serving liar. In fact, she becomes a literary artist in her own right. Far from Enid's self-flagellating servitude, Julian, although young, goes her own way—and resists the traditional happily-ever-after ending.

Every knight, of course, needs a profound confrontation, and Murdoch's heroes are no exception. The figure whom the protagonist confronts is often an absolute, embodying characteristics that the hero either wishes to develop or ignore. In this way, then, the absolute often plays a complex dual role as both the hero's alter-ego and shadow, as the protagonist is both attracted and repelled by this character. Hugo Belfounder, in *Under the Net*, reminds Jake of abandoned philosophical pursuits, which Jake has avoided during his slide into mediocrity. And Peter Mir, the strange Russian gentleman in *The Green Knight*, reminds a circle of friends of an unpleasant confrontation between two brothers by suddenly reappearing and demanding the friendship of the group after his assumed death. Like the medieval knight, Murdoch's post-modern hero, fueled by the author's concept of love, learns to accept and incorporate the characteristics of this absolute figure as an element of his final realization of truth. Rather than a show of manly strength, like Beowulf's slaying of the dragon to save his kingdom, the Murdochean hero slowly comes to understand this mysterious character and draws it into himself as he gains a deeper understanding of his own true nature, as well as that of the world. Through these three elements—the knightly quest, the feminine foil, and the incorporated shadow figure—Murdoch, as Slaymaker has asserted, adapts ancient, mythical themes to the

confusion and chaos of the post-modern world, thus establishing the tie across centuries of artistic technique and discovery (19).

Murdoch has employed these themes throughout her novelistic career, often in conjunction with the ideas put forth in her philosophical treatises. The majority of her novels focus on the individual, often an artist, who blindly negotiates his world with regard for little other than his own fulfillment. His pursuits are often humorous and usually absurd: besides Jake Donaghue in *Under the Net* and Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince*, Murdoch has also created self-absorbed, arrogant individuals in characters like Martin Lynch-Gibbon, whose intellectual games with various women's emotions in *A Severed Head* (1961) ruin not only his own life, but that of the women around him. *The Sea, the Sea* (1978) produces another such character in Charles Arrowby, a retired actor who, like Bradley Pearson, tries to escape to the seaside to write. Like Bradley, Charles's life is also constantly disrupted by his friends and business associates, and he too is involved in an unsuccessful love affair, concerned more with preserving his own youth than considering the needs of the woman he favors. Like the medieval knight, these masculine protagonists experience confusion during their quests: at times, they are overwhelmed by the tumultuous events occurring around them. Martin compensates for his confusion by turning inward, while Charles becomes angry and destructive. Both, however, like Jake and Bradley, learn to accept their lots and move on. Like Pwyll confronted by the puzzle of Rhiannon, Murdoch's singular masculine heroes learn the value of accepting the unpredictable elements of the world and, in doing so, fulfill their quests for truth.

Along with the individual masculine hero, Murdoch also commonly employs the medieval convention of the supernatural in her novels. In fact, three of her novels—*The Flight from the Enchanter* (1955), *The Unicorn* (1963), and *The Time of the Angels* (1966)—have been labeled “gothic” due to their use of terrifying elements such as incest,

murder, and suicide, as well as demonic figures and other manifestations of evil which the protagonists must fight to overcome. These novels also deserve the label due to their extensive employment of darkly erotic themes and their settings in claustrophobic, enclosed spaces, such as the dark, isolated rectory in *The Time of the Angels* and Calvin's basement in *The Flight from the Enchanter*. *The Good Apprentice* (1985), though not grouped with these gothic novels, also shares their dark, magical elements: much of the novel takes place at Seegard, a dilapidated castle out in the middle of nowhere, and Edward Baltram's quest begins with his vision of his estranged father at a séance. Though these novels introduce elements from traditional medieval settings, their central concern is very similar to Murdoch's other books because they focus on the voyage of the individual from selfish obsession to the enlightenment of Murdochean love.

One of Murdoch's major philosophical concerns is how the individual overcomes solipsism in order to join a community. However, her later aspirations suggest a desire to move away from examination of the individual to examine the community in which he or she exists:

My ideal novel—I mean, the novel which I would like to write and haven't yet written—would not be written in the first person, because I'd rather write a novel which is scattered, with many different centres. I've often thought that the best way to write a novel would be to invent the story, and then to remove the hero and heroine and write about the peripheral people—because one wants to extend one's sympathy and divide one's interests. (Chevalier 81)

Murdoch's later novels increasingly illustrate this artistic desire. Several novels feature a pair of heroes: Tallis and Julius in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), Monty and Blaise in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974), the title characters in *Henry and Cato* (1976). However, Murdoch's latest works employ a type of ensemble cast, where no one character is clearly the protagonist; instead, the novels focus on the quests and activities of a collection of characters. Notably, these novels also move away from Murdoch's almost

exclusive portrayal of masculine protagonists. *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987) examines the spiritual, intellectual, and sexual endeavors of three major characters, two of whom are female, and *The Message to the Planet* (1990) also focuses on the development of the feminine characters: Maisie, Irina, and Franca. In fact, the novel's point of view is largely presented through Franca. Murdoch's latest novel, *The Green Knight* (1993), is the culmination of her wish to eliminate the singular protagonist: it presents four women and four men, all of whom seek to overcome various destructive fantasies and discover the truth. These recent novels keep the quest motif intact; however, rather than narrowing the plot to include only one hero, these later works artistically embody Murdoch's ideal of love, moving away from a singular, prejudiced point of view to embrace the infinite variety of human beings and their complex pursuit of meaning.

This study will focus on four novels from distinct periods of her career: *Under the Net* (1954), *The Black Prince* (1973), *The Good Apprentice* (1985), and *The Green Knight* (1993). These four novels all use traditional symbolism and theme in varying degrees to illustrate the hero on his quest. These four novels are particularly representative of this tendency for various reasons which will be illustrated throughout this study, and their spread over Murdoch's career illustrates the author's consistent use of such imagery. Murdoch's use of both the traditional and the innovative produce novels both difficult and rewarding as her post-modern heroes seek to make sense of an absurd, tumultuous world.

Chapter 1

The Hero: "A Quest and an Ascesis"

In traditional literature, the hero of the quest tale is always a singular male who valiantly pursues glory for himself and his kingdom, often in the name of Christianity. He is strong and persistent in pursuit of his goal, and he is almost always honorable, slaying dragons and rescuing damsels along the way. The traditional hero exerts control over nature and the unpredictable essence of the world. The medieval knight is responsible for bringing sense and order back to a threatened world. He is a continual seeker, always pursuing the deeper truths of life that will unravel its mystery for himself and his civilization. The archetypal quester has been described as

the hero [who] embodies the human self accustomed to linear forms but is larger than they are, fulfilling his society's standards of excellence but discovering also their sheer irrelevance before the prime facts of life and death. If the hero is usually masculine, that is because "he" is imagined through the active genius of civilization, driven by the ego to the full intensity of personal powers. At the same time he is driven into the radically different realm of universal and natural forces that is the ultimate source of all power.
(Birenbaum 129)

In medieval literature, he is always better than the other male members of his society, and his quest is almost always a success. His deeper search for truth is often rooted in the spiritual importance attached to his quest. For example, Roland's quest for glory during the Crusades not only focuses on the necessity of bringing victory to his king, Charlemagne, but also on the medieval importance of establishing European spiritual beliefs by defeating the Muslim "Paynims." Charlemagne is not just a king, he is a Christian king, and his honor is inextricably tied to the spiritual relevance of Europe's common religion. In like manner, Gawain's quest for honor and the Green Knight is attached not only to the insulted honor of Arthur, but also to the necessity of defeating pagan religious traditions, personified by the Green Knight's resemblance to the Celtic

“wild man of the woods” (Stone 116), in favor of the Christian religion championed by Arthur’s reign. Of course, these strong, beautiful men always successfully fulfill their quests in defense of Christianity.

In our own time, the hero has taken on more human qualities and is usually more of an Everyman, a failed, weak person beset by problems and neuroses. In fact, due to the rise of existentialism and concurrent decline of religious faith, the post-modern tradition has begun to doubt the value of the quest itself. The protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* ends the novel in isolation, choosing to withdraw underground rather than deal with the hostile world outside. And Billy Pilgrim, in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, ends his time travels in Dresden in 1945, surrounded by images of profound suffering and the stench of death.

Murdoch’s heroes live somewhere in the middle of medieval faith and existential despair. For Murdoch, the individual despair found in so many novels of this era is not impossible to overcome. The main problem is not achieving the quest, but rather determining which quest to pursue:

The status of the quester is from the start very much open to question and, more challengingly, so is the nature of his quest. All Iris Murdoch’s word-children are unreliable narrators, flawed reflectors of the fictional worlds they inhabit. . . . But there is always the possibility in Iris Murdoch’s novels that the pilgrim’s sense of his quest may turn out to be yet another illusion, another gratifying fiction. (Johnson 5)

In Murdoch’s novels, the hero is forced by outside circumstances—by the recognition of the true, contingent nature of the world—to reassess his idea of his quest, and somehow he manages to revise it into something more meaningful and less self-absorbed. Through a series of confusing, often absurd events, he learns to abandon his selfish, destructive fantasies and comes to some realization of his quest, although the goal is very different

from what he pursued at the start. Johnson best defines the realization of Murdoch's questing hero:

In general terms, [the novels] trace the journey of the male hero into a comic version of Thebes, where he either remains caught for good in the toils of erotic (self) deception . . . or he manages to survive the process and move towards a modest version of Colonus . . . into a state not bound by his normal, narrow ego-consciousness. His vision is enlarged through the destruction of some of his most cherished illusions. (14-15)

In overcoming his own blindness, like Oedipus, the Murdochean hero finally finds success.

Murdoch's novels possess a level of hope rarely found in the post-modern works of this century. Her works present a deep, if indefinable, worth in the pursuit of goodness, and the key to discovering it lies within recognizing one's prejudices and selfishness. Although her use of absurdity and contingency clearly places her in the post-modern tradition, Murdoch works away from the despair of many post-modern works to a realm of some hope. Murdoch is clearly not religious in the traditional sense; she has said that she is "not . . . a Christian believer," but she does believe in a "spiritual center" (Biles 305) based on the search for truth. Her novels express this belief in the existence of truth and goodness, for which each individual must strive through the realization of Murdochean love.

The protagonist of each of these four novels suffers deeply from selfish delusion. He is obsessive and neurotic, needing to exert control over his surroundings and to keep his world at a simple, understandable level. "Neurosis . . . is the most telling mark of the existential man, whom Murdoch calls the Totalitarian Man because of his supreme isolation. . . . Totalitarian Man lives through a process of self-mythologizing, which casts the world and people in it as extensions of his own consciousness" (Tucker 3). As Lindsey Tucker states, these protagonists are rather despotic, desiring to keep all around them under control. When life seems to discourage these totalitarian efforts, the heroes

seek to separate themselves completely from the people around them, hoping to regain their precious control through isolation. At first, Murdoch's heroes are completely devoid of the author's idea of love, viewing others either as obstacles or means to their own selfish ends.

First, *Under the Net*'s Jake Donaghue seems constantly to seek to explain the world and, through this explanation, to exert control over it. Jake thinks he understands everything and is willing to explain it to everyone else. His language is fluent, as evinced by his status as a writer as well as his garrulousness. However, Jake's explanations are never quite successful, and constant upheavals always serve to disturb his sense of order. "I would be at pains to put my universe in order and set it ticking, when suddenly it would burst again into a mess of the same poor pieces" (*UN* 9). For example, at the beginning of the novel, Jake is returning to London after a stint in Paris, where he met with the author of the books he translates. He looks forward to returning "home" to Madge's flat, where he and his sidekick, Finn, have been freeloading for months. However, it is not to be: Finn meets Jake and informs him that they are being kicked out in favor of Madge's new lover, Sammy. On this occasion, like many others, Jake hates to admit to a loss of control; however, this loss is evident when he is struck speechless by some person or event. He is at a loss for words when his ex-lover, Anna Quentin, stands before him for the first time after many months, and also when he finally finds his estranged philosophical friend, Hugo Belfounder. Jake's ultimate loss of control is slowly uncovered throughout the novel: although he is a writer, he has not written anything for years except for translations of tawdry French best-sellers. Although Jake seeks desperately to explain the world and thus impose his own control upon it, his shortcomings are evidenced by his failure to write and his inability to speak before the people he most admires.

The Black Prince's Bradley Pearson, another would-be writer, also seeks to define his world through language. Bradley's self-defined quest is for solitude; he believes that,

in separating himself from the hubbub of London, he will finally be able to create a great work of art.

So I decided for a time to leave London, and at once began to feel closer to my hidden treasure. My decision taken, my confidence returned, and I felt that latent biding power which is the artist's true grace. I decided to rent a cottage for the summer beside the sea. I had never in all my life had enough of the sea. I had never lived with it, never lived in a lonely place with only the sound of waves, which is no sound but the murmur of silence itself. (*BP* 18)

Bradley believes that it is only silence and isolation that will allow him to produce art; the folly of this idea is expressed in Murdoch's philosophy, which asserts that art, like goodness, can only be achieved through loving attention to the world. Indeed, Murdoch does not let Bradley leave London, and he is beset by a frightening series of events—the “ordeal” that he speaks of early in the novel—that produces his voice. Human involvement, not isolation, gives Bradley the strength and inspiration to be an artist.

In *The Good Apprentice*, Edward Baltram's quest is for relief from a crushing guilt caused by his involvement in the death of his friend, Mark Wilsden. Edward's guilt “was a huge pain which blotted out ideas, and he lived in it like a fish at the bottom of a dark lake” (*GA* 12). He seeks any kind of relief from his pain: religion, psychology, philosophy, occultism. But all of these prove unsatisfactory, “abstract and flimsy” (*GA* 12), as Edward puts it, because they cannot erase his pain. After receiving the strange spiritual message from his father at the séance, and the subsequent letter from Seegard, Edward places all of his hopes for redemption in the image of his estranged father. Jesse becomes a kind of religious grail to him, “like an inspiration, a glowing indicator. [Edward] had thought, I'll go to my father, I'll confess to him and he will judge me” (*GA* 95). Jesse is to Edward much as Beowulf is to Hrothgar: Edward views him as a savior, as the only being that can save him from destruction. Just as Hrothgar places all of his hope in Beowulf's

strength and prowess for the salvation of his kingdom, Edward places all hope for his redemption onto his unseen father.

At first, Edward's quest seems more honorable than that of either Jake Donaghue or Bradley Pearson; he is, after all, not seeking an egotistical mastery of the world but is rather suffering for the harm he has caused another. However, further along in the novel, it becomes obvious that Edward, too, is lost in the mire of his own psyche. He will not let himself think of anything apart from his guilt. After Mark's death, as penance, he allows himself to feel no happiness:

Only occasionally when he woke from sleep did he for seconds recover his lost self, his happy self who did not know that his life was irrevocably smashed and over. Waking perhaps from a happy dream he would exist for seconds as that old self, the lively self that could anticipate a happy busy significant day. Then black memory would come, the blackness that covered everything, blinding his eyes and annihilating space and time. Thus did day bring back his night. (GA 11)

Because Edward wallows in guilt and self-pity, he too is obsessed by the needs of his own ego. Because he cannot let go of his self-inflicted misery, he is blind to the world around him, drowning in a mire of torture that he has created for himself. It is only in letting go of this guilt—like Jake and Bradley, Edward must surrender to the contingent nature of the world, to the idea that one cannot ultimately control the events of life—that he is finally able to forgive himself. And he can only approach this forgiveness when he lets go of his own problems and becomes involved in saving Jesse's dignity rather than dwelling on his own guilt.

Unlike the other three novels, *The Green Knight* does not have one clear questing figure. There are, instead, several characters who appear to be on a quest, all in one way or another obsessed and limited by their own selfish concerns. In fact, each character in this novel seems to embody a single aspect of the destructive fantasies which Murdoch

describes in her philosophical works. First there is Bellamy James, an unsuccessful man frustrated by his lonely life. Bellamy at last decides, like Bradley Pearson, that the key to his redemption is to reject his need for human companionship, and he rejects worldly things by trying to join a monastery. He begins by giving his beloved collie, Anax, to the Anderson family, and he continually writes to a Roman Catholic priest for spiritual guidance. The priest rebuffs Bellamy, and tells him that a life of physical denial is unwise; he should instead give himself over to the needs of others and involve himself in the world. Bellamy resists and, like Edward Baltram, places all of his faith for spiritual guidance in Peter Mir, the mysterious figure who seemingly rises from the dead to confront his would-be killer Lucas Graffe. Bellamy constantly places his faith in outside forces like Peter and Father Damien, denying both his own inward strength and the richness of his relationships with the people already in his life.

Next is Harvey Blacket, a young intellectual who is permanently disabled by a fall he took from a bridge in Florence. Like Edward Baltram, Harvey frets over his disability and allows himself to be overcome by despair. However, unlike Edward, Harvey can find nothing to place his faith in, and considers suicide. He spends much of the novel pitying himself and labeling himself a freak, despite the love and aid offered him by all of his old friends. Like Bellamy, Harvey chooses a life of semi-isolation instead of confronting his situation and continuing to give attention to the outside world.

Then there is Louise Anderson, an aging widow having problems coming to terms with the approaching independence of her three daughters. She, too, wallows in self-pity as she considers her approaching loneliness. Finally there is Louise's future husband, Clement Graffe, the younger brother of Lucas Graffe. Clement's quest is in many ways the most complex, for he has always had a rather complicated love/hate relationship with Lucas, who was attempting to kill him and struck Peter Mir by accident. When Clement learns the truth of that evening (he had been very drunk at the time), he is thrown into a

tizzy of confusion and self-doubt, and the novel chronicles his quest to find his place in both his own family and his circle of friends. Clement is torn between protecting Lucas, whom he inexplicably loves, and covering up the shame of the past. He also seeks to overcome his feelings of isolation and loneliness resulting from both his alienation from his brother and his reluctance to admit to the truth.

Each of these protagonists is deceived in some way, either by the nature of his quest, by the fantasies he has constructed for himself, or by a false belief in his own abilities or the abilities of others. Overcoming these obstacles is central to the quest: the hero must first recognize his errors before fulfilling his goal.

The Failure of Destructive Fantasy

Each novel's protagonist is in some way afflicted with Murdoch's idea of the destructive fantasy; that is, the selfishness and isolation which obscure the truth of the world and inhibit the individual from reaching the ideal of Murdochean love. Each protagonist searches for consolation, which is the basis of destructive fantasy: "For Murdoch, 'evil' means moral degeneracy, and moral degeneracy is the acceptance of consolation, either from fact or from emotive value, as the basis for one's life" (Hunter 111). Each of the characters seeks consolation of some kind: Jake seeks consolation from the absurd by linguistic explanation; Bradley seeks consolation from his writer's block by pursuing isolation; Edward seeks consolation from guilt by searching for his father; and the characters in *The Green Knight* seek consolation from isolation and loneliness by various means. It is the abandonment of this search for consolation which eventually leads to each hero's fulfilling a more honorable quest; it is only when the protagonist can let go of his self-centered obsession with his desired "emotive value" that he can meet his true needs. Each novel explores varying degrees and types of destructive fantasy as consolation: each protagonist seeks isolation or separation from those who disturb him,

indulges the need to feed his own ego, despairs when his selfish needs are not satisfied, and ultimately believes he can create order from the chaos of the world around him.

The first error that each protagonist makes is to assume that he can achieve his quest through isolation. As Murdoch's philosophy of love states, one can only achieve goodness by involving oneself in the world: "The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love" (*Sovereignty* 66). The achievement of love thus depends not upon contemplating the world with the limited vision enforced by isolation, but in directing one's vision outward by immersing oneself in the world's variety. Thus, by isolating himself from the business of the everyday world, each protagonist moves farther and farther from goodness. In *Under the Net*, for instance, Jake eschews deep contact with other people, finding them his intellectual inferiors and a hindrance to his ultimate aim. He roams London virtually on his own, preferring his own company to that of others. He has "chosen to inhabit a marginal position in regards to society, a position which determines [his] response to . . . relationships with other people" (Hague 214). Jake chooses to be alone, rejecting the invitation to become politically involved with Lefty Todd's socialist concern, and allowing his sidekick, Peter O'Finney, to drift off without pursuing him or even knowing where he has gone.

