



THE QUESTION OF CHARACTERISATION IN IRIS MURDOCH'S *UNDER THE NET*

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Abstract

The British novelist and philosopher Jean Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) frequently pronounced her engagement, as an artist, with the great tradition of English prose writing essentially characterised by its traditionalism. Comparable to this, Murdoch called herself a traditionalist who, in her fictional narratives, attempted to depict conventional illustrations of character descriptions. Notwithstanding her enunciations, Murdoch, in her first published novel *Under the Net* (1954), formulated a non-traditional protagonist whose characterisation hardly conforms to the criterion for conventional character formations. Particularly measured against Aristotle's - and those of the other theorists as well - configurations, Murdoch's protagonist is not a character portrayed precisely through conventional conceptions. This is due to the fact that Murdoch details a protagonist whose characterisation is dramatically limited by his unending misreadings of the situations, which at the same time decisively illustrates him as a character who has undeniably been trapped under a net of misconceptions and misjudgements.

Keywords: Tradition, Characterisation, Protagonist, Misconception, Misjudgement.

Introduction

Iris Murdoch plainly claims in a private interview conducted at her flat in London that she is principally a traditionalist novelist who aims at following the footsteps of the great writers of the nineteenth-century English literary realism.¹ In the same interview, more particularly, Murdoch is asked whether she is "a realist in the sense that [we] use the term in [our] consideration of nineteenth-century fiction" (Bellamy and Murdoch, 1977, p.137). She briefly and clearly answers this question saying "Oh, I'm attempting to be a realist . . . I aim at being an ordinary writer, a realistic writer in the tradition of the English novel" (Bellamy and Murdoch, 1977, pp. 137-139). It might therefore be now recollected that Murdoch's fiction - especially the individual works of her earlier writing starting in 1954 with her first published novel *Under the Net* - characteristically features, in accordance with what Murdoch herself claims, traditional realistic elements especially in terms of the development of the plot structures of her stories. This is, how Murdoch herself illustrates asserting, "I usually start with a little sort of knot or conglomerate of plot and character, whether it be two or three people in a tense situation" (Lesser and Murdoch, 1984, p. 13), and further adding, "or some sort of situation with potential surprises, and some kind of general idea of what it's about, whether it's religious life, or guilt, or conflict between old and young, or something of a terribly general sort, which would come along in the package. (Lesser and Murdoch, 1984, p. 13). These earlier works of fiction of the novelist² mostly depict the contemporary life through vivid descriptions of the details of the physical and the social background where the novelist's fictional characters portrayed in these earlier works survive. However, the theoretical implications of being a traditionalist artist - here in this example, in the case of a realist novelist - essentially requires the fact that the novelist attempts to represent the source material - in other words, the contemporary social and economic reality - as much as it could allow the artist to do. Furthermore, this explicit situation especially means that in terms of the technique of characterisation, for example, Murdoch's fictional narratives of the above mentioned period are supposed to be picturing individual characters that are actually modelled on specifically the psychology - as well as the motives, instincts and behaviour - of actual human beings. In other words, as it is correspondingly put here, "Characters and people: they are the same in the literary theory of Iris Murdoch; and in her novels, she attempts to provide them with fit houses to live in" (Culley, 1969, p. 345). In addition to this, it is again Murdoch herself who affirms, "I'm a traditionalist, and I want to write novels with characters and stories. And what the novel needs to give it life are two or three really live, strong, powerful characters" (Lesser and Murdoch, 1984, p. 14).

Over and above these interpretations, Murdoch's fictional characters - at least the characters of her earlier works of narrative fiction on the condition that the novelist, as Murdoch herself directly claims, is a traditionalist novelist and Murdoch has accentuated her special emphasis on the significance of "The

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¹ This 1977 interview must have been reflecting a panorama of two decades of fiction-writing for Murdoch published her first novel *Under the Net* in 1954.