Occasionally, Jake goes to the opposite extreme when he madly pursues Anna and Hugo. After the chase, however, he goes to great pains to avoid them. Jake's self-enforced isolation with regard to these two characters is due to his fears of inferiority and rejection, as opposed to the intellectual superiority he feels over the other characters. He is afraid of encountering Anna when he arrives at her theater, and when he does finally find her, he is "anxious just to avoid looking at her" (*UN* 37). Even after Jake's first encounter with Anna, when he kisses her violently in a prop room at her theater, he

pointedly makes no great effort to encounter her again before the novel's end, although he frequently discusses her and his desire to be reunited with her. He instead waits passively for her return: "I could not but believe that if I waited she must come" (*UN* 185).

Because he cannot explain Anna, he is concurrently fascinated and repulsed by her. He harbors a similar fear during his search for Hugo; after spending hours looking for him through the pubs of London, Jake contemplates actually encountering the big man: "I was beginning to feel very nervous now that the prospect of an interview with Hugo was looming over me like an iceberg. I had really very little idea about what I wanted to say to Hugo" (*UN* 89). This statement reveals the reason for Jake's fear of encountering others: he worries that his valued powers of explanation will be silenced. This fear creates the paradox of Jake's mad pursuits and equally mad escapes; as Conradi has said, "Flight and quest are often indistinguishable here" (*Saint* 30). Jake divides his time between chasing Anna and Hugo, with whom he is interminably obsessed, and then trying to avoid them. Jake grows more and more desperate in his quest for mastery; however, as Murdoch's philosophical works assert, Jake cannot hope to gain the understanding of the world he seeks by avoiding others.

This truth is forcefully exemplified in Jake's strange relationship to Finn. Jake hardly considers Finn, although the two spend much time together: they were even living together in Madge's flat when she kicked them out in favor of her lover. Jake considers Finn his social and intellectual inferior: "People do get the impression that he is my servant, and I often have this impression too. . . . Sometimes I think it is just that Finn is a humble and self-effacing person and so automatically takes second place" (*UN* 7). He sees Finn as a one-dimensional character without the intellectual sophistication that Jake prides himself on: "I sometimes feel that Finn has very little inner life. . . . It may be, though, that Finn misses his inner life, and that is why he follows me about, as I have a complex one and highly differentiated. Anyhow, I count Finn as an inhabitant of my universe, and

cannot conceive that he has one containing me” (*UN* 9). This statement blatantly illustrates Jake’s selfish isolation and ignorance regarding others’ humanity. He is very dismissive of those he views as mentally inferior to himself. It is only much later that Jake realizes that Finn is not around; he learns from his strange confidant, Mrs. Tinckham, that Finn has fulfilled his much-discussed dream of returning home to Ireland, thus demonstrating that he did, in fact, possess an “inner life,” and Jake regrets his failure to recognize it. It is at this point that Jake begins to realize the necessity of truly considering other people in order to fulfill his artistic aspirations: he understands that involvement with others can only be accomplished by recognizing them as truly human. “I felt ashamed, ashamed of being parted from Finn, of having known so little about Finn, of having conceived things as I pleased and not as they were” (*UN* 247). Jake has wasted so much time chasing the unattainable—Anna and Hugo—that he has failed to recognize one so close to him. Jake regrets this failure, but does not dwell on it; his simple realization of his selfish mistakes leads to his eventually successful quest for artistic inspiration.

In *The Black Prince*, Bradley Pearson believes the key to his artistic success lies in escaping the noise and confusion of London to Patara, the seaside cottage he has rented. In *The Fire and the Sun*, Murdoch cites the necessity for the true artist to immerse himself in the world’s realities—not to isolate himself from them—in order to create true art: “The artist’s worst enemy is . . . the cosy dreaming ego” (79). This is because the selfish ego blinds the would-be artist to the truth, and prevents him from completing the great artist’s quest: “It is the task of mortals (as artists and as men) to understand the necessary for the sake of the intelligible, to see in a pure just light the hardness of the real properties of the world, the effects of the wandering causes, why good purposes are checked and where the mystery of the random has to be accepted” (Murdoch, *Fire* 80). One must experience the “real properties of the world” in order to recreate them artistically, but Bradley denies this, saying that he only needs to get away from all of the chaos of the city to discover his muse

and create his great novel: "What I needed now . . . was literal silence" (*BP* 18). Bradley views other people as a disturbance to his artistic aspirations; he sees the needs of others only as hindrances to his goal of creating a great novel. He even views his suicidal sister, Priscilla, as an obstacle: "I did not want to be involved in any mess of Priscilla's. I did not even want to have to be sorry for Priscilla" (*BP* 72). He will not even recognize the "real properties" of his own sister's desperate life and tries only to escape to his selfish, isolated haven.

Despite all of Bradley's attempts to escape, he cannot. People in varying degrees of distress continuously turn up and inhibit him from getting to his cottage. When Bradley finally reaches Patara, he is not alone, but with Julian Baffin. Once there, Bradley accomplishes nothing but the selfish ruin of his obsessive love for his best friend's daughter. "Of course it was hopeless. . . . The little place with its open door and its ransacked air and all its lights on stood obscenely void in the bright sunshine" (*BP* 342). Patara is no longer a place of hope, but rather of dreams destroyed by his own selfishness. Bradley indeed escapes his London attachments, but he does not succeed in creating art. Rather, he only destroys his one source of deep human contact.

In *The Good Apprentice*, Edward Baltram, too, separates himself from the society of other people. Upon returning home from the scene of his "crime," he cloisters himself in his bedroom, refusing contact with anyone for a long time, preferring instead to focus on his guilt alone:

Edward was entirely occupied with his misery, he had no other occupation. He took the tranquillisers and sleeping pills prescribed by the family doctor. He slept for as long and as often as possible, he longed for sleep, unconsciousness, blackness, the absolute absence of light. He found it difficult, indeed pointless, to get up in the morning; curled up, hiding his head, he lay in bed till noon. There was nobody he wanted to see. (*GA* 9-10)

When he is forced to confront others who suggest that he get over his guilt and admit that Mark's death was an accident, he spurns their remarks. For instance, Edward's half-brother Stuart suggests that Edward's guilt is totally self-serving:

“All this repetitive misery is bad, it's not truth. I'm not suggesting you just try to jump out of it all, you can't. It's not like a riddle with a magic solution. You've got to think about what happened, but try to think about it in a bit of clear light. The burning has to go on, but hold onto something else too, find something good, somewhere, anywhere, keep it close to you, draw it into the fire—”
(GA 45)

Stuart here does not inane suggest that Edward simply forget his pain, as other members of the family have done; he realizes, due to his own misguided life, that Edward's problems are not that simple. Here, he is suggesting that Edward search within himself for forgiveness, learn from his error, and use the pain to search for goodness. As Murdoch suggests in her philosophy, Stuart encourages Edward to recognize, through Mark's death, the “hardness” and “real properties” of life rather than denying them through blind self-pity.

But Edward rejects Stuart's counsel thus: “There's no morality, no centre, since guilt can exist outside it, on its own. . . . Words don't help, names don't help, guilt, shame, remorse, death, hell, at the level I'm at distinctions don't exist, concepts don't exist” (GA 45). Thus, although Edward is mired in the depths of destructive fantasy, he is a step ahead of Jake, who spends most of *Under the Net* trying to explain things away. Edward realizes early on that language cannot do justice to truth. However, Edward must see beyond the trap of his own design instead of seeking exactly that “magic solution” that both he and Stuart know does not exist. Similarly, Edward declines the advice of his psychiatrist and adopted uncle, Thomas, who offers advice much like Stuart's. Edward's misery is not at all abated by rejecting the counsel of others, however, and it is only through his abandonment of self at the end of the novel that he is able to overcome his

guilt and pain. When, as Stuart suggests, he forgets his own suffering to mitigate that of his incapacitated father, he is finally able to forgive himself and give in to the reality of his life: “He had not finished with Jesse and . . . could not entirely believe that he was dead. ‘I’ve got to survive,’ he said aloud” (*GA* 515). Through recognizing the reality of Jesse—rather than his idealization—Edward learns to regain the world and go on without the need for total isolation with his self-centered grief.

The model of isolationism in *The Green Knight* is Bellamy James, who wishes to sever his contact with the material world in order to discover the truth: “He wanted to get closer to something—perhaps life. . . . Then *something*, which he felt was at last *that* for which he had been seeking, *overcame* him and he decided to ‘give up the world’ in the most extreme and complete manner possible by becoming a monk in an enclosed order” (*GK* 23-24). He believes that separation from the real world will afford him the spiritual satisfaction which his many careers—student, social worker, teacher—have failed to do. Bellamy fancies himself as a sort of Christian ascetic, even giving away his beloved dog and comfortable flat to live a life of self-inflicted suffering. Father Damien, the priest to whom Bellamy writes constantly, recognizes Bellamy’s self-denial for what it is: a selfish act of will to relieve himself of moral worries. “Your ‘yearning for holiness’ and ‘giving up the world’ are still, I fear, mere expressions of feeling, fancies which give you a ‘thrill’. . . . You should certainly find some *regular work* in the service of others; keeping in mind the possibility that this may, in the end, prove to be your whole true way of serving Christ” (*GK* 95). As Murdoch often states in her philosophy, Father Damien encourages involvement with the real world as the way to goodness rather than indulging in the self-centered fantasy of ascetic isolation. The priest recognizes that Bellamy is seeking the “thrill” of self-denial only in order to relieve the disappointment of his ordinary life. Bellamy’s unfitness for such a life is evidenced by his almost constant straying from the ascetic rules he has established for himself: he eats sweets, goes to parties, even drinks

alcohol, all the time chastising himself for his wanderings. Like Jake Donaghue, Bellamy's simplistic solution to his own goodness does not result in fulfillment, but only in frustration from his constant aberration from his own rules. Despite his self-appointed goal of separation from the world, Bellamy cannot separate himself from people: he involves himself in the feud between Peter Mir and Lucas Graffe, acting as Peter's supporter. It is, finally, Bellamy's deep love for the mysterious Mr. Mir which leads him to realize separation from others is impossible. Bellamy has grown to depend on Peter so much that he is completely devastated by his death; however, through his separation from his idol, he realizes his need to continue contact with the human world, and even brings Anax back home—and engages in consoling Moy, who had taken over care of the dog and is quite broken-hearted over his absence. Bellamy realizes his goal of achieving goodness not through separating himself from life, but in involving himself more deeply in the needs of others.

This fancied need for isolation leads to yet another destructive fantasy: self-centered, existential despair. Murdoch, who has extensively studied the French existentialists (especially Sartre and Camus), in the end rejects their philosophy, as it is too much centered upon the individual: "What [existentialism] pictures is indeed the fearful solitude of the individual marooned upon a tiny island in the middle of a sea of scientific facts, and morality escaping from science only by a wild leap of the will" (*Sovereignty* 27). This isolation and the seemingly hopeless situation it creates, she asserts, lead not to goodness, but only to despair. While she tends to agree with the existentialists' denial of a concerned God, she cannot accept their despair of human freedom. Rather, she sees freedom not as a burden, but as an opportunity—though a difficult one—to accomplish good for its own sake: freedom "attends to the real and is attracted by the good" (*Sovereignty* 75).

Some of Murdoch's protagonists reflect existential self-centeredness, as they despair of the validity of their own lives. Bradley Pearson is the most obvious of these; even at the end of the novel, when he has accomplished his lifelong goal of creating a great work of art, he despairs of the human condition: "I know that human life is horrible. I know that it is utterly unlike art" (*BP* 19). Although Bradley's transformation during the novel is quite dramatic, he cannot make the total transformation from self-centered egoist to perfectly virtuous individual. He has abandoned his selfish need for isolationism by the end of the novel, but the experiences he has had, especially Rachel Baffin's betrayal of him, and Julian's complete avoidance of him, do not allow him complete hope in the potential of the human race. Like Gawain, Bradley comes a long way during the course of his story, but has not reached perfection by the conclusion. This conclusion does not mitigate the power of the novel; rather, it illustrates Murdoch's artistic power by presenting a realistic character. Rather than using Bradley simply to proselytize her philosophical beliefs, she instead presents a character who, despite fulfilling his lifelong quest for artistic expression, is unable to completely overcome his despair of the world. In recognizing the true "hardness" of the world, Bradley cannot help but retain some despair. He even questions the value of his written creation: "That it is not great art I daresay I am aware. What kind of thing is dark to me as I am dark to myself" (*BP* 390). Even in fulfilling his quest, Bradley does not parrot the hopeful notions of his creator's philosophy.

Edward Baltram, too, is guilty of despair. He despairs, however, not of the human race as a whole, but of his own potential for redemption. He believes what he has done is so heinous that he will never be forgiven, and is doomed to live a damned life: "He recalled the innocence he had once had which he would never have again. . . . One momentary act of folly and treachery had destroyed all his *time*" (*GA* 10). This failing of Edward's is intricately connected to his need for isolation: he believes that his damned status denies him the right and the need to communicate with others. It is only by coming

out of himself that Edward is able to overcome his despair. When he arrives at Seegard, and immerses himself in the mindless tasks underway there, he is able to alleviate his despair somewhat, although at times it comes crashing back to him. However, when he gives up his simplistic belief that only Jesse can save him and immerses himself in his father's needs, Edward begins to leave his despair behind. He realizes the depth of the service he has done for his father by allowing him to regain some dignity before his death. Through all of the tragic events of his life, Edward learns to accept his failures. He also slowly realizes that total happiness is impossible, a simplistic fantasy like his blind hope in Jesse; his power lies in his newfound ability to overcome his despair and recognize the needs of those outside himself: "Perhaps there will be many of these catastrophes I can't conceive of now, perhaps I am doomed to have an unlucky life. But this is a senseless idea which I reject. . . . My life belongs to others, to those who are here now and those who are to come" (*GA* 515). By rejecting despair and giving himself over to others' needs, Edward is able to overcome selfish existential depression and experience rebirth.

Like Edward, *The Green Knight's* Harvey Blacket is consumed by self-pity and despair for his handicapped situation. Harvey's problem is not emotional, like Edward's, but rather physical, the result of a foot injured permanently in a fall. Harvey sees himself as a deformed monster: "His experience at the party of being somehow patently classified as a cripple had been very distressing, yet he also grimly accepted the distress as a kind of refuge, a cover" (*GK* 214). Thus we see Harvey ultimately using his disability as an excuse to avoid human contact, and even as an excuse for his other failures as he begins to take "refuge" in his perceived otherness. Harvey suffers from the ancient flaw of hubris as he agonizes over his infirmity. He is repulsed by his own inability to even walk properly, and hates to ask others for help. He blames his virginal status and his sexual failure with Tessa on his injury, though his contact with women was very limited even before his accident. He would rather remain in his borrowed flat and whine about his pain than listen

to the advice of Aleph, who tells him that his injury is not the deep horror he imagines it to be: “‘We are pampered children,’ said Aleph, ‘we don’t know *anything* about the horror. For us it’s just an exciting bogey’” (*GK* 111). In this way, Aleph encourages Harvey to see the world justly—in this case, to recognize his injury for what it truly is: a small accident, and not the portentous symbol of ruined life that he perceives it to be. He dismisses her words, however, as she is beautiful and whole, while he is handicapped and ridiculous. Like Edward, Harvey needs a shock to throw him out of his complacency. This shock occurs when Emil, the gentleman from whom Harvey has borrowed a first-floor flat, returns home from abroad, and forces Harvey to move out and get on with his life. The realization precipitated by this confrontation with reality inspires Harvey to move beyond his physical limitations: he resumes his studies and even regains his taste for women, as he falls shockingly in love with Sefton. This love finally emphasizes for Harvey the necessity of deep human contact, and the pointlessness of his despair.

This selfish despair is often exacerbated by each character’s ego, which blinds him to the truth of the world. In *Under the Net*, Jake’s pride stems from his perceived control over the English language; he prides himself on his ability to translate the worthless French of Breteuil’s novels into something more graceful: “For years I had worked for this man, using my knowledge and sensibility to turn his junk into the sweet English tongue” (*UN* 171). Jake is obsessed by controlling language in order to explain the world and thus establish his dominance over it. He especially uses his linguistic gifts to dominate others, such as Finn and Madge—although, as mentioned earlier, his true control over these other people is dubious at best. But Jake talks so loudly and so profusely that he cannot see the truth. Jake’s true lack of control over language, which establishes his linguistic dominance as a destructive fantasy, is revealed not only by his failure to control those people whom he feels are his intellectual inferiors, but also by the fact that he cannot write any words of his own and must gain his meager living by translating the words of another. Jake’s

desperation at his separation from language, as well as his self-deception as to whose words are in the novels, is revealed by his frantic attempt to regain the manuscript of Breteuil's latest novel. He mistakenly believes that he is in a powerful position with regard to the translated typescript, from which Sadie and Sammy are planning to make a film. Jake is deluded that the manuscript is his own: "All I knew was that I had a bargaining-point under my hand and that I would be a fool not to take advantage of it" (*UN* 126). Despite Jake's belief that he has some ownership of the novel, his lack of control over his own language, and the rest of his world, is illustrated by the fact that the manuscript truly contains only someone else's words.

Bradley's pride stems from his belief that great artistic potential resides within him. However, like Jake, his truly mundane status—Bradley is an ex-tax inspector—is revealed by the fact that he has written nothing. He speaks much about writing—about the joy, the necessity, the process—but he has produced nothing for years. Bradley reflects on this failure after the tragic events have taken place: "I did not expect the complete withdrawal of my gift. . . . But when I had given up the tax office and could sit at my desk at home every morning and think any thoughts I pleased, I found I had no thoughts at all" (*BP* 17). As mentioned earlier, even Bradley's trip to Patara with the woman he says has liberated his muse results in no written words: "I did eventually get to Patara, but what happened there did not include anything that I had expected" (*BP* 19). Thus Bradley, too, is tied up in an invented fantasy of pride in his elevated status as an artist. Like Jake Donaghue, Bradley criticizes the work of another writer, his prolific best friend Arnold Baffin:

It seemed to me that he achieved success at the expense of merit. As his discoverer and patron I felt from the start identified with his activities. And I felt, rather, distress that a promising young writer should have laid aside true ambition and settled so quickly into a popular mould. I respected his industry and I admired his "career." He had many gifts other than purely literary ones. I did not, however, much like his books. (*BP* 30)

Bradley, in his enforced literary silence which keeps his “gift pure” (*BP* 12), resents Arnold’s garrulity. However, Bradley never mentions the obvious: while Arnold’s novels may not be brilliant, they at least exist; this is more than Bradley can say. Bradley is more concerned with pompously creating the right atmosphere to unlock his perceived gift—the search for Patara, the ordeal with Julian—than with actually beginning to write.

In *The Good Apprentice*, egoism does not stem from a case of overinflated pride, as it does in the last two novels. Edward’s selfish obsession is concerned with his self-inflicted guilt. He wears his sin as a martyr would, allowing it to permeate every aspect of his life, and allowing everyone around him to become miserable because of it. Early in the novel, Edward’s psychiatrist, Thomas, points this out to him:

“You hate your damaged self and feel you cannot live with it, yet you desperately cherish it at the same time. You describe your grief as a system. Indeed it is, a defensive system of mutually supporting falsehoods instinctively produced to defend your old egoistic self-image which you cannot bear to lose. . . . Your ‘death’ is a pretend death, simply the false notion that somehow, without effort, all your troubles could vanish.” (*GA* 71)

However, Edward angrily rebuffs these suggestions, preferring to wallow in his own guilt rather than learning to deal truthfully with his pain. Instead of listening to the suggestions of the people around him who truly love him, Edward instead turns to magic, religion, and hope in a man he has never met rather than looking within himself for the solution which will once again allow him to rejoin the world. These spiritual ideals fail: Edward cannot bring himself to religious belief, and later he nearly despairs when he finds that Jesse is not the holy icon he has imagined, but rather a very sick, frail human being in need of even more help than Edward.

In *The Green Knight*, Lucas Graffe, like Jake and Bradley, is impressed by his own intellect. He is also, however, consumed by feelings of inferiority to his brother, who is the natural product of his parents’ marriage, while Lucas is adopted. Despite his great

intelligence, Lucas has always felt overshadowed by Clement, who is more gregarious than the deathly serious Lucas. Lucas addresses Clement with deep hatred: "I have always wanted to kill you, all my life led to that blow. Jealousy and hatred compose my earliest memories. I have killed you every day in my thoughts. . . . It was your fault. Not because you were preferred. But because you were cruel" (*GK* 198). The pain of Clement's status as the natural-born son is exacerbated by cruel tricks Clement played upon his adopted brother in childhood. All of this festers in Lucas, whose jealousy leads to his attack on Clement. Before the action of the novel commences, Lucas's secret rage has reached such a boiling point that he gets his younger brother drunk and drags him out to a deserted park in the middle of the night to beat him to death with a baseball bat. A stranger intervenes; Lucas strikes him instead, sparing Clement's life, and Lucas believes for years that he has killed this other man. He has even gone to court for the death, exonerated by the story that he killed the mugger in self-defense. Clement was so blindly drunk that he can remember nothing of the episode. However, when Peter Mir, the "mugger," reappears on the scene, very much alive, desiring no more retribution than the company of Lucas's circle of friends, Lucas is obsessed with the notion that the truth must not get out. He admits his treachery to Clement, and gets him to promise never to tell the true story. However, the truth will not be suppressed; once it has escaped, Lucas tries desperately to discredit the story, beginning a personal vendetta against Peter Mir. Lucas separates himself utterly from anything Mir is apt to be involved in, including the company of devoted friends, who innocently worry about Lucas's sanity. Lucas's ultimate failure is revealed, as are several other protagonists', in his enforced isolation. Peter has repeatedly said that he has no intention of going to the authorities, and is interested in nothing but the truth; however, Lucas, unable to redeem himself, separates himself from the action of the novel. He instead manipulates Clement into continuing the deception on his behalf. Like Bradley, Lucas cannot fully redeem himself by the end of the novel, and serves as a

reminder that not everyone will choose to save himself. However, his existence, and his successful relationship with Aleph—which is also concealed—underline Murdoch’s assertion that freedom is central to humanity: she does not force her character to fit into the limits of goodness prescribed by her philosophy. Rather, she allows Lucas to succeed despite his despicable conduct. Just as Bradley cannot completely overcome his solipsistic despair despite the fulfillment of his quest, Lucas too does not conform to Murdoch’s interpretation of goodness. In spite of his destructive lies and selfish intensity, Lucas escapes the confines of his friends’ judgment, and wins the love of the virtuous Aleph.

The protagonists’ engagement in destructive fantasy obscures their notions of the quest for truth. These egotistical obsessions often lead the protagonists to pursue goals which are false and therefore impossible to attain. Through recognizing and overcoming these fantasies, the protagonists are able to reach their goals; however, another obstacle, also tied to the heroes’ need to control their worlds, stands in the way of the fulfillment of the quest. This obstacle is the protagonists’ struggle to use and understand the limitations of language.

The Limits of Wittgenstein’s Net

The protagonists of these novels depend upon an imperfect medium—language—to impose order upon their worlds. According to Murdoch, the true essence of goodness cannot be explained, because it is unique to each individual and must be performed for its own sake, not for some explicable end. “Goodness is indefinable . . . because of the infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality” (*Sovereignty* 42). It is necessary, however, for the individual to apprehend as much of that reality as possible in order to achieve Murdoch’s ideal of love. Even in traditional literature, it is necessary for the successful hero to overcome the limits of his human language in order to grasp the truth: “The Hero masters his world and, finding it wanting,

feels compelled to seek out the nonlinear mysteries. Though he speaks only the language of his human world, he risks the apparent chaos of the wilderness, the darkness, and hell itself in order to know the elusive but more substantial truth over which his small human world is founded” (Birenbaum 129). Thus, both Murdoch’s post-modern quester and the traditional hero cannot depend upon the limits of language to explain the world, but rather risk giving up such linguistic control in order to comprehend complex truths.

Murdoch asserts that much of the problem with the linguistic ideal lies in the human creation of the Ordinary Language Man, whom she defines as a person employing “‘ordinary language’ . . . to solve piecemeal problems in epistemology which had formerly been discussed in terms of the activities or faculties of a ‘self’” (*Sovereignty* 48). The problem with this approach is, of course, that while it is fine for solving small, “piecemeal” problems, it is not an effective strategy for discovering universal truths. The protagonists in Murdoch’s novels are caught in the trap of using conventional, self-absorbed type of language to explain the totality of existence.

Convention is the dominant landscape of what Murdoch calls the Ordinary Language Man—so called because he is shaped by convention but is too arrogant to be overpowered by any structure larger than himself. He has a tendency toward abstraction and oversimplification, and although he exists in a network of difference, he still manages to operate self-sufficiently. (Tucker 3)

This type of activity has already been revealed in the attempts of the characters, especially Jake Donaghue and Bradley Pearson, to set themselves apart from the rest of the world through their mastery over the English language. However, several of the other protagonists also suffer from these linguistic limitations.

Jake Donaghue experiences the most obvious failure in this respect. He oversimplifies everything through his garrulous need to put a verbal explanation on the world. As discussed earlier, he believes that he can establish control over the world through his explanations, even though that world spins tumultuously out of control in the

midst of his plentiful words. But Jake is not the only protagonist with a desperate need to explain everything. Other characters in these four novels also express the same need for simplistic explanations of their surroundings, in forms vastly different from Jake's obvious volubility.

In *The Black Prince*, Bradley values his intellect to excess. In this same vein, he also prides himself on being an urbane, sophisticated individual who can not only put an explanation to everything, but can also control his emotions to such a degree that he is above reacting to highly charged situations.

We have therefore a character who, despite his carefully attained cultural expertise, his sophistication, his narrow but real ability as a writer, his years of experience in the routine of the tax office, and his fifty-eight years of complex human relationships, can be thrown easily into situation after situation in which his neurotic compulsions rule and his actions comically fail to coincide with the self-knowledge he wrongly believes himself to have. (Dipple 119)

Bradley's belief in his ability to explain even himself is systematically destroyed throughout the novel. One example of this failure is Bradley's night at the opera with Julian. They are watching *Der Rosenkavalier* when Bradley, overcome by the music, runs out into the night to vomit. Bradley attributes this reaction to the heat of the theater and his dislike of music. In reality, however, Bradley cannot control his emotions as much as he would like as he watches the tragic tale of an older woman's affair with a much younger man go terribly wrong on stage. Bradley pathetically attempts to conceal his loss of control when, waking the following morning, he states that "I could mainly congratulate myself on having been fairly cool last night" (*BP* 273) after vomiting due to the emotional force of his and Julian's sudden, violent love. He says that, despite this episode, "I had behaved with dignity" (*BP* 273). This verbal sham does not work; Bradley's violent bodily functions simply cannot be undone by his later empty words. His

perceived ideas do not downplay his profound loss of control, but rather emphasize his desperation to present a sophisticated face to the world.

Edward too is guilty of oversimplification as he searches for a single key to relieve his painful guilt. Even before he latches onto the idea of Jesse as the ultimate answer to his problems, Edward spends most of his time searching books and magazines—conspicuous sources of the limitations of language—for the one thing which will improve his miserable existence. Edward seeks comforting language to reverse the violent, hurtful words hurled at him in letters from Mark’s grieving mother. His haphazard faith in language is exemplified in this excerpt concerning Edward’s careless search: “The only use he had ever put the Bible to was occasionally to take a *sors*, to open it at random and extract a message, an absurd or ridiculously apt one, from the verses his finger lighted upon. He did this now, opening the book and pointing quickly” (GA 48). Edward reads the random passage about the destruction of the sinful world. Searching for symbols anywhere he can, Edward takes this random event as a portent of his own doom, much in the same extreme manner as he later takes Jesse as the symbol of his salvation. Soon after, he replaces this prophecy with the words uttered to him by Jesse’s apparition at Mrs. Quaid’s séance, repeating the words to himself like a mantra: “Come to your father. Come to your father” (GA 62). Edward turns this phrase into an obsession, imagining Jesse Baltram as the benevolent god that will save him. But all of Edward’s verbal icons turn out to be worthless: he soon abandons religion when it offers him no immediate relief, and his idealized faith in Jesse, emphasized by his hypnotic repetition of the phrase uttered at the séance, is crushed when he sees the true Jesse, diseased and helpless. Thus, Edward learns that words, like appearances, cannot be trusted on his journey to truth.

The most curious of these explanation seekers is Bellamy James in *The Green Knight*. Bellamy is desperately unhappy, and he doesn’t know why; he “found simply *living* a task of amazing difficulty” (GK 22). Thus, like Edward, he continually places his

hope for relief in other people. Having a low opinion of himself, he believes absolutely in the words of others, and when their words do not provide what he searches for, Bellamy is crushed. Bellamy first places all of his faith in a young priest, Father Damien. The two correspond at length, Bellamy seeking affirmation for his decision to enter a religious order. Father Damien always writes back to Bellamy and begs him to reconsider the solitary life, as he feels this pursuit is not suitable for Bellamy. However, Bellamy persists until the priest orders him to stop writing. Later, Bellamy is disillusioned upon finding out that Father Damien has left the priesthood. Bellamy feels confused and betrayed by this action, overwhelmed by the loss of faith of one whose words he has depended upon. Bellamy then moves on to idolizing Peter Mir, the mysterious man who seems so wise to the naive, seeking Bellamy. Bellamy hangs upon Peter's oft-promised (but rarely delivered) "explanations": explanations of his past, his Buddhist conversion, his wealth, his role for Bellamy. Disillusioned by Father Damien's loss, Bellamy soaks up Peter's promises. He expresses his blind faith to Peter directly: "When I first talked with you, I said I wanted you to enter my life, enter my heart, with a great beating of wings like an angel. . . . I asked you for a sign, and a sign has been given. Let me be your patient, let me be your servant, heal me—" (*GK* 299). These words, like Edward's apparition, come to nothing, despite Bellamy's devotion. When Peter's deception is revealed, and he, like Father Damien, cannot deliver what Bellamy desires of him—first when he is carted back to the asylum by his doctor, and again after he dies without so much as requesting Bellamy's presence—Bellamy is once again crushed by disappointment. As with Father Damien, Bellamy's reliance upon the faith of others—rather than developing his own inner path to goodness—fails utterly. Bellamy's failing is not, of course, that he seeks peace through goodness and virtue. His failing is that, in the tradition of the Ordinary Language Man, he seeks that virtue by simplifying its source into a single, other person rather than undertaking the arduous journey toward goodness upon himself.

In conveying these various linguistic follies, Murdoch commonly uses the image of Wittgenstein's net of discourse, especially when she is seeking to communicate this strange failed relationship between humanity and its language. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein puts forth the idea that language is a net that attempts to express basic truths about the world in a unified, descriptive form. Murdoch sees this net as limiting one's view of the universe, as it depends on a finite system—language—to explain things which she considers to be inexplicable. Responding to Wittgenstein and other empirical philosophers like him, Murdoch writes,

[The agent] appears as an isolated will operating with the concepts of "ordinary language," so far as the field of morals is concerned. . . . Thus the will, and the psyche as an object of science, are isolated from each other and from the rest of philosophy. The cult of ordinary language goes with the claim to be neutral. . . . Linguistic analysis claims simply to give a philosophical description of the human phenomenon of morality, without making any moral judgments. (*Sovereignty* 49)

Thus, as human beings use language to explain moral systems and philosophies, the descriptions do not offer any judgments or advice to the agent attempting to pursue moral goodness. The agent is left alone with this information but without any idea of how to put it to use. As Murdoch put forth earlier in *The Sovereignty of Good*, the reason for this difficulty is that each human being is different, with an individual definition of what it is to be good. The sheer volume of these individual definitions of morality serves to make "good" a thing that is indefinable within the finite limits of language. Thus, although Wittgenstein's net attempts to capture these protean definitions through the use of language and discourse, more truths escape through the holes than are captured, according to Murdoch.

It is Wittgenstein's net to which Murdoch was referring when she titled her first novel, *Under the Net*. "What is important about the net is that it is *there*," Byatt asserts

(15). In this novel, Murdoch is not as concerned with defining the net in Wittgenstein's terms as with exploring humanity's relationship to its pervasive existence. In Murdoch's novels, the net is ubiquitous, and part of the hero's quest is recognizing it and attempting to overcome its limitations. Jake is continually caught by the limitations of this net, as his simple, linguistic explanations fail to satisfy his need to control the world. Jake cannot recognize the two sides of the net: "Language and theory alike (which constitute the net) both reveal and yet simultaneously conceal the world" (Conradi, *Saint* 32). Jake's main concern, as an explanation-giver, is to use the net only to reveal the world, and he is dumbfounded when it fails.

The failure of the net is most clearly demonstrated when Jake discovers that the two people whom he most values—Anna and Hugo—have collaborated to found a mime theater. These two honorable characters create art not through the manipulation of language, but through the power of silence. Jake experiences this power without being able to explain it: "The actors meanwhile were continuing to execute their movements in the extraordinary silence which seemed to keep the whole house spellbound. . . . Their left hands performed a variety of simple conventional gestures. I had never seen mime quite like this before. The effect was hypnotic. What was going on was not clear to me" (*UN* 36). Likewise, Hugo has partly made his fortune through the instantaneous, wordless splendor of fireworks: he is a manufacturer and designer of pyrotechnics. Jake's endless flood of verbiage opposes both of these characters, as he talks on and on, overwhelming his own artistic aspirations. Like Plato's false art object, Jake's garrulity prevents him from recognizing truth because his speech drowns it out: "The true *logos* falls silent in the presence of the highest (ineffable) truth, but the art object cherishes its volubility, it cherishes itself not the truth, and wishes to be indestructible and eternal" (Murdoch, *Fire* 65-66). Hugo and Anna, both creators of wordless art, have recognized this truth, and their power ultimately strikes Jake speechless. After puzzling over them, Jake is finally

able to embark upon his own artistic career. He gives up his treasured volubility and is able to stop explaining the world, and simply accepts its inexplicable nature at the end of the novel as he stands before the mystery of Mrs. Tinckham's kittens: "'Well,' I said, 'it's just a matter of . . . ' I stopped. I had no idea what it was a matter of. . . . 'I don't know why it is,' I said. 'It's just one of the wonders of the world.'" (UN 253). As Johnson has asserted, this episode culminates in Jake's abandonment of his egocentric necessity to control his surroundings:

Under the Net provides a good-humoured critique of the male questing hero of so much modernist (and post-modernist) fiction, of the almost solipsistic intensity which accompanies his sense of his quest. At the conclusion of the novel, Jake has found his true quest, his "path," but he does not celebrate it in a grand self-justifying gesture. He is last seen puzzling over the workings of genetics as he contemplates a mixed litter of newborn kittens.
(25)

Jake has worked through Wittgenstein's net of discourse. He no longer needs to rely on rewriting the words of others: his abandonment of control, of frameworks, of stipulations, of even understanding, reawakens his creative power. The novel ends "with the *artist* Jake discovering his own voice and an enhanced ability to suffer and celebrate the heterogeneity of experience without having to reduce it by explanation" (Conradi, "Useful" 67). Jake, at last, is free, but it is thanks to his increased understanding of the world's chaos rather than dependence on order and control.

Bradley, another failed writer, is caught in this net of discourse as well. As described earlier, when he observes the opera, which conveys its truth by depending not on words but on the abstract quality of sound, Bradley is unable to cope; the spectacle makes him physically sick. Even at the end of the novel, he has learned to question even his own sophisticated power over language as he doubts the worth of the novel he has just written, even though it is the culmination of his lifelong quest: "Socrates wrote nothing,

neither did Christ. Almost all speech which is not so illumined is a deformation of the truth. And yet: I am writing these words and others whom I do not know will read them. With and by this paradox I have lived. . . . Perhaps it will always be for some an unavoidable paradox” (*BP* 391). Although he has finally completed the work he has waited his whole life to create, in the end he doubts its efficacy, as it is composed of words. His recognition of the net is illustrated by the fact that he acknowledges the limitations of language: that language masks and thus deforms deep truths. However, despite this knowledge, Bradley writes on; even though he knows his work may influence nothing, he carries on to fulfill the necessity of artistic expression. Bradley, who has thus far fancied himself the urbane, sophisticated intellectual, has learned to question the elevated position of human language as the source of all knowledge.

The Green Knight, a much later novel, also invokes the image of the net. However, instead of exploring the limitations of language, as do *Under the Net* and *The Black Prince*, this later novel emphasizes the extraordinary power of silence. The strongest image of this power is illustrated as Clement, the actor and naive, deluded younger brother of intellectual Lucas, stands alone in his silent, dilapidated theater: “The stage was no longer empty. A man was standing on it, the man was Clement. He was standing with his hands in his pockets and his head bowed” (*GK* 436). He stands on the deserted stage in an attitude of supplication before the silence of the theater. Clement has given up his work as a performer, as a speaker of someone else’s words, in favor of saving a long-silent theater, filling it with his own truths and thus restoring it to its former dignity. Like Jake Donaghue in *Under the Net*, Clement gives up repeating the creations of others and goes behind the scenes to play a silent role as the prime mover of his own theater. Clement has given up seeking art through outside sources, and now seeks to find his own, individual truths to empower his own loving attention to the world.

Opposing Clement's reverent new silence is Lucas, who has been betrayed by the world of language which he has sought to control and suppress. A lecturer and intellectual who has constantly offered his opinions to those less intelligent and experienced than himself, he finally rejects explanation by leaving London without a word to anyone. Whether silenced by the shame of the truth which has been revealed, or by his inability to control the linguistic medium which has thus far been his only proud success, Lucas finally rejects language and escapes silently from the world he feels has betrayed him. In their own ways, then, both brothers, through their embrace of silence at the end of the novel, have realized the limitations of the net, although each man's solution to these limitations is very different: Clement seeks to broaden the net to include his own unique contributions, while Lucas attempts to abandon the net which has finally betrayed him.

This net is, ultimately, the human attempt to impose order upon the world through the use of language. The protagonist's success relies on how successfully he is able to manipulate the net and travel beyond its limitations. Traveling beyond these limitations is dependent upon the surrender of the protagonist to the inexplicable nature of the universe, and this surrender to contingency is the final step before the hero reaches his ultimate goal: the recognition of Murdochean love.

The Acceptance of Absurdity

In these four novels, the first inkling of the protagonist's impending surrender to the absurd, contingent nature of the world is that his preferred method of control begins to break down. Jake, who has to provide an explanation for everything, cannot explain either Anna or Hugo; he is struck speechless when confronted with each of them. Bradley, who believes his quest to create art lies solely in his ability to escape London, is thwarted at every turn by some new cataclysmic event. Edward, who has sought to control his inner life by chastising himself, is led away from his self-inflicted guilt by recognizing the serious

flaws of the other people around him. And in *The Green Knight*, this loss of control for several of the main characters centers variously on Peter Mir's death, Aleph's disappearance, and Lucas's escape.

According to Murdoch, the ultimate achievement of love and goodness is contingent upon the acceptance of absurdity in the world. "Of course there is a bad absurd (degrading, hurtful), but is there not also a good absurd? Loss of dignity need not be loss of moral stature, can be surrender of vanity, discovery of humility; and a sense of the ludicrous is a defence against pretensions, not least in art" (*Fire* 73-74). It is in surrendering to these absurd events, in admitting to one's pretensions and mistakes, and ultimately in learning to deal with one's insubstantial humanness—as well as that of others—that finally allows one to lead a good life. Jake's realization of this universal truth is best illustrated at the conclusion of *Under the Net*, when he is seen puzzling over the strange genetic makeup of Mrs. Tinckham's litter of kittens. At this point, since he has at last given up his dependence upon the words of others (especially Breteuil), and since he has finally realized his failure to recognize the true humanity of Finn, he is able to give up the need to explain everything; he has, in effect, given up his egotistical quest for control by demonstrating his linguistic excesses and is now instead attempting to explore the mysteries of life through art.