² Novels published, perhaps, until the 1970s.



traditional novel" (Herman, 2001, p. 551) – are supposed to comply with, if one needs a primary example for the modern theory of literature, M. H. Abrams' specific definition that "Characters are the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as being endowed with particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive ways of saying it – the dialogue – and from what they do – the action" (1999, pp. 32-33). This is, as it has already been established, the realistic – as well as the mimetic – theory of characterisation in narrative fiction which basically argues that "the so-called 'realistic' argument sees characters as imitations of people and tends to treat them – with greater or lesser sophistication – as if they were our neighbours or friends, whilst also abstracting them from the verbal texture of the work under consideration" (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p. 34). Besides this, the same theory of the character significantly underscores the condition that "Such an approach . . . tends to speculate about the characters' unconscious motivations and even constructs for them a past and future beyond what is specified in the text" (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, p. 34).

In addition to these observations, as it has more significantly – and universally – been acknowledged today, one of the earliest surviving sources of the canonical theory of (Western) literature – the theory of dramatic arts in particular – is Aristotle's *Poetics* where the researchers of the theory of fictional narratives can notice how the ancient Greek philosopher examines the nature of characterisation in literary narratives of his time. Although most of the modern critics of literature have specially concentrated on Aristotle's emphasis on the relationship between the character and the action for Aristotle inaugurates his discussion on the character with the significance of action,³ particularly in the fifteenth chapter of his *Poetics*, Aristotle outlines four fundamental peculiarities of character construction in narrative fiction. These are as Aristotle specifically identifies that "the primary one, is that they be solidly reliable . . . The second thing is that character be fitting . . . The third thing is that character be lifelike . . . And in states of character . . . one should . . . always seek either what is necessary or what is likely" (2006, p. 41). As it is quite noticeable here in this theoretical framework, Aristotle's notion of the fictional character fundamentally echoes the mid-twentieth-century formulation of the character as illustrated by the realistic (the mimetic) theories of these fictional entities. It could therefore be asserted that Aristotle mainly interprets the nature of fictional characters assuming that these entities, although openly fabricated by their artists, are necessarily the imitations of people.

Murdoch's Protagonist

When one once again takes into consideration Murdoch's personal statement that she is a traditionalist writer who aims to follow especially the great examples of the nineteenth-century English literary heritage, the circumstances of her fictional characters in – but particularly the protagonist of – her first published novel *Under the Net* effectively convey the impression of being at odds with principally Aristotle's special notions of character construction. In other words, the particular textual illustration of Murdoch's protagonist in *Under the Net* generates neither a reliable nor a believable character setup – the two notions as specified by Aristotle. This means that Murdoch's protagonist, who is at the same time the first-person narrator of the story, appears at first sight to be a stable sample of fictional character mostly illustrated by the novelist through a traditional – mimetic – method of character composition. The protagonist of Murdoch's *Under the Net*, James Donaghue, as he describes himself, is "something over thirty and talented, but lazy" who he says "live[s] by literary hack-work, and a little original writing, as little as possible" (1982, p. 21). It is remarkable in the story that Jake, as he is mostly called in the story, is depicted as a fictional character in a realistically drawn setting principally reproduced from the imitations of the real-world components. In addition to this, in terms of the initial characteristics of this realistic depiction, Murdoch's protagonist is conventionally (ordinarily) portrayed as a single and a middle-aged man who lives an almost average life – but without much complaint – in the physical and the social reality of a specific period of time, the London of the mid-twentieth-century Britain. Furthermore, it might be underscored that Jake, particularly as the protagonist of the story, is at the centre of a social circle which, of course, encompasses friends, relationships, adventures and experiences.

However, what peculiarly grabs the reader's attention in Murdoch's narrative in *Under the Net* especially in terms of the characterisation of the protagonist is the fact that Jake, who is – due to the specified reasons indicated above – supposed to be a more or less realistically described model of an individual, hardly comes out to be a fully developed fictional character. The protagonist, Jake, has indeed been

³ One of the most significant of these critics, Seymour Chatman, also discusses in his *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* that "Aristotle's general formulation of character and characterization is not totally appropriate to a general theory of narrative, although, as usual, he provokes questions that cannot be ignored" (1980, p. 110).



portrayed in Murdoch's narrative as somebody whose behaviours and character traits are strangely inexplicable for the reader. In other words, Murdoch abnormally operates her protagonist as a character who easily and quickly gets lost under a net – therefore pertinently referring to the title of the novel – of limitless misconceptions and misjudgements particularly about the people and the events around him, which almost always results in significant disillusionment for him. Furthermore, it is necessarily to be claimed here that it is these misconceptions and misjudgements which Jake's adventure as a character is absolutely limited to.