In *The Black Prince*, certainly the most cataclysmic of all the tragedies that surround Bradley is Rachel Baffin's murder of her husband, Arnold. Thus far, Bradley has fought all the absurdities that have surrounded him: he avoids seeing his ex-wife by running to Patara; he avoids confronting the spectacle of Priscilla's suicide by lying to Julian; he avoids facing Julian's disappearance by lurking around her home and writing her totally ineffectual love letters. However, the violence of the murder finally forces Bradley to give in to contingency. When Rachel betrays him, he fights for a while, but then gives in to his lifelong prison sentence, although it is based upon a lie. At last, Bradley

surrenders himself for the good of another, even though the motives of that other were entirely selfish. He does not exactly forgive Rachel for her deception, but attempts to recognize her fully: "I suppose I owe it to her as a kind of duty to see what she did, to look at it and try to understand it" (*BP* 382). This willingness to try and understand the reason for another's actions, even in the face of one's own misfortune, strongly resembles Murdoch's concept of love, which is supposedly so illuminating for the individual attempting to live a moral life. Bradley may not be a successful artist; his work may or may not be valuable. But this ability to recognize the fallible human actions of another points to Bradley's relative success as a moral being. Bradley also surrenders himself to his false sentence in order to save Julian from the loss of both of her parents. It is finally this surrender of himself to the unpredictable forces of the world that allows Bradley the time and quiet to compose his art: "So we live on together here in our quiet monastery, as we are pleased to call it. And so I come to the end of this book. I do not know if I shall write another. . . . Art is a vain and hollow show, a toy of gross illusion, unless it points beyond itself and moves ever whither it points" (*BP* 391-92). In surrender, Bradley has found peace; he has managed to find his long-sought-after satisfaction in even the most negative of circumstances. In the solitude that the dank prison offers him, Bradley is able to find the inner peace with which he can face the truth and create his art without fantasy or fear.

Edward, too, finds peace at the close of *The Good Apprentice* by surrendering to the contingent nature of the world. He is able to accept his part in Mark's death as one of the random mishaps of the universe over which he had no control:

In a way it's all a muddle starting off with an accident, my breakdown, drugs, telepathy, my father's illness, cloistered neurotic women, people arriving unexpectedly, all sorts of things which happened by pure chance. At so many points anything being otherwise could have made everything be otherwise. In another way it's a whole complex thing, internally connected, like a dark

globe, a dark world, as if we were all parts of a single drama, living inside a work of art. Perhaps important things in life are always like that, so that you can think of them in both ways. (*GA* 517-18)

By recognizing the unpredictable nature of existence, Edward realizes the necessity of forgiving himself. He realizes that, although his own carelessness did carry a high price, chance also played a considerable role in the catastrophic events of his young life. Edward must thus let go of the destructive fantasy which he has created for himself. Edward looks to the chaos of the real world for strength and redemption. As this passage illustrates, Edward accepts that perhaps Mark's death was not all his doing, that perhaps it was just the absurd forces of the world at work. It is in this letting go of self that Edward, like Bradley, allows his suffering to end. This acceptance hinges on his final realization that Jesse and others are merely human with their own flaws and weaknesses. In accepting the flaws of other people—by engaging Murdochean love—Edward is finally able to accept his own weakness and escape the mire of self-pity which had prohibited him from recognizing the world.

The Green Knight's Bellamy James also ultimately gives up relying blindly upon the advice of others to fulfill his quest for goodness. After facing the rejection of Father Damien and the death of Peter Mir, Bellamy finally decides to think for himself; he takes back his beloved dog and gives up trying to sell his treasured seaside house. By inviting all of the newly engaged couples to a holiday at this very same beach house, Bellamy at last rejoins the world. Bellamy realizes the necessity of human contact to leading a good life. After taking a last look at Father Damien's letters, Bellamy thinks of Peter Mir's final advice to him: "Your will is free, upright and sound, it would be wrong not to be ruled by its good sense. . . . Yes it is true . . . I shall get that job helping people" (*GK* 465). In the last scene of the novel, Bellamy, with Anax's help, saves Moy from drowning in the ocean. Bellamy and Moy, the novel's two misfits, are united by this profound event as well as by their love for Anax. In saving Moy, Bellamy not only intellectually realizes his

role as a helper of others, but is also able to enact it. After rescuing her, he reflects upon his newfound “moral station”: “Bellamy thought, what’s happened, something’s happened. . . . I’ve got so much to do, I’ll find that job [Father Damien] spoke of, and yes he was right about happiness, don’t be miserable thinking you can’t be perfect. . . . I’ll look after Moy” (*GK* 471-72). Bellamy recognizes his pursuit of asceticism as a fallacy, and attempts to attain goodness by establishing loving contact with other people.

The Necessity of Love

Thus, through recognizing the contingent nature of the world, each character realizes the necessity of Murdoch’s idea of love. This deep attention to and recognition of the world outside the self provides the protagonists with the impetus needed to fulfill a worthwhile quest in place of the selfish goals they had been seeking. “Murdoch finds that freedom is possible for those persons who can love and accept an object (human or nonhuman) which is other and distinct from the loving subject. . . . The aesthetic principle of love must be applied in order to free the characters in the contemporary novel, and to respect their individuality and contingency” (Slaymaker 20). What each character is freed from is the limiting boundaries of his own ego. When he learns to surrender these limitations, he discovers the truth of the world outside his small universe of language and selfish desperation. Each moves from isolating himself from the company and variety of other people to recognizing the necessity of rejoining the world in order to fulfill his quest. However, each must confront and overcome false versions of love as it is commonly perceived in order to recognize Murdoch’s idea of true love. The most insidious of these is romantic love, which is only an egotistical impulse centered on the self’s needs instead of the needs of the other person. This false type of love is evidenced by both Jake’s self-serving manipulation of the women around him, and Bradley’s use of Julian as an outlet for his sexual frustration, an outlet which he believes will lead him to artistic inspiration.

The second type of love in which each character erroneously indulges is excessive self-love, as illustrated by the obsessive need for solitude pursued by Bradley Pearson and Bellamy James. Finally, familial love is also revealed to be illusory, because Edward cannot depend on the guidance of his insane father and Louise suffers due to her selfish need to be surrounded by her daughters. All of these types of love are fueled by the self-centered need to control and satisfy the ego rather than recognizing the needs of other human beings. Jake only seeks money or a place to live from the women he woos; Bradley seeks some sort of outlet through Julian by manipulating her immature feelings for him, and at the same time tries to get away from others in order to satisfy his ego's need for artistic immortality; Edward seeks only absolution for himself through his encounter with Jesse; Bellamy seeks to assuage his own guilt by separating himself from others; and Louise only wants to delay her impending loneliness by keeping her daughters at home for as long as possible. Each character blankets these needs in the guise of love, but this kind of self-serving love is only another destructive fantasy.

True love is only to be found in the abandonment of the self and the recognition of another being's otherness. Jake finally finds his true love in the company of the Alsatian, Mars. The development of this love is illustrated after the tumultuous political gathering where Jake first encounters Hugo. Jake and Mars spend the night on the Victoria Embankment, hiding from the police: "His body was radiantly warm from nose to tail. . . . At last we settled down with my face thrust into the loose fur of Mars's throat and his hind legs curled into my stomach. He licked my nose" (*UN* 156). Later, when Jake is beginning to despair of his own cleverness after Sadie fails to respond to his ransom requests, it is Mars's need for exercise which finally encourages Jake to leave his smelly bedroom and rejoin the outside world. Giving in to the needs of the dog provide Jake with a satisfaction unparalleled by any of his human relationships, which are fraught with his need to impress and control. With Mars, Jake is free to forget himself; and, as

Slaymaker has established, true love can engulf any subject, “human or nonhuman.” What is important is that Jake’s relationship to Mars is a contributing factor to his fulfillment of his true quest. Rather than continuing with the ridiculous quest to gain ransom from Mars’s capture, Jake instead gives in to his deep feelings for the dog and even surrenders his meager finances to purchase him and thus save him from any more exploitation.

As mentioned earlier, Bradley’s realization of love engulfs him when he gives up his life for Rachel. It is this selfless act that saves Bradley and affords him the opportunity to fulfill his own artistic quest. Although the isolation of the prison is far different from the isolation he originally sought at Patara, it makes no real difference to Bradley, as his abandonment of selfish concerns leads to his realization that it matters not where he is; he has passed successfully through his ordeal and is given the reward of peace. “I do not know whether I shall see the ‘outside world’ again. . . . The question is of no interest to me. A truthful vision finds the fullness of reality everywhere and the whole extended universe in a little room” (*BP* 391). Due to his ordeal, Bradley is able to recognize the truth of the world even within the confines of his cell; and, beyond recognizing the truth, he is able to express it artistically in his novel.

Edward’s realization of love is also not the most pleasant of experiences: he discovers it through the gradual acceptance that his frail, dying father will not be able to provide the judgment which Edward initially sought from him. It is when Edward gives up his self-centered quest for forgiveness, and instead turns his attention to restoring the dignity of his imprisoned father, that he unknowingly reaches his goal. Jesse’s death pains him, of course, but he recognizes the significance of finding and helping him as the key to expunging his own guilt: “And as in a vision Edward saw Jesse in the calm centre, diminishing into a tiny radiant sphere. . . . I love him, thought Edward, *he* has done me no harm, only good, he is alive in me, he needed me, I am responsible for him. . . . This was not an illness of his whole being, it was a clean wound which would heal” (*GA* 518-19).

Immediately after retrieving Jesse's body from the cold stream, Edward wanders away from Seegard, his duty accomplished; he ventures outside his own suffering to take part in the suffering of another, and in so doing is able to abandon his own egotistical self-pity.

Many of the questing characters in *The Green Knight* achieve Murdochean love: Harvey abandons his self-deprecation in favor of loving the homely Sefton; Louise learns that it is better to allow her daughters the freedom to live their own lives rather than fetter them with her own selfish fears; and Bellamy gains more satisfaction from immersing himself in the world than any type of isolated monasticism could afford him. It is this type of outlook which is the true quest of human life: coming to grips with what is real and difficult rather than constantly giving in to the demands of the selfish ego.

The result of all of these truthful realizations is that the final fulfillment of each protagonist's quest is very different from what he set out for at the start of the novel. For example, Jake winds up living with and finding suitable companionship with Mars instead of Anna or Hugo. Bradley finds his solitude behind the bars of a prison cell rather than within the walls of Patara. In *The Good Apprentice*, Edward winds up saving Jesse rather than the other way around, and *The Green Knight's* Bellamy reclaims all of his worldly goods instead of rejecting them for an obscure, self-centered monastic quest. As each hero's self-proclaimed quest turns out to be an illusion, he realizes the necessity of accepting whatever absurdities life presents. Satisfaction is not found in overcoming obstacles and enduring ordeals, but rather in the placid acceptance of the unpredictable and in the loving attention to the beauty of contingency.

Chapter 2

The Women: Heroines or Diversions?

Since the Middle Ages, women have played a variety of rather predictable roles in literature. In medieval works, women are commonly reminders of the chaotic, natural forces in the world of their questing male counterparts. “The feminine qualities are primarily nonlinear ones: feeling and intuition, a sense of the whole, spontaneity, the natural rhythms of the body; while the masculine are essentially linear: rationality and purposefulness, action in time, individuality and self-assertion” (Birenbaum 105). This idea is based on the Jung’s concepts of *anima* and *animus*, which define the complementary masculine and feminine properties residing in each person: the masculine qualities favor the rational, controlling side of humanity, while the feminine attributes emphasize natural, more mysterious elements.

The mysterious aspect of femininity is tied to the fact that women are the source of life. The highly prized nature of this life source is emphasized in traditional literature, in which women are often awarded as prizes to heroic protagonists in return for enduring some ordeal, such as the “damsel in distress” found in many fairy tales: the young, beautiful girl who marries the handsome prince after he succeeds in delivering her from a terrible fate. These traditional female characters are not always relegated to the simple role of prize, however. They also commonly serve as negative forces, as enchantresses or hags who undermine the attempts of the hero striving for his goal. A good example of this type of woman is Circe, who captures and enchants Odysseus and his men and turns them into pigs in order to keep them from escaping her island.

A medieval work which presents numerous examples of traditional feminine types is *The Mabinogion*. This collection of Celtic folklore exhibits all the traditional feminine types which have been handed down to later literature. For example, in “Branwen Daughter of Llyr,” Branwen is the beautiful, powerless woman-object, who is given as a

peace offering to a neighboring island. Once there, she is beaten endlessly. Branwen sends news of her miserable state to her brothers, who are outraged, and they travel overseas to rescue her. In this tale, Branwen's character is a one-dimensional commodity, common in the myths of warrior societies: her family first trades her as a political object, then the butcher uses her as an object of abuse, and Branwen ends the story as an object by which her brothers can gain glory as they sail heroically to save her. *The Mabinogion* also contains enchantresses such as Rhiannon, who serve to remind the questing masculine characters of the uncontrollable powers of the world beyond men. Rhiannon does this by skillfully avoiding the advances of Pwyll on her ambling white stallion, which wanders slowly out of reach no matter how fast Pwyll's steed can run. Finally there are the hags, whose sole aim is to undermine the quest of the knights. They plan malicious magic upon the linear labors of the men and are clearly cast as evil characters, defined by their extreme ugliness and malignant acts.

Many of the women in these tales, especially the hags and enchantresses, possess a profound strength: these medieval women have true power over men—even Branwen, who only needs to summon her brothers once—and they personify the forces which the linear-minded men cannot and should not hope to control. In fact, according to Jungian theory, the masculine characters must accept and integrate the non-linear qualities of these mysterious women in order to fulfill their quests for truth.

Some critics, among them feminists, have sold Murdoch's women short on this point. Cheryl Bove, in her mostly positive critique of Murdoch's later novels, says this about her early portrayal of feminine characters: "Perhaps even more unsettling is Murdoch's frequent statement that she identifies more with men than women. . . . Many critics find her acceptance of a male role for herself disturbing. The truth is that while Murdoch may feel fortunate in her own acceptance in the male world, the women that people her novels usually enjoy a far different status" (191). Bove goes on to say that the

women in Murdoch's later novels exhibit a greater sensitivity and do a better job of "more fully representing the female voice" (193). However, several of the female characters in Murdoch's earlier fiction, such as *Under the Net* and *The Black Prince*, also exert considerable power and influence over the developing story, and do so with a singleness of mind and freedom of purpose that Bove does not seem willing to grant in her essay.

Even more unyielding in her criticism of Murdoch's women, Carol Seiler-Franklin says that "most . . . female characters in Iris Murdoch's works remain static and only the men develop" (38). True, Murdoch has created women that can be justifiably described as one-dimensional—such as the fawning Lizzie Scherer in *The Sea, the Sea* or the excessively narcissistic Antonia in *A Severed Head*. By the same token, however, Murdoch has also created many male characters with the same problem: none of the men in *The Italian Girl* is fully developed in comparison to the strong, vibrant character of Flora, and even Martin Lynch-Gibbon, the protagonist of *A Severed Head*, makes no philosophical progress in comparison to his mistress Georgie's recognition of their destructive relationship. Arnold Baffin in *The Black Prince* and Lucas Graffe in *The Green Knight* also end their respective novels without realizing or accepting the unpredictability of life, while some of the female characters around them make great progress toward their own recognition of the truth.

However, the major female characters in the four novels under discussion are strong-willed, positive women who not only serve to awaken the questing masculine hero's intuitive *anima*, but also make a strong statement about the place of women in modern society. Murdoch has never called herself a feminist; in fact, she deplores novels that seek to engage in extended social commentary: "I think it's a novelist's job to be a good artist, and this will involve telling the truth, and not worrying about social commitment" (Rose 60). Although many critics have accused Murdoch of elevating the status of men over women in her novels, oftentimes her female characters strive to overcome and influence the masculine presences in their lives.

Woman as Catalyst

The most obvious role these female characters play is that of catalyst. The influence of these women helps the questing masculine heroes to recognize the meaningless nature of their selfish goals. However, due to the force of will these women exhibit, they are more than simple props functioning to advance the story of the protagonist. Murdoch's women are very different from *The Mabinogion's* subservient Enid in the tale "Gereint and Enid." Enid, like Murdoch's feminine characters, serves as the instrument through which the questing hero, Gereint, learns a fundamental truth: she teaches him the importance of occasionally leaving the linear, masculine pursuit of power behind once in a while in favor of indulging in the pleasures of life-affirming romantic love. After teaching Gereint this lesson, however, Enid dutifully follows her husband back to his kingdom, reduced almost to the role of decorative servant in comparison to Gereint's overwhelming power. Murdoch's twentieth-century women, while they too establish the importance of giving in to the non-linear aspects of life, do not exist simply to serve the protagonist as he struggles through his quest, and then to decorate and admire him after he comes to his epiphany. They do not end the novels in subservient roles, as Enid does; rather, they depart from the masculine protagonists as strong, independent characters.

In *Under the Net*, several women function in a catalytic capacity. First and most important is Anna, whom Jake madly pursues throughout much of the novel, hoping to renew his lost love affair with her. As mentioned earlier, Jake is struck dumb by Anna's power when he encounters her face-to-face at her theater. Anna, and the power she holds over Jake, are emblematic of Jake's true quest: her silence is what makes her so attractive to him. Her involvement in the mime theater is directly opposed to Jake's incessant speech—in fact, when Jake first witnesses her art form, he cannot make sense of it. Anna is an enigma to Jake, and that is why he continues to alternate between pursuing and fleeing from her: he is both attracted by the need to try to explain her, and repelled by the fear

that he will not be able to. Anna personifies unexplainability, the concept which Jake spends the novel struggling to accept.

After Jake's first, thwarted encounter with Anna in her theater, he does not see her again. However, later in the novel, Jake romantically fancies that Anna is leading him on a chase through the Tuileries after Bastille Day fireworks. But he receives a nasty shock: "I caught up with her and spread out my arms. 'Alors, chérie?' said a soft voice. The woman who turned to face me was not Anna. I reeled back like a wounded man" (*UN* 194). This experience of chasing the false Anna finally leads Jake to realize the error of his obsessive love for her. Wandering around Paris alone, he sadly understands the futility of the game he has been playing, seeking Anna only for his own financial and emotional needs, without concern for the person Anna Quentin—he has, after all, not seen her at all since their awkward meeting in the opening pages of the novel. "I stopped calling and waited in silence. . . . I knew now that Anna would not come. . . . The party was over" (*UN* 196). The debris and garbage scattered on the streets, along with the procession of exhausted revelers back to their homes, parallel Jake's disillusionment: after the madness of his illusory flights and chases, Jake is now exhausted and beaten as the reality of his solitude and the futility of his quest for acceptance begin to dawn on him.

This episode in *Under the Net* is reminiscent of "Pwyll Lord of Dyved" from *The Mabinogion*, in which Pwyll, too, is led on a fantastic chase after Rhiannon on her ambling steed. Pwyll tries all manner of conventional ways to catch her up, first walking after her and then spurring his own horse on to greater and greater speeds. All of these methods fail; it is only when Pwyll is able to admit that he is beaten, and asks Rhiannon to stop, that his quest to meet her is fulfilled. Unlike Rhiannon, however, Anna is not in love with her pursuer; she is in love with Hugo, and thus does not offer herself to Jake. However, Jake, too, must admit to being beaten: the success of his quest is dependent upon recognizing the false nature of his frantic chase after Anna and his desire to explain her. He can only

give up this futile quest, and realize another, more honorable one, after recognizing that his pursuit of Anna—symbolized by this final, deceptive chase—is just another destructive fantasy keeping him from recognizing the truth. After this last, false chase, Jake returns to London, leaving behind not only the romantic fantasy of Paris, but also the fantasy of his love for Anna. Through her silence, Anna has revealed to Jake the necessity of accepting the contingent, imperfect world as it is, and soon after this episode Jake rediscovers his desire to write again; he sets off to search for truth through art with only Mars by his side.