The Protagonist's Flaws

I.

The first textual illustration of this particular case is the opening scene of *Under the Net* where Jake, who has just returned from France – the country he says he has frequently escaped to – in a mood that could only be described as lack of enthusiasm for Jake revealingly utters the words, "I hate the journey back to England anyway" (1982, p. 7), comes upon the rather unforeseen news that his landlady has exactly "thrown [them] out" (1982, p. 8). This is, of course, not an exceptional event for an individual living in the modern times; yet Jake's great surprise at hearing the reality about his own situation effectively confounds the reader. His surprise is so unpredictably great that he creates a portrait of himself as an individual (as a character) who has grasped almost nothing about the reality of his own world. In other words, Jake's specific drawback, as it is accurately put elsewhere, is that Jake is "a hero who is a reluctant interrogator of reality" (Vickery, 1971, p. 70). The conversation below that Jake has with Finn, who as Jake introduces, "is Peter O'Finney, but [we] needn't mind about that, as he is always called Finn, and he is a sort of remote cousin of mine, or so he used to claim, and I never troubled to verify this" (1982, p. 7), reveals the first vital glimpses of his complete misunderstanding of this particular situation. It is easily discernible in the tone of his sentences, questions and answers that Jake has now become a victim of his own neglect, as he acknowledges at the end of the talk, for he has not given enough care or attention to Magdalen, the woman he has been living with – even before the beginning of the story. It is obvious that Jake has simply been blind to the reality:

'What is it?' I said at last.

'She's thrown us out,' said Finn.

I could not take this seriously; it was impossible.

'Come now,' I said kindly to Finn. 'What does this really mean?'

'She's throwing us out,' said Finn. 'Both of us, now, today.' Finn is a carrion crow, but he never tells lies, he never even exaggerates. Yet this was fantastic.

'But why?' I asked. 'What have we done?'

'It's not what we've done, it's what she's after doing,' said Finn. 'She's going to get married to a fellow.'

This was a blow. Yet even as I flinched I told myself, well, why not? I am a tolerant and fair-minded man. And next moment I was wondering, where can we go?

'But she never told me anything,' I said.

'You never asked anything,' said Finn.

This was true. During the last year I had become uninterested in Magdalen's private life. If she goes out and gets herself engaged to some other man whom had I to thank but myself? (1982, p. 8)

This exemplary situation practically displays how Jake has strangely been living with Magdalen, who he – in a way that might be claimed to belittle her status in the story – says "is a typist in the city, or she was at the time of the earlier events related in this story," (1982, p. 10) for more than eighteen months. Perhaps because of such a simplistic description of Magdalen – which at the same time attributes to Jake's complete lack of interest in her – which is easily remarkable in Jake's depiction of the place and the context of his dwelling, he has already wasted the occasion of establishing a promising – and at the same time necessary – connection with her. Jake significantly reveals,

Magdalen lived in one of those repulsive heavy-weight houses in Earls Court Road. She had the top half of the house; and there I had lived too for more than eighteen months, and Finn as well. Finn and I lived on the fourth floor in amaze of attics, and Magdalen lived on the third floor, though I don't say we didn't see a lot of each other, at any rate at first. I had begun to feel that this was my home. (1982, pp. 9-10)



Jake's almost unacceptable mistake here is that he has been oddly indifferent to the reality of his own social environment. As a consequence of this, it might be concluded that he has built misconceptions such as the one in the illustrated example. In other words, Jake must certainly be in such a frame of mind that he has never considered the possibility of having a broken – or ended – relationship with Magdalen. That is to say that Jake's preference has only been comfort that he has drawn from the fact that he has lived in Magdalen's flat free of rent. Jake, as a result of this situation, has never been interested in Magdalen's relationships with other men either. He therefore confesses,

Sometimes Magdalen had boy friends, I didn't mind and I didn't inquire. I preferred it when she had, as then I had more time for work, or rather for the sort of dreamy unproductive reflection which is what I enjoy more than anything in the world. We had lived there as snug as a pair of walnuts in their shells. We had also lived there practically rent-free, which was another point. There's nothing that irritates me so much as paying rent. (1982, pp. 9-10)

In addition to his unexplainable indifference to Magdalen's life, the special way Jake describes Magdalen as a woman to the reader abnormally addresses Magdalen's physical features as a pretty woman. Throughout the description, in other words, Jake merely points to the bodily – or the material – features of the subject of his definition. In other words, Jake never, for example, refers to Magdalen's immaterial reality, which he is supposed to do as a man who has been with her for a considerable period of time. He accordingly describes her saying,

She is not beautiful: that is an adjective which I use sparingly; but she is both pretty and attractive. Her prettiness lies in her regular features and fine complexion, which she covers over with a peach-like mask of make-up until all is as smooth and inexpressive as alabaster. Her hair is permanently waved in whatever fashion is declared to be the most becoming. It is a dyed gold . . . Magdalen's attractiveness lies in her eyes, and in the vitality of her manner and expression . . . Magdalen's are big and grey and almond-shaped, and glisten like pebbles in the rain. She makes a lot of money from time to time, not by tapping on the typewriter, but by being a photographer's model; she is everyone's idea of a pretty girl. (1982, p. 10)

On the other hand, as it has occasionally been the case in the story, Jake tries to understand the indisputable problem; and he confesses what he thinks has been his mistake. It is the same issue here; but what brings the issue here is that Jake does this only when he finds himself a homeless man. Jake says, "I ought to have taken better care of the girl" (1982, p. 12). This is true but he cannot change the reality at the end of the adventure. Jake refers to his own situation here further asserting, "This metamorphosis must have been a long time preparing, only I had been too dull to see it. A girl like Magdalen can't be transformed overnight. Someone had been hard at work" (1982, p. 12). It should further be stated here that although these confessions all contribute to the general discussion about the characterisation of Jake, they do not stimulate a reversal of the present situation.

II.

Another case of misconception and misjudgement in the story in terms of Jake's relationships with the people around him – particularly the people whom he portrays as his friends – is his lack of true knowledge of the nature of his relationship with his best companion, Peter O'Finney. These two men have been pictured so close as friends in the story that Jake even introduces Finn with the assertion that "people do get the impression that he is my servant, and I often have this impression too, though it would be hard to say exactly what features of the situation suggest it" (1982, p. 7). Although this specific case might not be called abuse – or rather misuse, the friendship between the two men has not been a good example of mutual interests that they both have equally shared. Moreover, it is interesting here to read what Jake says about his closest friend, Finn. Jake claims, "Sometimes I think it is just that Finn is a humble and self-effacing person and so automatically takes second place. When we are short of beds it is always Finn who sleeps on the floor, and this seems thoroughly natural" (1982, p. 7). In addition to this, how Jake has personally felt about Finn becomes obvious when he utters the words, "It is true that I am always giving Finn orders, but this is because Finn seems not to have many ideas of his own about how to employ his time" (1982, pp. 7-8).

Murdoch especially pictures the two characters, Jake and Finn, mostly acting together throughout the story of *Under the Net*. It is only at the end of the novel that these two characters – but more particularly Finn who turns back to Ireland – make their choices and go their own ways. This situation, therefore, potentially creates the impression for the reader that Jake has had comprehensive knowledge of the personality of his companion and he has acknowledged the significance of his friendship with Finn. What should be stated here is that this impression is a false image of the reality. At the end of the story when, for example, Jake