Jake has no such romantic interest in Sadie. Her role resembles that of the pixie, Luned, in *The Mabinogion*'s "The Countess of the Fountain": although the hero finds her attractive, he does not have any kind of amorous encounter with her. She instead serves to set up the circumstances which will ultimately change the course of his quest. In the medieval tale, Luned skillfully arranges for Owein to meet and woo the Countess, even though the knight has murdered her husband. Luned constantly aids Owein in the fulfillment of the many tasks he is set upon to make up for the death of the Countess's husband, and, with Luned's unfailing help, Owein is finally able to reach his goal of facing up to the needless suffering he has caused and gains the Countess's hand. While Jake's ultimate quest for Murdochean love does not involve marriage, it does involve recognizing the truth, and Sadie, like Luned, is always instrumental in pointing him toward his proper goals. First, it is while guarding Sadie's house that Jake re-establishes contact with Hugo. The phone rings, and Jake answers it, hearing Hugo's voice. Jake suddenly realizes that Sadie's unwanted admirer is Hugo, and he desperately tries to start a conversation with his old friend. His lack of success leads him to begin the mad pursuit of Hugo that follows throughout the remainder of the novel. That same day, on Sadie's bookshelf, Jake finds and re-acquaints himself with *The Silencer*, his published fictional dialogue which caused all the trouble between him and Hugo in the first place. Along with strengthening his resolve to locate Hugo, re-reading his only published novel begins to stir Jake to consider

writing again, a consideration which turns into a strong commitment to art by the novel's conclusion. And it is in Sadie's house that Jake finds Mars, first the object for the ransom of Breteuil's lost manuscript and then the final object of Jake's true loving attention. Sadie herself appears only minimally in the novel, but her influence is ubiquitous: she is always affecting Jake in one way or another. However, Jake's solipsism prevents him from recognizing the truth; just as he cannot recognize the absence of love which Anna exhibits toward him, he also does not realize that Sadie's machinations are often performed because she is romantically attracted to him. Like Luned in "The Countess of the Fountain," Sadie loves the hero deeply, and does anything she can to keep him near her—including locking him in her luxurious flat and stealing his translated manuscript. Jake recognizes none of this; in fact, it is Hugo who informs him of Sadie's infatuation, which Jake cannot believe. He has been so preoccupied with trying to win Anna from Hugo (which is also a mistake, as Hugo is in love with Sadie, not Anna) that he has not seen Sadie's obvious attempts to gain proximity to him. Again, this recognition of the truth—like his race after the false Anna in Paris—leads Jake closer to the realization of his inability to explain anything despite his pride and false self-assuredness. He states his recognition thus: "I knew everything. I got it all the wrong way round, that's all. . . . I didn't realize all this," I said. 'I might have behaved differently'" (UN 227). Jake has gone from frantically attempting to name and explain everything in order to make sense of it, to realizing his fallible nature and the fact that he has, perhaps, acted badly. This realization, paired with his chase after Anna, leads him to abandon his selfish pursuits and embark upon the search for truth through art. Like Anna, Sadie plays a considerable role in Jake's eventual realization, even though she herself must suffer unreciprocated passion.

In *The Disciplined Heart*, Peter Wolfe sees Anna and Sadie as insignificant due to their brief appearances in the novel: "In that Anna and Sadie each make only one brief appearance, they cannot sustain much narrative weight. The psychological impact they

have on Jake is largely unaccounted for dramatically and presented with little scenic depth” (64). It is true that the women’s actual appearances in the novel are extremely brief, but they are present almost constantly in Jake’s thoughts and conversations, as the episodes cited above illustrate. In realizing the truth of his relationships with both women, Jake is able to realize his true quest for Murdochean love—and this realization is the profound, life-altering “psychological impact” which Wolfe denies.

The most mysterious and complex feminine character in *Under the Net* is Mrs. Tinckham, the shopkeeper who collects Jake’s mail and keeps his bottle of whiskey secure. Whenever life begins to overwhelm Jake, he returns to the warm womb of her shop for a bit of alcoholic comfort and conversation. The chain-smoking Mrs. Tinckham resides over her abode like a sibyl in a cave. Describing the shop, Jake says: “Here I have spent many peaceful hours. . . . Beside her on the counter is a little wireless which is always on, very softly and inaudibly, so that a sort of murmurous music accompanies Mrs. Tinckham as she sits, wreathed in cigarette smoke, among the cats” (UN 16). The dim, hazy atmosphere surrounding the strange woman, along with the indistinct music and the numerous cats, serves to make her a mystical figure, seemingly possessed of some spiritual power. Jake addresses this mysterious, other-worldly quality as something that inspires trust: “I am sure that people talk enormously to Mrs. Tinckham. I have come in sometimes and felt this unmistakably in the atmosphere. . . . There was a soft murmuring, which might have been the wireless or might have been Mrs. Tinckham casting a spell in order to make me talk to her” (UN 18). The shop is a comforting place for Jake, a retreat where he can find some relief from his obsession with incessant speech and explanation. For Jake, a man who requires verbal representation for everything, his refuge in Mrs. Tinckham’s shop is strangely quiet: there is only the soft hum of the radio and the squeaking of her many cats.

Mrs. Tinckham, like the sibyl, always seems to have the right answer for all of Jake's problems. Her advice is never direct, but somehow she is always able to read his mind and recognize the root of his difficulties. For instance, when Jake goes to her shop after being kicked out of Madge's flat, he makes some general remarks about how difficult people can be at times, although he is unwilling to relate the story to her. She, however, meets his remarks by commenting on how much better the world would be without sex; as if reading his mind, she recognizes the nature of his difficulties even though he has not admitted anything to her. Jake, however, is unwilling to recognize her wisdom at times. During this episode, Jake prides himself on his imagined ability to resist Mrs. Tinckham's "spell": "But I gritted my teeth against speech. I wanted to wait until I could present my story in a more dramatic way. . . . If I spoke now there was always the danger of telling the truth; when caught unawares I usually tell the truth, and what's duller than that?" (*UN* 18) Foolishly, he has not realized that Mrs. Tinckham has already noticed the nature of his problems. By the end of the novel, however, Jake fittingly comes to the ultimate realization of his inability to explain the universe through language, and he is honest before Mrs. Tinckham. This fact is illustrated by his willingness to admit that he cannot explain the mystery of the bizarre litter of kittens in her shop. Even though Mrs. Tinckham hardly knows Jake, she is a font of general wisdom that is always willing to aid him. In *Iris Murdoch*, Johnson comments on Mrs. Tinckham's womb-like cave of feminine wisdom: "It suggests female space, creativity and power. It carries all these associations in the legend of the Sibyl who dispensed from her cave an archaic wisdom in scattered leaves" (87). It is thus significant that Jake experiences his final surrender to contingency in Mrs. Tinckham's shop: after recognizing the futility of trying to control and possess women like Anna and Sadie, Jake can finally embrace the intuitive, unpredictable nature of the *anima* and thus becomes a whole person, able at last to realize his own potential as an artist.

In *The Black Prince*, Bradley, too, is influenced by a trio of women. First is Julian: she personifies the ordeal that Bradley must experience in order to be successful in his quest for artistic creativity. However, Julian is much more than a muse in human form. After learning of Bradley's deception with regard to Priscilla's death, Julian makes up her own mind to leave Bradley, and in fact leaves London altogether without Bradley's knowledge. Bradley, however, wrongly assumes that she has been spirited off by Arnold against her will—despite Bradley's professed love for her, he gives her no credit for having her own mind. When she writes to him from the continent, Bradley is convinced she has written in code to obscure her true feelings for him from her father Arnold but Bradley refuses to believe that she is telling him the truth about her love being a silly, girlish crush: "The letter had, of course, been written for Arnold's eye. . . . The girl was being supervised, virtually a prisoner. Of course she couldn't, as she said, 'explain clearly'" (*BP* 372). Bradley imagines an elaborate codified significance to Julian's letter that simply is not there. Bradley cannot even believe Rachel, Julian's mother, when she backs up Julian's letter as a realization of her immature, "great craze" (*BP* 359) for Bradley. Although Bradley, lost in his web of fantasy, cannot admit it, Julian has demonstrated great independence during this episode; she has not given in to Bradley's pleading, nor to her own father's admonitions. She has overcome her own immature fantasies and decided, on her own, to leave her imperfect relationship with Bradley, which she views as "muddle and misery" (*BP* 371). Significantly, it is this young, unformed girl who recognizes truth before Bradley is able to. Thus, she not only provides Bradley with the tragic material he needs to complete his novel, but she also is a fully developed character in her own right, realizing the true nature of life's quest before a man nearly forty years her senior.

It is also significant that, at the end of the novel, Julian is revealed to be a writer of poetry, a much more complex, compressed form of literary language than the wandering

prose narrative Bradley offers to his readers. In this way, Julian succeeds over both the verbosity of her prolific father and the garrulous, unbroken silence of her father's rival. "I am a poet. So I am careful and sparing with words. . . . True art is very cold. . . . It is concerned with truth in its least pleasant and useful and therefore most truthful form. . . . Pearson was not cool enough. Neither was my father" (*BP* 409-10). In her postscript, she argues that Bradley's love for her could not have released his muse because erotic love, being illusory, cannot be the wellspring of true art. The passions of Bradley and Arnold were, to her, the cause of their mutual artistic failure, although that failure was manifested in opposite ways: Arnold wrote too much, Bradley too little. She even calls *The Black Prince: A Celebration of Love* "a literary failure" (411) because it uses illusory romantic love, rather than the search for truth, as its inspiration. Julian thus mirrors Murdoch's own convictions about the nature of art, which must be, as opposed to self-serving romantic love, "markedly unselfish" (*Fire* 77), and must use as its subject matter "what is hard and necessary and unavoidable in human fate" (*Fire* 79). Thus, Julian is not simply a one-dimensional feminine character who serves only to satisfy the lust and advance the artistic caprice of the narrator. She begins this way, but by the end of the novel she has developed into an independent, intellectual woman who questions the very nature of the quest which the protagonist has so painstakingly described in the preceding pages. She does not cast doubt on the truthfulness of Bradley's story, as do the other characters' postscripts, but she does question the validity of the quest he has presented as the central event of his sad life.

Bradley's sister Priscilla, like Sadie in *Under the Net*, plays a peripheral role in the story by acting as a catalyst who precipitates critical events in Bradley's selfish quest. Priscilla's unexpected arrival at Bradley's flat forces him to stay in London in the first place. Her extended stay leads to many crucial events, including Bradley's lie to Julian and Arnold's murder. While Priscilla's presence leads to many of the novel's devastating

events, her most important function is to lead Bradley to recognize his extreme selfishness after her death. As much as Bradley attempts to avoid caring for his depressed sister early in the novel, he is constantly thrust into situations which force him to consider her. In the end, he deeply regrets his failure to save her, much as Jake Donaghue regrets his failure to see Finn as a whole person: "I would not wish it to seem at the end that I have . . . somehow forgotten the real being of those who have figured as my characters. . . . Priscilla. May I never in my thought knit up the precise and random detail of her wretchedness so as to forget that her death was not a necessity" (*BP* 392). When Bradley was frantically pursuing Julian, he would not see Priscilla as a real, suffering human being; he could only view her as an encumbrance to his own selfish goals. Later, in prison, Bradley cites this attitude as his deepest regret. His sister's needless death helps Bradley to recognize his selfish acts and, ultimately, this recognition enables him to reach his goal of Murdochean love. Like *Under the Net's* Sadie Quentin, who plays a small but pivotal role in helping Jake to see the truth of his misguided life, Priscilla, too, leads Bradley to the recognition of his selfish failures.

Then, at last, there is Rachel Baffin, who is as much a hag as any feminine character Murdoch has invented. She often bears a physical resemblance to the evil women of medieval fiction with her swollen eyes, tangled hair, and incessant screaming. Her ugliness always manifests itself after she has done something particularly horrible, such as attempting to seduce Bradley or murdering her husband. Rachel does not always appear horrible; she vacillates between extremes of looking tidy and "handsome" (*BP* 34) and extremes of ugliness. But the descriptions of her hideous moments are much more detailed than anything else said about her physical appearance, which is characteristic of the descriptions of hags in medieval tales. For instance, in *The Mabinogion*, while beautiful women are often vaguely described, the hags are presented in minute detail, as

are the hags of Gloucester in “Peredur Son of Evrawg.” And, like Peredur’s hags, Rachel constantly attempts to thwart the quest of the protagonist.

Rachel lives up to her hag-like descriptions with her malicious actions, which serve to undermine Bradley’s quest. Near the beginning of the novel, she fails to seduce Bradley, as he remains impotent before her sagging flesh. Rachel’s jealousy toward Bradley’s involvement with Julian is virulent: after Julian leaves for Europe, Rachel turns up at Bradley’s flat under the pretense of offering him condolences for his sister. Her true mission reveals itself when she says, “You’re simply absurd. . . . A couple of weeks ago you were kissing me passionately and lying beside me in bed. Now you expect me to believe that you’ve developed a lifelong passion for my daughter in the space of four days. . . . One would think that some sort of dignity or tact or ordinary human gentleness would check this outpouring. . . . You do *remember* being in bed with me, don’t you?” (BP 357). However, her false condolences for Priscilla, paired with her violent outburst at Bradley with regard to her own thwarted passion for him, illustrate her own lack of “ordinary human gentleness.” She displays no real regard for Bradley’s pain, despite the fact that she counted him among her “real friends” (BP 139) earlier in the novel. At the same time, Rachel also suffers a violent jealousy due to her husband’s philandering with Bradley’s ex-wife. She finally takes her revenge on both men by murdering her husband and then falsely accusing Bradley of the crime. She assumes the role of the suffering madonna in her postscript, where her regard for Bradley’s novel as an “‘adolescent’ fantasy” (BP 403) and her numerous statements with regard to the lack of women in Bradley’s life—she calls him a “‘Peter Pan’ type” (BP 403)—strongly contrast with Julian’s account of the events, and thus reveal Rachel’s desperate attempt to conceal the truth and save herself further embarrassment due to both Bradley’s and Arnold’s rejection of her.

But, just as Peredur overcomes every challenge presented to him by the black hag in order to fulfill his heroic quest, Bradley’s quest for love is sealed by overcoming the

wickedness of Rachel's act. Bradley does not destroy Rachel, as Peredur does the hags of Gloucester, but he does destroy his negative feelings toward her, an act which proves his ultimate success at achieving Murdoch's ideal of love. Bradley accepts his fate, Christ-like, and even tries to forgive Rachel: "I do not exactly 'blame,' though neither do I 'condone' I have 'let her off' In some blank way I even wish her well. . . . In fact she was an instrument which did me a very great service" (*BP* 383). While he cannot condone her actions, he can extend his discovery of Murdoch's concept of love even to the woman that caused his final misery—which, paradoxically, has also led to his artistic fulfillment. Thus, although Rachel's main aim is to destroy Bradley Pearson due to her own sexual jealousy, she really ends up speeding him on his way to the fulfillment his true quest.

In *The Good Apprentice*, Edward is also affected by a trio of women. This trio is composed of the caretakers of Seegard: Jesse's wife, Mother May, and their two daughters, Ilona and Bettina. There is something mysterious about these women which Edward notices straight away; in fact, when he first sees them, he is unsure if they are real: "And then he saw, near to the door, and flattened against the twilit wall, painted there as a frieze or set up as statues, three women" (*GA* 99). They seem almost magical as they flutter about their "castle," living close to the earth—they are all vegetarians, and live simply, making their own clothes and rarely venturing into the outside world. Edward feels their mysterious life-giving force, as he works hard at the tasks they assign to him and feels his misery slowly dissipating. All of them, especially Mother May, resemble the character of Gwenhwyvar in *The Mabinogion*, whose wisdom and sense of fairness often save her husband, Arthur, from the excesses of his own ego. In like manner, the Seegard women encourage Edward to overcome the selfish misery which inactivity inspires by providing him with physical labor to lessen his pain. However, as the novel progresses, these three women begin to reveal their true natures. Rather than being three

personifications of the life-giving earth mother, the Seegard women actually take on the roles of the opposing feminine types described earlier: Mother May and Bettina are the evil, undermining hags, while Ilona represents the strong and redemptive life force.

Mother May begins to reveal her true nature after Edward discovers Jesse locked in Seegard's tower. Through her lies, she undermines both Edward's quest to discover his father and Jesse's need for contact with the outside world. She cannot admit her shame and so keeps her insane husband locked up. She constantly admonishes Edward for his interest in the older man, and incessantly reminds the younger man that "we know what is best for [Jesse]" (GA 189). Mother May seeks to control everyone around her: she keeps Jesse hidden, dictating when he can leave his room, eat, and see people; she dictates the schedule at Seegard, assigning tasks to her daughters and Edward with a militaristic efficiency. Unlike Rachel in *The Black Prince*, Mother May's physical appearance does not reveal her evil nature—she is often described as a radiant, beautiful woman. However, Mother May's beauty is a deceptive mask which conceals her malicious personality. When Jesse finally escapes to his death, she accuses Edward: "You have brought death into this house, you killed your friend, you came here with stained hands, you brought death with you, Jesse saw him sitting beside you at the table" (GA 438). Mother May's deceptive nature is revealed in this comment: upon Edward's arrival at Seegard, she tells him that she invited him in order to relieve the misery of Mark's death, and later she accuses him of killing Jesse by bringing the memory of that unfortunate incident to Seegard. By this time, Edward is well on his way to abandoning his own selfish fantasies, and implores Mother May to see the truth as well: "It's true . . . he's *dead*, why do *torture me by pretending?*" (GA 438). But she cannot, and Edward leaves Seegard immediately. While Mother May clearly plays the role of hag, she is also a catalyst; without her cruel concealment of her husband, Edward would never have felt the impetus

to save the sick man, and rescuing Jesse from this indignity contributes to Edward's eventual abandonment of his self-inflicted guilt.

Bettina, the older Baltram daughter, is a slavish imitation of her mother. She is cowardly and bossy, doing anything to further Mother May's will. She constantly echoes May's sentiments, especially when she is seeking to belittle Edward or Ilona. When Edward is being admonished by May for sneaking into Jesse's room, Bettina echoes her mother with a chorus of simplistic, affirming comments (*GA* 185-88). Ilona, however, grows more and more silent during this interview, and when Edward asks what she thinks, she bursts into tears. Bettina responds to this show of emotion, so different from the coldness of herself and May, by saying, "Oh shut up, Ilona" (*GA* 189). Bettina abuses Ilona for her refusal to agree with the rest of the family regarding Jesse's fate, supporting May's desire to keep the sick man cloistered and out of sight.

The unity of Mother May and Bettina is emphasized after Jesse's escape is discovered, when they "were both sitting upon the sofa and had unconsciously adopted identical postures, their hands, with fingers spread, upon their knees" while "Ilona stood by the fireplace, fidgeting," clearly not united with her family (*GA* 317). After Jesse's death, Edward returns to Seegard to check on the well-being of the young women; he finds Bettina on her own. Even by herself, she echoes Mother May's words, telling him that Jesse never knew who Edward was, and telling him that "some people just bring disasters about" (*GA* 477), just as Mother May accused Edward of bringing death with him to Seegard. Together, May and Bettina attempt to undermine both Edward's and Ilona's desire to rescue Jesse.

By contrast, the younger daughter, Ilona, is somehow liberated by Edward's arrival, and her quiet rebellion against her oppressive family keeps Edward from despair. As illustrated above, she does not share her family's detachment from Jesse's debilitated state, and she and Edward form a quiet alliance against May and Bettina. It is Ilona who

tells Edward of May's true motivation for keeping Jesse—and his paintings—locked up: “‘They’re keeping [the paintings] till he’s dead,’ said Ilona. ‘They’ll be worth more than’” (GA 197). Ilona is the only one among the three women who is always honest with Edward, agreeing with him about Jesse's illness and his need to be in contact with the people he loves instead of remaining cooped up in Seegard's tower. Ilona's role as life-giver is emphasized by her relationship with Edward and Jesse. Even though Mother May has forbidden her from seeing her father, he still remembers her, even through his senile haze. In fact, after he has recognized Edward as the one who will save him from the indignity of imprisonment, he suggests to Edward that he and Ilona marry, thus bestowing honor upon them both. Jesse's memories of Ilona are fond and he wishes to see her, despite May's orders, and the fact that he imagines Ilona and Edward as two parts of his life-giving force is testament to her power. Jesse wishes to unite the pair because they embody the qualities he has lost because of his illness: Ilona, as a mysterious, life-giving female, reminds Jesse of his previous creative powers, while Edward's solid, linear searching reminds him of his lost sanity. Being brother and sister, Edward and Ilona cannot marry, but they represent elements of the *anima* and *animus* which Jesse must integrate and regain in order to die with dignity. Ilona has supported him up to now with her love; but Jesse, too, has waited all his life to meet his estranged son and thus complete the picture. Edward and Ilona do unite with the common aim of restoring Jesse's dignity: Edward keeps Ilona apprised of Jesse's condition after his clandestine visits, and the two often sheds private tears over their father's fate. Their union is similar to the marriages found in *The Mabinogion*, in which the non-linear, natural woman unites with the linear, questing male to save a kingdom, such as Owein and the Countess or Pwyll and Rhiannon. Even though Edward and Ilona cannot marry, their alliance is crucial to saving their father.

In medieval literature, the life-giving feminine force is often paired with nature: Branwen and Rhiannon, for instance, have special power over animals, and Owein's

feminine savior emerges from the middle of the forest. In *The Good Apprentice*, Ilona too fits this description. At one point, after visiting Jesse in his cloister, Edward tells the women that Jesse has asked that the poplar trees outside the house not be cut down, as they hold many happy memories for him. Bettina and Mother May are adamant about the necessity of removing the trees; Ilona, however, begs for them to be spared: “‘I love those trees,’ said Ilona, ‘I think it’s terrible to cut down trees’” (GA 196). Earlier in the novel, while Edward is exploring the woods behind the house, he secretly watches Ilona as she performs a strange, mystical dance, alone in the middle of the forest:

What it looked like was that Ilona was lifted from the ground by some superior force . . . and was conveyed to and fro over the grass. . . . Once or twice it seemed as if, like a leaf, she was about to be blown away altogether and to disappear floating in the wood. . . . It was a dance of joy, becoming slower and sadder toward the end. . . . She began to move, not exactly wearily, for the precision of the movement remained, but as if, by flowing gestures of her hands and her whole body, she were casting away something, like a garment, in which she had been briefly clothed. (GA 157)

This strange ritual ends with Ilona leaving an offering of flowers at the foot of the plinth before which she has performed her dance. This act is extremely primitive and natural, emphasized by Ilona’s bare feet and communion with the wooded scene. She appears like a nymph, a delicate feminine embodiment of the natural world. After all of the tragedies unfold at Seegard, including Jesse’s death and May’s breakdown, Ilona escapes to London, where she becomes another kind of dancer: a stripper in Soho. Edward observes this dance too, but this time he does not hide, as Ilona has invited him “only to demonstrate that she was not ashamed” (GA 463). Torn from her natural environment, Ilona’s dancing here is revealed to be pathetic: “*She could not dance. . . . Her nakedness was pitiful, touching like that of a child. . . . What in the other girls had seemed simply ugly and vulgar, here shone out as something sublimely obscene*” (GA 464). Ilona,

absenting herself from the prison of Seegard, has now imprisoned herself for money as a Soho stripper. Edward pleads with her to come with him, but she will listen to others no longer. She quickly escapes the obscenity of this unnatural dancing to pursue her own career in Paris. Although Ilona's brief stint as a stripper is clearly unnatural, taking the job has been her own decision—a decision she quickly realizes is wrong. Thus, she escapes the oppression of England altogether—Jesse, Bettina, Mother May, even Edward—to find her independence in Paris. She escapes, finally, without permission from her mother, the approval of her slavish sister, or the knowledge of Edward. Like Julian Baffin, Ilona matures throughout the course of the novel from a naive young girl to an independent woman. While she helps Edward to keep his faith during his stay at Seegard, in the end she abandons everyone to pursue her own quest.

In *The Green Knight*, there are several different women who play a healing, catalytic role in relationship to the protagonists. First, as discussed earlier, Sefton and Aleph succeed in drawing out Harvey and Lucas through the feminine powers of healing and true love. Moy, however, is much more complex: like Ilona in *The Good Apprentice*, and the various feminine enchantresses in *The Mabinogion*, she is clearly an earth-mother type, who inspires her family to vegetarianism and intimately loves animals and even rocks. Moy is the one character in all of Murdoch's novels who fully personifies Murdoch's conception of love, and her absolute characterization of that love in some ways illustrates the impossibility of fully attaining it. Everything is deeply important and magical to Moy. She even empathizes with the rocks on her bedroom shelves, which she imagines to be pining for their homes: "Now the conical stone with its yellow message was exhibited, dusty as in a museum, in a little rainless room, among other random captives. How unhappy it must be. And she thought of the grey rock far away, lonely in the night and the day, the sun and the storm. Tears came into her eyes" (*GK* 261). Because Moy has achieved this elevated state of Murdochean love, she is in a state of continuous pain.

She realizes that she cannot possibly serve and aid everyone who seems to be in need of help. She experiences everyone's pain, and she is in a constant state of emotional excitement.

Moy's extreme sensitivity leads Louise, her mother, to worry constantly about her daughter's sanity, even after her own epiphany at the end of the novel: "I think Moy is going mad. . . . It's probably my madness. She cries a lot" (*GK* 455). Louise mistakes her own selfish neurosis for Moy's sensitivity; even she cannot understand her own daughter's extreme accomplishment of Murdochean love. However, Moy has an outlet that Louise does not: art. She locks herself away in her room to paint, to rid herself of the constant pain she experiences because of her overdeveloped sensitivity. But in the end, even Moy's art cannot save her from the depths of her empathetic depression, which is made worse by her unrequited love for Harvey. At Bellamy's cottage by the sea, after returning the yellow stone to its proper home, Moy casts herself into the ocean because "there were no more pleasures now in life, her stones knew it, they were dead" (*GK* 467). Moy has not been able to save Harvey or Peter or her mother; other people have stolen her role. Thus, her joy is gone; even her stones give her no happiness. In the end, Moy cannot save anyone else, and instead must herself be saved; and who better to save her than Bellamy, himself recently returned from the brink of emotional excess? Thus, in being defeated by her suffering, Moy, too, serves as a catalyst for the realization of Bellamy's quest to belong. He and Anax plunge into the icy water to rescue Moy, and, through this unselfish act, Bellamy's own realization of love is completed. He thinks, "I've got so much to do. . . . I'll look after Moy" (*GK* 472).

Murdoch's feminine characters do often serve to expedite and encourage the quest fulfillment of the masculine protagonists. However, they function as more than one-dimensional props in support of male success; they also exhibit strength and wills of their own, as they often desert the male characters to live their own lives and possess a

profound intelligence illustrated by their status as artists or intellectuals. Unlike Enid in *The Mabinogion*, Murdoch's women go far beyond the traditional role of supporter: they are often fully developed characters in their own right, experiencing pain and setbacks similar to those of the questing male heroes.

Woman and Destructive Fantasy

That Murdoch's feminine characters are one-dimensional can also be refuted by the range of personality and action they are afforded in the novels. They are not all "inarticulate, unselfish mothers of large families" (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 53), or simple, uninteresting paragons of naive goodness, as Seiler-Franklin seems to imply (38, 84). While Murdoch's women often function to help the male protagonists overcome their selfish fantasies, they, too, are plagued by such fantasies which they must overcome independently. As they help the male protagonist on his way to overcoming his own self-centered illusions—which oftentimes are centered on them—the women have their own illusions to dismantle, with no helpful, pixie-like catalyst to help. In the twentieth century, when women have an autonomy virtually unknown to medieval females, it is fitting that they, like men, should have their own burdens to overcome. Unlike Enid and Rhiannon, whose wills, in the end, are controlled by the male characters, Murdoch's women have a much more complex role to fulfill in the post-modern world.

In *Under the Net*, for instance, Sadie does not simply function to present Jake with the opportunities he needs to complete his quest. As Jake lies to himself about Anna, Sadie too is deceived by her romantic obsession with him. Jake never notices her, and even when Hugo tells him of Sadie's attraction, Jake is struck with disbelief, immersed as he has been in his chases after Anna and Hugo. Sadie is as selfish and false in her pursuit of love as Jake, relying on her beauty and fame to try and seduce him. She runs from one extreme to the other, one minute fawning innocently over Jake in a beauty salon, and the

next locking him in her flat under the pretense that she needs a guard. Sadie cannot differentiate between her masked life as a movie star and her real life away from the camera; she needs to create drama wherever she is, calling attention to her beauty and charm. Jake frustrates her, so her attempts to win him grow ever more drastic: her next trick is to steal the manuscript of Jake's latest Breteuil translation and attempt to sell it to a film producer. Although Sadie's character is not as developed as Jake's—her actual physical appearance in the novel is very brief—she too appears to reach some recognition of reality by the novel's conclusion. This is illustrated in the letter she sends to Jake, in which she stops leading him on about Mars's ransom, suggesting that he purchase the dog, and she surrenders Jake's manuscript to him with no mention of the silly romantic game she has indulged in. She addresses it briefly at the end of the letter: "Let's meet again. . . . Tho' heaven *only* knows when that will be. . . . I have a long and tender memory" (UN 249). No longer forcing herself on Jake, she leaves herself open to his choice, thus acknowledging his humanness by allowing him to decide whether or not they should meet, rather than attempting to force her presence upon him by ridiculous means.

In *The Black Prince*, while Julian is certainly the most important contributor to Bradley's ability to overcome his egotism, she also spends a considerable amount of time feeding his destructive fantasies—and constructing some of her own. She blindly follows Bradley, which is not unusual for a young girl infatuated by a much older man. However, she fails to recognize it as infatuation, and erroneously calls it love, thus feeding Bradley's fancy, as their discussion after Bradley's vomiting episode illustrates. At first, even Bradley fears the shallowness of her immature affection, and after her declaration of love he says to her:

"You have . . . loved me, when you were a little ignorant innocent child and I was an impressive visitor. . . . Now you are an adult and I am a man, a good deal your senior, but suddenly seen as inhabiting the same adult world. . . . What in this new situation do

you do with your old feeling of affection for the man whom the child used to admire? . . . You have felt impelled to make a counter-statement . . . which you will certainly regret tomorrow.”
(BP 271-72)

As discussed above, despite his initial knowledge of Julian’s immature emotions, he later allows himself to be carried away by his long-denied sexuality. Julian feeds this selfish urge of Bradley’s as well, as she intentionally dresses up as Hamlet at Patara to rouse Bradley by bringing back to mind their first romantic encounter at his flat. But when Julian unwittingly experiences Bradley’s violent sexuality, she begins to question her relationship to the older man, even before discovering his deception about Priscilla’s death. This doubt is expressed first by Julian’s tears after their lovemaking, and later by her comment to Bradley that she “just feels shattered and empty” (BP 331). Later, Julian’s negative feelings are justified when she discovers the ugliness of Bradley’s lie to her; she denies him admittance to their bed, and by morning has disappeared. In her postscript at the end of the novel, Julian justly describes her experience, recognizing it as an immature fantasy which nonetheless seemed quite important to her at the time:

“Centuries separate me from these events. I see them as diminished and myself there as a child. . . . I think the child I was loved the man Pearson was. But this was a love which words cannot describe. Certainly his words do not” (BP 409-11). In comparison to Sadie in *Under the Net*, who also displays a tendency toward indulgence in selfish illusion, and unlike the limited, severely controlled women in *The Mabinogion*, Julian is a much more rounded character who does actually develop into a full human being by the novel’s conclusion. She, like Bradley, has overcome her own destructive fantasies with regard to romantic love, and she too is able to be an artistic success.

In *The Good Apprentice*, the feminine character most deeply afflicted by destructive fantasy is Mother May, who combines her shame for her ill husband with greed fueled by the money his paintings will bring after his death. Her immersion in her own

self-centered fantasies is also revealed when, after Edward discovers Jesse's body submerged in the stream behind Seegard, she immediately blames Jesse's son for causing her husband's demise rather than considering how her own obsessive need for control, manifested in her imprisonment of Jesse—as well as her refusal to call a doctor—may have affected his decline. Her daughter Bettina is afflicted by similar problems: unable to think on her own, she imitates and follows her mother's every instruction, thus immersing herself in a false world of power and manipulation. These two women are unable to overcome their problems by the novel's end, as evidenced in Edward's last conversation with Bettina, where she continues to parrot Mother May's accusatory statements concerning Jesse's death. In *The Good Apprentice*, only Ilona possesses the strength to move beyond the manipulative confines of her family home; she engineers her own escape without anyone's, even Edward's, help. By her final appearance in the novel, she correctly assesses her relationship to her mother and sister when she says, "They don't need me. . . . I have to follow my own path now" (GA 455).

The women in this novel illustrate two major elements of Murdoch's female characters: first, the selfish obsessions of Mother May and Bettina point to a kind of equanimity in Murdoch's work because, like Sadie and Madge in *Under the Net* and Rachel in *The Black Prince*, women as well as men suffer from destructive fantasy as they pursue malicious, selfish goals like those of the masculine heroes. But, like Julian in *The Black Prince*, Ilona comes to realize her responsibility to overcome the destructive fantasy which has afflicted her family for too long, thus proving that Murdoch does create female characters who develop throughout the course of a novel rather than remaining simplistic and one-dimensional. True, many of the protagonists are masculine, but they are not the only characters to mature, develop, and overcome, as Seiler-Franklin's book asserts.

Other than Julian Baffin in *The Black Prince*, *The Green Knight*'s Louise Anderson is Murdoch's most fully realized female character. Her destructive obsession

stems from her overwhelming need to control the rate at which her daughters mature because she fears being left alone. However, like the true questing hero, she is able to recognize the folly of her ways by the conclusion of the novel, after enduring the ordeal of losing her oldest daughter, Aleph. Although she is still deeply concerned about her girls, she gradually becomes able to give loving attention to the world once again and successfully completes her quest to let go of her grown children. The difficulty she has in letting go of the three young women is rooted in her inability to get over the death of her husband, which is illustrated in the plaintive way in which she calls upon his memory and often speaks directly to him in times of trouble, as when Aleph has disappeared. However, Aleph's disappearance, while obviously upsetting to Louise, provides her with a much-needed shock: the situation, and her daughter's life, have been forced out of her control. Armed with this realization, she pursues Clement Graffe to his empty theater, where they begin a long-anticipated courtship which ends in their marriage. The sudden reality of Aleph's absence functions to shock Louise out of her selfish obsession with her own loneliness, as she discovers, somewhat reluctantly, that her involvement with the world is a matter she must solve for herself. Having first sought Clement for help during Aleph's disappearance, she later is able to realize his deep feelings for her, and to recognize the necessity of rejoining the world in order to realize her full potential for Murdochean love: rather than standing alone at her bedroom window, as she does throughout the novel when she indulges in her solitary despair, we last see Louise standing before the seaside cottage's window, firmly joined to Clement's side.

Woman as a Creator of Fools

In her study of Murdoch's work, Johnson has asserted that "the women in her fictions are often given the role of undermining (comically or tragically) [the male narrators'] sustaining fictions" (6). In this way, the women serve to remind the men to

recognize the functions of the *anima* in order to accept the chaotic, unpredictable nature of the world. As Rhiannon outsmarts Pwyll on her ambling mount, many of Murdoch's women serve to undercut the serious approach the male protagonists take to their self-proclaimed quests by consistently making them look ridiculous—sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. An example of this feminine undercutting in *Under the Net* is the episode already discussed, when Jake desperately pursues Anna through the streets of Paris, only to discover that the woman he has been chasing is a complete stranger. In *The Black Prince*, Julian in her Hamlet garb accomplishes a similar feat at Bradley's expense. His selfish boorishness is emphasized by her innocent willingness to submit to him; her tears after their violent lovemaking underline Bradley's role as a self-centered churl interested only in his own gratification rather than the profound lover he believes himself to be. Julian's departure soon afterward also makes Bradley look like a fool, as does his frantic search for her upon returning to London, even after she has written to tell him their relationship is over. Julian, in her youthful innocence and honesty, serves as a foil to Bradley's deceptive, conniving actions.

Early in the novel, Rachel, Julian's mother, has a sexual encounter with Bradley, although her experience differs greatly from Julian's near-rape. In this case, Bradley fails completely to get an erection in Rachel's plump, naked presence. Bradley feels keen embarrassment during this scene, describing his awkward clothed presence next to "a panting naked woman" (*BP* 158). Like the vomiting episode outside the opera house, this episode reveals Bradley's inability to deal with extraordinary events, contrasted by Rachel's calm acceptance of the situation.

In *The Green Knight*, Moy's absolute achievement of Murdoch's love completely undermines Bellamy's self-conscious attempt at monasticism: his failure to recognize the necessity of human contact contrasts sharply with Moy's universal empathy. Their coming together at the novel's conclusion is imminent, as Moy's painful obsession with

Murdochean love is leading her to despair, while Bellamy's renewed joy with the world allows him to save her, both literally and figuratively. In Moy's simple, unconscious and absolute success, Bellamy finds his strength, and is able to leave behind his own, more self-conscious attempt at goodness.

Also in *The Green Knight*, Sefton's rational, intelligent approach to love deflates Harvey's excessive enthusiasm, thus making him appear naive and childish when compared to her graceful maturity. When Harvey yearns for the consummation of his relationship to Sefton, she cautions him: "You don't understand, I'm not denying or tormenting, we must prove this thing, we must respect it" (GK 383). Sefton is not trying to ignore her love for Harvey, as he suggests. Rather, she is trying to avoid becoming mired in the destructive fantasy she engaged in with relationship to Lucas, and which she has seen in the failed romantic relationships around her, including her mother's heretofore unfulfilled attraction to Clement Graffe. As opposed to Harvey's desperate desire to rush their relationship to its inevitable pinnacle, Sefton wants to be sure that they are not only seeking to fill a void of loneliness, but are really concerned with the well-being of one another.

While Murdoch may often rely on the masculine narrator to lead her tales, women also play a substantial role in emphasizing the error of these men's selfish obsessions and denial of Murdoch's concept of love. Just as Rhiannon patiently waits for Pwyll to understand the nature of her ways, the profound calmness or unconscious innocence of Murdoch's women emphasizes the silliness of the frantic, linear quests of the masculine characters.

This feminine undermining of male lust and linear pursuits illustrates the nature of the women in Murdoch's works: while not all of them are morally superior to the men, many wield considerable power which forces the men to reconsider their status as questing heroes. Through the influence of these feminine characters, the masculine protagonists

begin to recognize the necessity of surrendering to the uncontrollable forces of the world—one of those uncontrollable forces being the independent wills of members of the opposite sex. Here Murdoch parts company with the twentieth century's existential portrayal of women, in which "the heroic male consciousness . . . is particularly inclined to see the women it loves as objects in its mental landscape; their importance lies in the shape and direction which they give the all-absorbing quest" due to the hero's "existential quest and the isolated heroic questing consciousness" (Johnson 7-8). Murdoch's heroes often begin the novels viewing women in this light, but after being made foolish by them, especially with relationship to their selfish masculine sexuality, and by thinking about the situations presented to them by the women, they soon begin to reassess their relationship to the feminine and, indeed, the world.

Chapter 3

The Absolute: Integration through Murdochean Love

In Murdoch's novels, the weak protagonist is often attracted to a character who embodies an absolute quality. This quality opposes the developing virtue of the protagonists: it makes the absolute appear settled, peaceful, and unchanging in the doubtful face of the protagonist's tumultuous growth. Sometimes, however, the absolute quality represented by this character encourages the protagonist's destructive fantasies and must be confronted and overcome in order for the quest to be fulfilled. Thus, these absolute characters in Murdoch's novels often play a complex double role, as both the hero's redemptive alter-ego and haunting shadow. These figures at once resemble such traditional types as the fallen Lancelot's son Galahad, who possesses "pristine perfection" (Zimmer 180), and the terror-mongering Grendel at Heorot.

In *The Saint and the Artist*, Conradi describes the goodness of Hugo Belfounder in *Under the Net*: "Hugo is an absolute, the thing [goodness] itself, not a synthesis of the peculiar means and cumbersome devices human beings use to get there" (56). Jake, by contrast, is completely overloaded with his wrong-headed attempts to attain goodness, hence the absurd acts he performs throughout the novel to gain attention and force his wordy overexplanations. This is why Hugo is so appealing to Jake: Hugo has, it seems to Jake, attained the calm ability to accept the contingent nature of the world which Jake so desperately seeks.