hears that his friend has left London, he seems to be totally unaware of the situation. Furthermore, Jake apparently becomes disillusioned. It is Mrs Tinckham, who “keeps a newspaper shop in the neighbourhood of Charlotte Street” (1982, p. 15), and whose shop is “a dusty, dirty, nasty-looking corner shop, with a cheap advertisement board outside it, and it sells papers in various languages, and women's magazines, and Westerns and Science fiction and Amazing Stories” (1982, p. 15), Jake has heard the news about Finn’s evacuation from. He then asserts, “The notion that Finn had made a confidant of Mrs Tinckham came to me for the first time and rushed in an instant from possibility to probability (1982, p. 247), and therefore he asked Mrs Tinckham” ‘He told you just before he went?’ I asked. ‘Yes,’ said Mrs Tinckham, ‘and earlier too. But he must have told you he wanted to go back?’ ‘He did, now I come to think of it,’ I said, ‘but I didn't believe him.’” (1982, p. 247). Jake’s unpredictable – and at the same time predictable – conclusion is significant enough to reveal his particular situation. He says, “And somehow this phrase had a familiar ring. ‘I'm a fool,’ I said. Mrs Tinckham didn't dispute this” (1982, p. 247). This is just another confession of his failure.

III.

Murdoch narrates one of the most amazing scenes of *Under the Net* – the scene of the miming theatre – during Jake’s search for an old friend, Anna Quentin, who he remembers saying, “has a husky-speaking voice and a tenderly moulded face which is constantly lit by a warm intent glow from within. It is a face full of yearning, yet poised upon itself without any trace of discontent” (1982, p. 29). Besides this, another issue is that Jake makes pointless generalisations in the story about women who have somehow become involved in his life. This situation, of course, does not exclude Anna. He says, for example,

The women that I know are often inexperienced, inarticulate, credulous, and simple; but I see no reason to call them deep because they manifest qualities which would make us call men self-absorbed. Or if they are cunning they deceive themselves and others in much the same way as men do. It is the same deception that we are all involved in; except in so far as women are always a little more unbalanced by the part they have to act. Like high-heeled shoes which shift the inward organs in the course of time. Few things disgust me more than these pretended profundities. (1982, p. 28)

However, it could now easily be pronounced that Anna is still a distinct woman whose memory is clearly noticeable for James meaningfully discloses, “perhaps I loved Anna” (1982, p. 29). In addition to this case, another revelation that Jake, who interestingly defines marriage as “an Idea of Reason” (1982, p. 31), makes is the fact that he has even considered to marry her. Despite that, Jake has not, due to his own reasons, made an offer. What then becomes significant here in terms of the relationship between Jake and Anna is that Jake makes a straightforward analysis of Anna’s character traits as a woman. Nevertheless, the result of this elementary reasoning has predictably proved to be an inaccurate explanation. He describes her asserting,

I was greatly attached to her, but I could see even then that her character was not all that it should be. Anna is one of those women who cannot bear to reject any offer of love. It is not exactly that it flatters her. She has a talent for personal relations, and she yearns for love as a poet yearns for an audience. To anyone who will take the trouble to become attached to her she will immediately give a devoted, generous, imaginative, and completely uncapricious attention, which is still a calculated avoidance of self-surrender. (1982, p. 30)

The difficulty – perhaps the impossibility – of making a true description of Anna as a woman for Jake becomes visible when Jake pays a visit to where, he has heard, she has recently been working as an artist. This is the Riverside Miming Theatre a poster of which Jake accidentally notices reads, “Reopening on August 1st with a luxurious and fanciful production of . . . Members only. The audience is requested to laugh softly and not to applaud” (1982, p. 34). This specific scene in which Jake enters the gallery of the miming theatre which, as he illustrates, “sloping and foreshortened, seemed to give immediately onto the stage” (1982, p. 35); metaphorically describes Jake and his friends affirming, “and on the stage were a number of actors, moving silently to and fro, and wearing masks which they kept turned towards the auditorium” (1982, p. 35). What is even more interesting in this description is the fact that “These masks were a little larger than life, and this fact accounted for the extraordinary impression of closeness which I had received when I first opened the door” (1982, p. 35). Here in this scene, Jake’s utter bewilderment and confusion that have been engendered by the actors who wear masks on their faces is an allusion to his misconceptions and misjudgements especially about the people he has had relationships with. Jake is clearly perplexed in the gallery, like he is in reality, by the situation that does not provide a defined sense of the true identities of the actors. It is the reality of both the actors and their masks which symbolises Jake’s inability to differentiate between the true and the imagined identities of his friends. As it happens here, what Jake has



seen so far in life is nothing but illusions (misconceptions and misjudgements) of the reality symbolised by those masks worn by the actors.