Conradi further suggests that Hugo's "power in the book is seriously challenged by the verve and development of Jake as an attractive, finally positive character who may work in the right direction. Jake is interestingly in process, testing the means whereby he can achieve the end of knowing reality, whereas Hugo despite his apparent confusion symbolizes the end itself" (*Saint* 57). Since Jake is the main character of the novel, the reader is meant to follow his progress instead of Hugo's. And, since Hugo personifies

absolute goodness, he has presumably gone through his discovery process already, as his abandoned, destructive pursuit of Sadie Quentin exemplifies. Nonetheless, he is far more advanced in his quest for goodness than Jake, and as such functions as an ideal for the protagonist. Hugo is the person who ultimately inspires Jake as to the possibility of his own goodness.

Bradley has a similar relationship to P. Loxias, who is barely described in the novel except in terms of his influence on Bradley. Loxias has mastered the abstract art of music, which Bradley admires because it is not encumbered with the limitations of language. As Hugo is an absolute of goodness to which Jake can aspire in *Under the Net*, Loxias is the artistic absolute to Bradley's literary goals. In his postscript, Bradley calls Loxias "the crown of my quest" (BP 391). Through Loxias, Bradley sees the possibility of artistic mastery, despite the oppressive atmosphere of the prison.

In *The Good Apprentice*, Jesse Baltram personifies for Edward the absolute of suffering: he is a once-brilliant man who has been robbed of his artistic talent by madness. Virtually unable to speak due to his debilitating illness, his suffering pierces Edward the first time they meet, as Jesse pleads with his eyes for compassion—which has been noticeably lacking from Mother May: "Edward, shuddering with emotion, approached the bed and stopped. The red lips, a little frothy, moved, but no sound came. The large eyes besought Edward to hear, to respond. . . . Edward took the weak white hand in his. Then he knelt down beside the bed and buried his face in the blanket. He felt the other hand touch his hair. He burst into tears" (GA 184). Edward's strong emotions are to be expected, as this is the first contact he has had with his father in many years. However, Jesse represents something beyond the paternal role in a prodigal son parable: in him, Edward finds a physical reflection of his own inward existence. Rather than personifying the absolute of what the protagonist aspires to be, as Hugo and Loxias relate to Jake and Bradley, Jesse embodies the absolute of Edward's destructive fantasy. The outward chaos

of Jesse's physical appearance—his wild eyes, disheveled hair, tangled beard, tattered pajamas—parallels the chaos of Edward's tormented psyche. After witnessing the misery of his once-proud, once-dynamic father, speechless and imprisoned by his own family, Edward casts his self-pity aside to relieve this absolute suffering. Soon after his initial encounter with Jesse, Edward begins to understand his mission at Seegard. He must forget his selfish guilt in favor of involving himself deeply in another's life. "And why can't I leave, he thought, what keeps me here? Jesse, love for him, pity, duty. . . . I thought I was mad because I was in love with Mark and couldn't go on living. Wasn't that why I came here? To lose the old hated self and be given a new one by magic. I was in love with Mark—and now I'm in love with Jesse. Is that my cure, my healing, my longed for absolution?" (GA 201-2) At this point, Edward begins to realize that he must leave his obsession with Mark's death behind and move on to help provide his father with dignity before death. Edward's psychological cure lies not in magic, but rather in facing the reality of Jesse's helplessness and his own ability to rescue him from the torment caused by Mother May. Edward's face-to-face encounter with Jesse's visible physical suffering, an indignity so much greater than his own self-imposed guilt, presents to him the necessity of forgetting his own pain in order to achieve the ultimate goodness of Murdochean love.

Just as *The Green Knight* presents a group of heroes rather than a single protagonist, it appropriately possesses a pair of absolute characters: Peter Mir and Lucas Graffe. The two personify opposite ends of morality: Lucas is absolute lack of virtue, while Peter is absolute—if naive and insane—virtue. The violent clash between these two characters leads to the culmination of the other characters' realization of truth. Lucas, whom all of them have admired for years, becomes an object of derision as his treachery is revealed by Peter's insistence on truth-telling. When Peter insists upon re-enacting his near-death at Lucas's hands, thus forcing Lucas to admit the truth of his actions to his

brother Clement, Clement's faith in his long-admired brother is shaken, and he is finally able to shake off Lucas's oppressive influence. Because of this revelation, Clement is able to embrace Louise and thus aid her in abandoning her own selfish despair. The other questing characters do not experience the same direct benefit from the revelation of the truth as Clement; however, after the story of Lucas's deviousness is told, they gradually allow Peter to enter their lives, and each of them benefits from contact with him—except for Lucas, who exiles himself further and further from his social circle. Lucas, always malicious and proud, remains a one-dimensional character, clearly an unchanging personification of absolute evil.

Peter, however, is much more complex: while his generous, understanding actions toward the other characters illustrate a truly unselfish nature (for instance, he searches out and returns Anax to Clifton in his Rolls-Royce when the dog is lost), Peter's deep flaws are uncovered by the end of the novel. At his party, Peter is revealed to be not the rational, intelligent man he seems, but a retired butcher with a profound mental illness. Peter is a liar; however, his infirmity makes him innocent. Peter's illness, with its accompanying irrationality and despair, transfers the blame for his deception to Lucas: it is Lucas's blow to his head which has robbed Peter of his faculties and his profession. Thus, like the wise fool so often seen in medieval tales and the plays of Shakespeare, Peter remains innocent. He is crazy, yes, but the revelation of his illness does not hinder the fact that he has aided many in the fulfillment of their own quests to rejoin the world and develop Murdoch's concept of universal love and acceptance. In spite of his insanity, the help that Peter has afforded the other characters justifies his role as a messenger of truth.

The Absolute as Alter-Ego

In both traditional and post-modern literature, the alter-ego plays an important role in relationship to the protagonist's development. In most older literature, the alter-ego is

a part of the protagonist's personality which he has lost or suppressed; it is "the self reborn . . . the perfect being that we ought to be, that we are striving to become" (Zimmer 180). Thus Galahad, the son of the fallen Lancelot, attains the virtue necessary to gain the Grail. In Murdoch's novels, the alter-ego often exemplifies a similarly positive aspect of the protagonist's personality that his selfish fantasies have suppressed. In other words, the protagonist sees in the absolute an aspect of himself that he has lost and, sometimes, fears he will not be able to regain. Jake's awe of Hugo in *Under the Net* illustrates this tendency. The big man's powerful silence makes the garrulous Jake feel that words are ridiculous as he stands before Hugo for the first time in many years: "A deep distress overcame me. After the dignity of silence and absence, the vulgarity of speech" (UN 143). Hugo's spare eloquence during their tenure together at the cold cure clinic has overshadowed Jake; to Jake, Hugo seems to have knowledge of all explanations, afforded him by his quiet attention to the world as opposed to Jake's endless volubility. Jake is awed by Hugo's silence and belief that language and description make truth "falsified from the start. . . . The language just won't let you present it as it really was" (UN 59). This attitude is directly opposed to Jake's desire to describe everything, and his willingness to color the truth whenever necessary. The pair's contrasting attitudes toward language lead Jake to imagine his dispute with Hugo: Jake feels that he has betrayed his friend by publishing their conversations in the form of *The Silencer*, the shame of which has silenced both Jake's writing ability and his conversations with Hugo.

Because *Under the Net* is centrally concerned with Jake's transformation from translator to artist, this conflict with Hugo is, as Jake puts it, "the central theme of this book" (UN 53). Hugo's distrust of language and ensuing silence allow him to pay close attention to the world, a trait necessary for the good artist; Jake, with his cherished verbosity, is too busy constructing descriptions and explanations to pay the same kind of attention. Conradi defines verbose Jake's curious attachment to the quiet Hugo: "Jake

finds Hugo's puritan suspicion of language not desiccating but life-giving because it is in the service of a love of truth and a love of the real" (*Saint* 37). This "love of the real" is something that Jake has not been able to attain, and his failure to attain it has resulted in his own artistic inability. Thus, when Jake re-establishes contact with Hugo, he chases the big man frantically, hoping to touch his silent genius once again. Jake's attraction to Hugo resembles his attraction to Anna: both are silent and inexplicable, and Jake, being unable to give up his own dependence on language, seeks both of them, hoping to unlock the secret of their acceptance of the inadequacy of linguistic explanation.

In *The Black Prince*, Bradley proclaims his alter-ego to be P. Loxias, the editor of his novel who plays no direct role in the action. Like Jake's speechlessness before Hugo, Bradley is in awe of Loxias's wordless indulgence in the most abstract form of art, music. Contemplating the ambiguous nature of art conveyed through language, Bradley reflects on the superiority of Loxias's art over his own: "In the wordless ultimate regions of your art . . . form and substance hover upon the brink of silence . . . where articulate forms negate themselves and vanish into ecstasy. Whether words can travel that path, through truth, absurdity, simplicity, to silence I do not know" (*BP* 392). As he has already established in his introduction, Bradley is suspicious of garrulity, and thus admires Loxias's ability to accomplish his art purely, without the artifice of language to hinder him.

This reaction to Loxias's music is strikingly different from the violent reaction Bradley had to *Der Rosenkavalier* at the beginning of his relationship with Julian, when he was still beset by the limitations of his own self-centered fantasies. Due to the calm attention and acceptance that life in prison has afforded him, Bradley is able to understand and appreciate music rather than vomit; rather than denying the truth presented to him by the opera's story, Bradley finds in Loxias's music the ultimate truth of art. Significantly, "Loxias" is another name for the god Apollo, who himself is personified as a musician and the guardian of all art forms. Dipple and Conradi have explored the importance of

Loxias's name in relation to Bradley's pained efforts to create art, suggesting that Bradley's suffering parallels the myth of Apollo and Marsyas, in which the mortal challenges the god to a musical competition, loses, and is flayed by the god as a penalty for his hubris. These critics conclude that Bradley's suffering, like that of Marsyas, must be endured in his devotion to transcendent art: "Marsyas always loses, and yet the losing provides the *extasis*, the human achievement and the ultimate contact with divine 'other' reality" (Dipple 110). Through his ordeal, and with the help of Loxias, Bradley has been able to create true art, re-creating the "terrible and absurd" that Murdoch prescribes and developing his own ability to accept contingency and pay close attention to the world. With his novel, he has abandoned the proud hopes with which he began the story, and has created what he hopes is "an honest talk, a simple love story" (*BP* 392).

Bradley's transformation is also exemplified by the fact that Loxias is really his second alter-ego. The first is the late Arnold Baffin, whose prolific writing career is the polar opposite of Bradley's literary silence. Bradley despises Arnold's verbosity, but is jealous of it too, as evidenced in his vacillation between writing bad reviews of Arnold's latest work and his overwhelming desire to re-read everything Arnold has written; he even goes so far as to order all of Arnold's books. But, by the end of the novel, Bradley has done away with his dependence on the written word; this is illustrated by his ambivalence toward writing again. Bradley has replaced Arnold Baffin with an alter-ego whose art is much purer, abandoning the ambiguous tyranny of language for the wordless abstractions of music. Bradley's shift in values is exemplified by these divergent alter-egos: rather than spending his time jealously criticizing the overabundant words of another writer, Bradley instead embraces a wordless, abstract art form which he previously shunned in favor of the finite explanations of language.

In *The Good Apprentice*, Edward searches for Jesse Baltram, his estranged father, in order to discover the mystery of his origins. In returning to his father, Edward believes

that his inner turmoil will be relieved in a manner analogous to the biblical story of the prodigal son. Even though Harry Cone has been a loving and supportive father-figure to him, Edward's tragedy has instilled in him a need to reacquaint himself with his biological father. As a child, Edward never thought of Jesse—"I made him non-exist" (GA 75), he tells Thomas. But his vision of Jesse at the séance, and the subsequent invitation to Seegard, ignite Edward's obsession with meeting his mysterious father; it is in this prodigal return that Edward places all hope for redemption—not only for Mark's death, but also for his lifelong feelings of rootlessness. Upon meeting Jesse for the first time, he feels like "he had understood everything" (GA 184). In meeting his father, Edward is able to rediscover a part of his past that had been lost and, through Jesse, Edward is able to discover the truth of his life: that his incessant feelings of guilt must be abandoned in favor of involving himself in relieving his father's suffering. Like Loxias's influence over Bradley, the power of Jesse's silent presence saves Edward from self-destruction. After his father's death, Edward spreads all of his mementos of Jesse on his dresser; after examining them and reflecting on his brief relationship with Jesse, Edward concludes, "I've got to survive" (GA 515).

In *The Green Knight*, Peter Mir clearly plays the alter-ego role to Lucas Graffe, the man who almost killed him several years before. The two perfectly oppose one another: Lucas is a bookish intellectual, while Peter has made his living with his hands as a butcher; Lucas wishes to conceal the truth and save his family from shame, while Peter sees redemption as possible only through revelation of the truth; Lucas is angry and bitter and violent, while Peter is quiet and just and fair. The two men contrast sharply, and provide the dividing line between the rest of the characters in the novel. At first, the rest of the characters are suspicious of Peter, who lurks around their homes in hopes of making their acquaintance. Later on, he charms all of them, except for Lucas, into believing in him and accepting his never-ending stream of advice. Throughout much of

the novel, Lucas and Peter play the role of complementary characters often found in fairy tales: the wicked stepmother versus the fairy godmother, the caring father versus the hideous beast, the ogre versus the handsome prince. Little by little, Lucas's esteemed standing among his circle of friends is eroded by Peter Mir's charm, as Lucas grows more and more violent and irrational. Peter seems to hold all of them under his spell, and then—in a great Murdochean reversal—he is revealed to be a liar, mired in his own fantasies. And, unlike fairy tales, in which the prince always wins the beautiful princess, it is the evil Lucas who escapes with lovely Aleph, much to the chagrin of Louise and Clement. After both men are gone—Lucas off to America, and Peter dead—Bellamy reflects on the complementary relationship of the two:

We may indeed diminish Peter and make him into a mere nightmare or a retired butcher—but really he is something alien and terrifying. After all, the Green Knight came out from some other form of being, weird and un-Christian, not like Arthur's knights. But he was noble and he knew what justice was—and perhaps justice is greater than the Grail. Lucas came to understand him, and indeed they understood each other, it was as if they were bound together.
(GK 456)

Thus Bellamy realizes the importance of Peter, even though Mir was guilty of certain untruths; while Peter's lies centered on insignificant details of his own life, his realization of larger, more universal truths, and his wise communication of them to the others, saves Clement, Louise, Bellamy—and maybe even Lucas, who leaves the scene of his literal crime to experience rebirth in a new land

The Absolute as Unintentional Manipulator

Because this absolute figure often represents a trait the weak protagonist wants to develop within himself, the hero sometimes desires to be manipulated by his alter-ego, wishing to surrender responsibility for himself to the wisdom of another. In her essay on

Murdoch's characterization, Cheryl Bove considers this fact: "Murdoch's novels . . . contain a number of characters who want to be manipulated by others. . . . [Murdoch says,] 'people are not only manipulated by others but want to be so. . . . People very often elect a god in their lives, they elect somebody whose puppet they want to be, and . . . almost subconsciously are ready to receive suggestions from this person'" (192). This indulgence allows the protagonist to avoid responsibility for his own actions. When things get too complicated, he relies completely on the influence of this other person. Jake is especially guilty of this tendency in his relationship to Hugo. Jake attributes his writer's block to the imagined offense he has caused Hugo by publishing *The Silencer*; after its release, Jake abandons his former life, including Hugo and writing: "I . . . just wished most heartily that all could be as if the accursed book had never been. I stopped going to the cinema, and avoided looking at the more sensational dailies which tended to feature Hugo's activities. It was about now that Finn turned up and attached himself to me, and gradually my life took on a new pattern and the powerful image of Hugo began to fade" (UN 67). Later on, Jake's constant pursuit of Hugo keeps him from attempting to write, and this obsessive pursuit allows Jake to avoid confronting his literary failure. Chasing after Hugo gives Jake an excuse to ignore his artistic quest.

When Jake finally meets up with Hugo in the hospital, it is the tall man who at last points out Jake's silliness, and denies Jake's elevated opinion of him. He tells Jake that he is "far too impressed" by him (UN 221). Immediately after this conversation, Hugo takes leave of Jake to prepare for his apprenticeship up north. Jake is, of course, disturbed by Hugo's departure; he had hoped for a longer meeting and possibly a renewal of their friendship. However, like Anna, Hugo has his own agenda to fulfill, and he leaves Jake on his own. In Hugo's words, "Everyone must go his own way" (UN 221). After Jake's chase of the false Anna in Paris, it is this departure which finally leads him to abandon his dependence on the idealized Hugo, his final destructive fantasy. He realizes this before

Hugo leaves, as they stand outside the hospital: “He wanted to be rid of me. I wanted to be rid of him” (*UN* 236). He allows Hugo to walk away from him; this time he does not chase the tall man. In letting go of his obsession with Hugo, Jake has finally purged himself of his selfish illusions. In the concluding chapter, which follows this incident, Jake finally rediscovers his desire to write and pursue truth through art.

As discussed earlier, in *The Good Apprentice*, Edward simplistically places all of his faith for redemption in his estranged father. But in these reflections, Edward ignores the fact that, unlike the prodigal son, he has not sinned against his father, but only against himself through his selfish obsession with his own emotional distress. Thus, his perceived need for forgiveness from his biological father is completely foolish. However, focusing on Jesse’s power to forgive him does allow Edward to avoid the true, inward source of his guilt, and thus he can displace his own responsibility to redeem himself. This obsession with Jesse is an extension of the accusations Stuart makes near the beginning of the novel, when he tells Edward that there is no “magic solution” and that he must inwardly “think about it in a bit of clear light” (*GA* 45), rather than searching for answers in books and meaningless rituals. Initially, Edward views Jesse precisely as that “magic solution” through which he avoids looking for his own salvation. In the end, Jesse is an instrument of Edward’s redemption, but not in the way that Edward initially expects. Edward expects immediate absolution from his father, but instead receives an opportunity to love and immerse himself in the world outside himself by caring for Jesse, who is not a magical figure, as Edward expects, but rather a weak, diseased man.

Similar to Edward’s foolishly placing his faith in a virtual stranger, *The Green Knight*’s Bellamy places his need for spiritual guidance in the hands of the odd newcomer, Peter Mir. Bellamy describes his attachment to Peter thus: “I saw a path with a light shining on it, I saw everything I’ve been *looking for*—wanting to be in that monastery was a false way—then suddenly at last I found *my way* . . . I felt I had *come home*” (*GK* 363).

Although his relationship to Peter helps Bellamy to realize the falsity of his monastic aspirations, his attachment to Peter is yet another destructive fantasy: extreme, inexplicable, and embarrassing. What Bellamy sees in Peter is a peace of mind which he cannot attain for himself. Upon learning that Peter had been a Buddhist, Bellamy feels vindicated; his dependence on Peter, another ascetic, is justified. After Peter professes his Buddhist beliefs, Bellamy begs for his guidance. Bellamy conveniently ignores the paradox of Peter's opulent house and obvious wealth and follows him anyway, hanging on Peter's every word. This slavish attachment to Peter allows Bellamy to deny the failure of his own pursuits: by adhering to the life and standards of another, he is relieved of having to come to his own conclusions with regard to which lifestyle is most suitable for him. Peter's departure is traumatic for Bellamy; at last, being forced to think for himself, he reconsiders his devotion to asceticism, and joyfully decides to follow his own path back to involvement with the friends he has forsaken, as illustrated by his reclamation of his seaside home and his vow to rescue Moy.

Thus, some protagonists in Murdoch's novels take their dependence on their alter-egos too far and try to shirk their individual responsibility for discovering truth by slavishly adhering to the example and advice of another. This is in direct opposition to Murdoch's idea of freedom and goodness, which stipulates that each person's true path is different; what works for one agent is not necessarily beneficial to another. Plato devalued art precisely because it is an imitation of what is real. While Murdoch does not agree with this view of art, she does believe that the determination of goodness is up to the individual, and that imitation cannot suffice. She has this to say about the unquestioning admiration of another: "The impulse to worship is deep and ambiguous and old. There are false suns, easier to gaze upon and far more comforting than the true one" (*Sovereignty* 100). Thus, the developing individual must painstakingly search for his own truth, rather than imitating the actions of another in hopes of achieving goodness.

The Absolute as the Jungian Shadow

To assert his strength in an unpredictable world, the traditional hero must defeat his nemesis—sometimes a monster, sometimes a hag, sometimes another man. Birenbaum describes the traditional shadow figure as a threat to society's order:

Built as a refuge from the wilderness and from eternal night (both literally and figuratively speaking), the hero's world defends itself against an enemy whose ways are radically unlike its own. The enemy has a form which unmans all those who see only with ordinary eyesight. It has powers beyond those of men, serving a heart which mocks all human vulnerabilities. This is, of course, the monster, who personifies whatever culture (or whatever the conscious mind) abhors and fears. In Jungian terms, it is the *shadow*, looming vestige of the rejected self. (130)

This is Grendel, the monster who terrifies a whole kingdom with his senseless, violent murders of innocent men, attacking in the middle of the night when the kingdom is asleep and vulnerable. This is the Green Knight, who survives decapitation, wearing earthy green garb that illustrates his attachment to the Celtic pagan past which Arthur's Christian world seeks to bury. Shadow figures such as these disturb society's status quo; however, like the feminine characteristics discussed earlier, this character must be confronted and integrated by the hero in order for the quest to be fulfilled. For example, after Gawain admits his decidedly un-Christian deception to the Green Knight, the antagonist himself is transformed into a Christian knight. In this tale, protagonist and antagonist are integrated: Gawain compromises his Christianity by placing faith in a supernatural object, and through their interaction, the Green Knight is released from the pagan spell to become a member of the status quo.

Murdoch infuses this traditional notion of the shadow with her own ideas of love and acceptance. Like the medieval knight, Murdoch's protagonists initially view the shadow as something that must be defeated, and then fulfill their quests by transforming the shadow from a source of fear and loathing into a source of enlightenment and

inspiration. The hero does not use physical violence to defeat the shadow in order to elevate himself, but rather psychologically defeats his fear of the human being upon whom he has projected many negative characteristics. Murdoch's heroes likewise overcome the urge to reduce the shadow to a one-dimensional horror and proceed to establish a sometimes uneasy friendship and admiration for him.

Instead of the physical combat employed by the medieval knight, Murdoch's protagonists integrate the shadow figure through Murdoch's concept of love. The hero recognizes the shadow as a complex human being with needs and flaws similar to his own. Jake's relationship with Hugo exemplifies this point. Jake spends the greater part of *Under the Net* agonizing over his imagined offense toward Hugo because of *The Silencer*, and he vacillates between madly pursuing Hugo and fearing the contact. Even though his actual contact with Hugo is very brief, he comes away from it relieved; he learns that Hugo even admired the novel and could never understand why Jake disappeared so suddenly after its publication. Jake is amazed that Hugo, too, has been suffering from the lack of contact: "I never could see why you cleared off like that before. I wanted to talk to you very much then. There was never anyone I could discuss with like you" (*UN* 220). The friends' final contact affects Jake deeply. Although he doubts he will ever encounter Hugo again, he does not doubt the ongoing value of their relationship: "He towered in my mind like a monolith: an unshaped and undivided stone which men before history had set up for some human purpose which would remain for ever obscure. . . . To have seen him was enough. He was a sign, a portent, a miracle. . . . Had I finished with Hugo?" (*UN* 238) That Jake is not finished with Hugo, or at least not finished with the ideas Hugo has given him to consider, is the final impetus which leads Jake to abandon his dependence upon explanation and the approval of others in favor of his ultimate venture back into the realms of artistic creation.

Another shadow figure who disappears suddenly after slowly befriending the novels' characters is Peter Mir who, after creating a tremendous mystique about himself, is suddenly taken from the close-knit group's grasp. As Hugo Belfounder inspires Jake Donaghue, the shock of Peter Mir's return has afforded many of the novels' characters a new outlook on life due to the overwhelming generosity and kind sympathy he offers. He overcomes an initial aura of distrust to become an object of inspiration and joy to the small social circle which peoples the novel. Peter's "resurrection" from Lucas's blow makes him as alien to the characters in *The Green Knight* as the medieval Green Knight, severed head in hand, is to Arthur's court. As his medieval counterpart reveals himself to be a wise Christian knight in an enchanted disguise, Peter overcomes his negative aura with a sage, forthright wisdom. As the Green Knight ends the tale by praising Gawain for valuing his life, Peter, too, helps the people around him realize the importance of involving themselves with the world. Like Hugo at the end of *Under the Net*, Peter has a lasting impact on the people he has had such brief contact with, and just as Jake will never be finished with Hugo, the multitude of questers in this novel will likewise never be done with Peter Mir. Bellamy illustrates the necessity of remembering Peter near the end of the novel, as he reflects on past events: "Everything had happened so topsy-turvy. It was as if it would take years for [Bellamy] to *understand* what had happened. But what would he be doing during those years, how would he live, would he not simply *forget*? But then how would he exist, having forgotten?" (GK 463). At the end of the novel, Peter is also on the minds of Louise, Clement, and Bellamy; his influence remains with the major protagonists, even after his death. Peter's self-assuredness complements and helps to undo the neuroses of the various characters in *The Green Knight*, just as Hugo's down-to-earth wisdom tempers Jake's tendency toward abstraction and excess in *Under the Net*.

The Absolute as an Ordinary Mortal

An important element of the protagonists' integration of the absolute is the necessity of recognizing him not as a one-dimensional personification of a certain quality, but rather as a multi-faceted human being. While Murdoch does sometimes present the absolute as a shadow figure, she revises the idea of the traditional monster by creating shadow figures who possess many more broad, recognizably human characteristics than the horrific, one-dimensional villains of older literature. Although some of their attributes contribute to the heroes' erroneous perceptions, Murdoch moves beyond this one-dimensional portrayal. In fact, in three of the novels under discussion, the protagonists' realization of the true, frail humanity of each of these shadow figures is integral to the fulfillment of their quest. The attainment of good hinges upon the realization of Murdoch's concept of love, which must be achieved for all beings, no matter how much one hates or fears or even idolizes them. According to Murdoch, love is "the direction of attention . . . away from self . . . towards the great surprising variety of the world" (*Sovereignty* 66). A true vision of reality includes "what is terrible and absurd" (*Fire* 80): this necessity includes a deeper understanding of the absolute figure, upon whom the protagonist has projected many unreal qualities which induce either crippling fear or unrealistic expectations.

Under the Net's Hugo Belfounder is first presented as the ogre that Jake is hired to protect Sadie from; his abrupt manner with Jake on the phone and his towering physique contribute to the initial perception of him as a dark, forbidding figure. However, despite his physical freakishness and daunting silence, Hugo is slowly revealed as a wise, admirable human being who suffers some of the same doubts and weaknesses as Jake, albeit to a lesser degree (such as his fruitless pursuit of Sadie Quentin). After harboring his fear of rejection for so long, Jake finally recognizes Hugo as a normal, failed human being when he observes the big man's injured form being wheeled into the hospital:

His face was dead white and his eyes were closed. . . . My immediate feeling was one of guilt; like Hamlet confronted by the ghost of his father. . . . Together with this I experienced immediately a certain gratification at the thought that as soon as I had ceased to look for Hugo he had been knocked on the head and brought to me. . . . But this idea had no sooner formed that I was overcome with remorse, and nothing mattered to me except the question of how badly Hugo was hurt. (*UN* 210)

This comment reveals the gamut of emotions that Jake feels for Hugo. First, like Hamlet when he sees his father's ghost, Jake feels a sense of intimidation and fear toward Hugo, which has also been exhibited throughout the novel by Jake's silence before the tall man. Jake also feels malicious satisfaction at the thought of his nemesis experiencing defeat because of his injury—significantly, though, it is not Jake who causes the injury, but rather some force outside their relationship. The third emotion Jake feels for Hugo is revealed in the last sentence, where Jake admits to caring for Hugo. In spite of the intimidation and fear Hugo causes him to feel, Jake also feels love for him, and it is the possibility of Hugo's being badly hurt—and possibly taken away from him—that allows Jake to admit to his positive feelings for Hugo. At the same time, Hugo's concussion also makes him more approachable to Jake, who is consumed with the idea of sneaking into Hugo's room to talk to him, risking his job to make contact with the mysterious man. They do make contact, and Jake does lose his job; but his final acceptance of Hugo as a human being, and not as a figure of fear, is the final incident that frees Jake to pursue the art of writing. Hugo's essential humanity is also illustrated the last time we see him: like Jake, Hugo exits the novel to start a new career, having abandoned the wealth he has gained from the fireworks business to begin an apprenticeship as a watchmaker. This switch from tycoon to apprentice also signifies a new start for Hugo, paralleling Jake's rebirth; while Jake will pay deep, loving attention to the world through art, Hugo too will be engaged in a painstaking task—watchmaking—which is, like art, a “task honouring the world's details” (Conradi, *Saint* 45), an idea central to Murdoch's concept of love.

In *The Good Apprentice*, Jesse, like Hugo, also possesses a rather disturbing appearance, as Edward views him for only the second time: the bearded Jesse

nodded his large head several times, opening his very red lips, and gazing at Edward with intent dark rather prominent round eyes. His eyes had a wet jelly-like appearance and seemed to be entirely dark, a reddish brown in colour, with no white area visible. . . . He had indeed still got his teeth and hair . . . the dark hair, though receding a little at the brow, grew into a copious crest and fell in long locks as far as his shoulders. . . . The hands were large and long-fingered, white and blue-veined, covered in long dark hairs which grew down as far as the fingernails. (*GA* 191)

This description, with its mention of Jesse's hairiness and sclera-less eyes, resembles that of a werewolf more than a man, contributing to Jesse's aura of mystery and power. Jesse's appearance feeds both the aura of mystery that Edward has drawn around Jesse and the monstrous tales that the dead Chloe constructed of him when Edward was a child. However, because of his serious mental and physical illness, Jesse is unable to be either the icon which Edward has hoped for or the monster Chloe made him out to be. Jesse is simply an individual afflicted with a mysterious disease, mortal and in need of attention like any other sick person. Edward is eventually able to let go of the fantastic, iconic image he has constructed of Jesse. He is able to come to terms with Jesse's human reality as he recognizes the weakness of the older man: Edward "studied the big head, so close now, discerning squares and hexagons in the wrinkled skin. He became aware of a strong smell, a smell of urine, of sweat, of old age" (*GA* 191). When he was estranged from Jesse in faraway London, it had been easy for Edward to construct fanciful, almost religious images of his father as the force that would save him from self-destruction. However, sitting close by Jesse's sickbed, Edward is forced to accept the truth of Jesse's frailty. When Edward finally comes to terms with this reality, he is much better able to get on with helping Jesse instead of worrying about his own self-centered problems. By

recognizing the truth about Jesse, Edward moves closer toward fulfilling his ultimate quest for forgiveness and renewed involvement with the world.

In Murdoch's latest novel, *Peter Mir*, the green knight of the novel's title, parallels the medieval figure in a number of ways: he seemingly rises from the dead, is always clothed in green garb, and desires just revenge for his injuries. Like Hugo Belfounder, Peter is set apart by his ability to understand the failings of others, and offers the other characters advice which they can use to escape their own selfish obsessions, such as the realizations he offers to Bellamy and Clement. However, when Peter is revealed to be a weak, sick man who has inadvertently deceived them, the other characters are not angry, but rather feel sadness as the hapless man, who has caused such a miraculous upheaval in the lives of so many complacent people, is led off to the mental institution. All of the characters are forced to realize that Peter has been suffering under his own delusions while helping them to overcome theirs: he has lied about his profession and denied his illness throughout the entire novel. The other characters are dumbstruck by Peter's sudden removal, and cannot believe it at first: Bellamy physically tries to prevent him from leaving while Louise and her daughters sob, and the others endlessly quiz the doctors about their credentials. Peter points out the heroes' collective tendency toward destructive fantasy one final time, as he openly acknowledges his weakness and goes willingly to the hospital. He tells them, "This sudden intrusion is probably all for the good, I am forced to realize that I am very tired. . . . I don't want to be in danger of a sudden collapse" (*GK* 354). Even after this revelation, the rest of the characters continue to live by the advice Peter Mir has given them; however, their quests take on a deeper meaning as they give up their dependence on the strange man and learn to find truth on their own.

Thus, while the absolute figures play suspect roles at the start of each novel, they are revealed by the end to be humans just as deserving of loving attention as the protagonists. Rather than being objects for derision and defeat, they are sources of

enlightenment for each hero. Each hero, in the end, aspires to achieve goodness through Murdoch's concept of a love gained through careful attention. Through their deep human contact with these would-be villains, the protagonists are able to gain valuable insight into themselves and their relationship with the rest of the world. This insight, gained through transforming fear and false idolization into love, leads to the heroes' ultimate fulfillment of their quests for virtue.

Conclusion

The Tragicomedy of Human Life

Iris Murdoch skillfully intertwines and adapts the themes of traditional literature to the post-modern novel. Rather than wallowing in the despair of twentieth-century absurdity and isolated existential heroes, Murdoch instead offers a world of hope in her novels—a somewhat unusual phenomenon in recent literary history. Murdoch's focus, like that of many of her contemporaries, is on the individual; however, the individuals she creates are not defeated by an uncaring universe, as opposed to John Irving's cynical John Wheelwright or Ralph Ellison's angry invisible man. Murdoch's heroes themselves are in charge of their success or defeat: they overcome existential despair and twentieth-century urban isolation to immerse themselves in the world seething around them. Like the medieval knight, Murdoch's heroes search for answers to the meaning of their absurdly small lives. In contrast to the despair emphasized by many post-modern novelists, her heroes find that meaning by joining the tumultuous society bubbling around them, rather than withdrawing into a hopeless inner universe.

Reflecting upon the absurdity of human existence, Murdoch's novels are often tragic and comic at the same time. For instance, the exaggerated speed with which the events occur that prevent Bradley Pearson from leaving London creates an almost slapstick atmosphere, as do Bradley's reactions, such as his vomiting episode with Julian and his failed sexual encounter with Rachel. Bradley's continuous, unintentional success at making a fool of himself inspire laughter; however, the tragic accusation he suffers at the novel's conclusion nearly reverses that humor. The deaths and lies and violence occurring at the story's end seem a betrayal of the comedy which precedes them. Charles Arrowby's experiences in *The Sea, the Sea* follow a similar course: the ex-actor is constantly harried by his silly, almost caricatured London theater friends, but the sudden deaths of people he is close to inject the novel with sudden sobriety, making the humorous

moments even more ironic. This pattern of frank humor followed by bitter tragedy resembles the tale of Rhiannon and Pwyll in *The Mabinogion*: when Pwyll first sees Rhiannon on her enchanted steed, his attempts to capture her by traditional means are exaggerated and ridiculous; however, this humorous touch is reversed later in the tale, when Rhiannon is accused of murdering her own son, and Pwyll sentences her to carry visitors into the kingdom on her own back, ironically, like a horse—her status, then, as a Celtic horse goddess serves to both elevate and denigrate her.

Several of Murdoch's novels employ this same technique, mixing joyous, absurd humor with grave tragedy and death. One minute, Murdoch's hero is making a fool of himself; the next, he is reeling from some violent catastrophe. For example, in *The Black Prince*, Bradley's silly schoolboy chase after Julian ceases with Arnold's murder. Martin's transparent manipulations of those around him in *A Severed Head* are thwarted by Georgie's attempted suicide. And in *The Green Knight*, Bellamy's silly, desperate search for a mentor is halted by Peter's death.

These reversals are often the events through which the hero begins to understand the necessity of accepting the chaotic, flawed world as it is. What is humorous is the hero's silly attempt to dominate his surroundings. But sudden, shocking tragedy, robbing him of all control, allows him to recognize his true quest for acceptance by showing him the impossibility of completely overcoming absurdity. Like Rhiannon, the heroes learn to accept their tragic circumstances; and, like Rhiannon, they are rewarded at the novel's end by the fulfillment of their quests. At the end of "Pwyll Lord of Dyved," Rhiannon's patient suffering is finally relieved when the truth of her servants' deception is revealed and her son is returned to her. In like manner, Bradley's patient endurance of his wrongful conviction is redeemed by the completion of his novel; Bellamy's acceptance of Peter's death is compensated for by the renewed love of his friends; Jake's surrender to the finality of Hugo's and Finn's sudden exits is rewarded by the renewal of his artistic

inspiration. The world in Murdoch's novels is utterly beyond human control. While the heroes' frantic attempts to deny this result only in silliness and confusion, patient acceptance of this truth results in inner peace and fulfillment of the quest for truth.

In pursuing the theme that surrender and attention to post-modern life's confusion lead ultimately to the attainment of goodness, Murdoch's novels themselves have become less orchestrated. Instead of focusing on the quest of a single character, Murdoch's novels lately embrace the variety of human life by doing away with the individual protagonist. Instead, they focus on the collective quests of a group of heroes. As a result, these later novels are less contrived and less tidy. The various quests and comedies and tragedies these novels present make for dense, difficult, often confusing plots: *The Book and the Brotherhood* and *The Message to the Planet* pursue three individual quests apiece, and her latest novel, *The Green Knight*, pursues no fewer than eight. While Murdoch has retained the medieval idea of the quest story, she has adapted it to reflect her own twentieth-century concern with developing a deep attention to the world in order to surrender to its chaotic, uncontrollable nature.

The tumult of Murdoch's fictional worlds creates a different energy than that of the traditional quest tale, which follows the journey of a single protagonist. Her novels, especially the later ones, inspire a boundless curiosity: while it is interesting enough to follow her singular characters, her creation of a truer world, containing numerous quests and questers, turns the artist's attention away from the concerns of the solitary individual to exploring the conflicts and reactions of a balanced and varied group of individuals. Her later novels resemble more than ever the real, confused, everyday world around us and, while her characters muddle through their diverse tasks, the possibility for unexpected developments grows with each new character that is introduced. Conradi has rightly called her novels "a densely populated world, full of memorable people and memorable *tableaux*" (Saint 270). *The Green Knight* best fits this description, as each of the many

heroes reaches the same level of complexity and realism, one quest contributing to another as each member of the novel's crowd moves from solitude to community through the grand old houses, parks, and streets of present-day London.

However, despite the tragedy and confusion and absurdity her novels present, her "densely populated world" is really one of hope. That Murdoch has devoted her entire career as a philosopher to postulating how one may achieve goodness already indicates an artist who believes that this achievement is possible. Her novels, then, also present this idea in artistic form: the hero, though beset by loss and humiliation—much like Gawain in his fight with the Green Knight, or Owain's pursuit of the Countess—always winds up fulfilled. Jake finds his inspiration; Bradley writes his novel; Edward discovers forgiveness; and the characters in *The Green Knight* overcome isolation to unite at the conclusion. These quests are not completed in the way the hero intends at the beginning of the tale, but, as he slowly learns humility and acceptance, he finds his true path. By abandoning societal ideals of control and manipulation in favor of Murdoch's concept of love, each hero is ultimately able to attain the good. By accepting the uncontrollable elements introduced by their *animas*, and in learning to love rather than suppress their alter-egos, Murdoch's protagonists gradually learn to give up their linear aspirations in favor of a joyful attention to the motley confusion of the world around them.

Murdoch's artistic quest attempts to communicate the necessity of recognizing this crazed, absurd, tumultuous world for what it is: a place never to be fully defined or understood, but instead to be accepted and expressed with honesty and joy: "The (good) human artist . . . is trying to portray the partially failed world as it is, and in doing so to produce something pleasing and beautiful" (Murdoch, *Fire* 80). Jake Donaghue ends *Under the Net* hoping to accomplish this feat, and *The Black Prince*'s Bradley Pearson ends hoping he has accomplished it. As for Murdoch herself: whether her novels are pleasing *or* beautiful is a topic for debate. But their attempt to portray human beings on

their quests for fulfillment through the alarming absurdity of the post-modern landscape presents an intriguing question: Can goodness be attained in this chaotic, pointless universe? This is the challenge Murdoch's novels present to her contemporaries and readers alike.

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