IV.

It is appropriately affirmed here in this quotation that "When we first meet Jake, he is in no way involved with life: he lives with friends, but wants no entangling relationships; he translates novels, but does no original work of his own. The root of his problem is hatred of 'contingency'" (Porter, 1969, p. 379). This is absolutely true for Jake has never tried to establish an authentic correspondence between himself and the other people involved in his story. The above commentary, furthermore, points to another problematic relationship that Jake has unfortunately misread. Jake is not a writer but a translator who has translated the works of a French writer, Jean Pierre Breteuil. He says, for example, "I've translated so much of Jean Pierre's stuff now, it's just a matter of how fast I can type" (1982, p. 20). Jake enjoys translating books for he honestly accepts that he has made enough money. Besides this, and this is much more meaningful in terms of his characterisation, Jake unusually prefers being somebody else, although in its literary - and in its metaphorical - meaning, to being himself. As a consequence of this, he claims commenting about his profession, "I translate Breteuil because it's easy and because it sells like hot cakes in any language. Also, in a perverse way, I just enjoy translating, it's like opening one's mouth and hearing someone else's voice emerge" (1982, p. 20).

In addition to the utmost pointlessness of the whole situation, Jake has never truly valued Jean Pierre whose works he has been translating. Jean Pierre, for Jake, has been an undistinguished writer who never deserves much critical attention. As a consequence of this, when he sees that Jean Pierre has recently been awarded a prestigious prize in literature, Jake, as usual, is unable to hide neither his surprise nor his lack of knowledge of the latest developments. Jake says, "It was only then that it struck me as shocking that my predominant emotion was distress. It was a distress, too, which went so deep that I was at first at a loss to understand it" (1982, p. 170). At first, Jake questions the validity of the decision of the jury. However, Jean Pierre is the writer he has so far been working with. Besides his surprise, there is admission. Similar to what he feels when Magdalen wants him to leave her apartment, Jake comes to a revelation. As he asserts,

I was of course very surprised to find Jean Pierre in the role of a Goncourt winner. The Goncourt jury, that constellation of glorious names, might sometimes err, but they would never make a crass or fantastic mistake. That their coronation of Jean Pierre represented a moment of sheer insanity was a theory which I could set aside. I had not read the book. The alternative remained open, and the more I reflected the more it appeared to be the only alternative, that Jean Pierre had at last written a good novel. (1982, pp. 170-171)

It is straightforwardly implied that Jake is not jealous of Jean Pierre's success. However, what Jake truly feels now is even more absurd than jealousy. He discloses, "I felt an indignant horror as at some monstrous reversal of the order of nature: as a man might feel if his favourite opinion was suddenly controverted in detail by a chimpanzee" (1982, p. 171). Jake's feelings are so complicated that it is impossible to decipher these feelings at once. As he asserts here, Jake is even afraid of the success of Jean Pierre. Although this particular situation might immediately sound an unexplainable development, it is mostly because of the fact that Jake has never considered the possibility of such an outstanding achievement of Jean Pierre's publications. Jake, therefore, tries to understand the situation, and he comments that "[Jean Pierre] should secretly have been changing his spots, secretly improving his style, ennobling his thought, purifying his emotions: all this was really too bad" (1982, p. 171). This is precisely the same as how Jake has so far analysed the similar situations. More precisely, this is the same reaction as Jake has already had against Anna, Finn and, of course, Magdalen. Besides this, it is practically impossible to claim here that this last example is actually enough for Jake to come to a final realisation of all his misconceptions. It is simply not clear yet whether Jake will, from now on, be ever aware of his own misjudgements. Instead of considering perhaps an analysis of the whole situation, Jake blames Jean Pierre for he mistakenly concludes that it is actually Jean Pierre who has camouflaged himself so effectively that Jake has been unable to see the reality. Jake says,

I felt that I had been the victim of an imposture, a swindle. For years I had worked for this man, using my knowledge and sensibility to turn his junk into the sweet English tongue; and now, without warning me, he sets up shop as a good writer. I pictured Jean Pierre with his plump hands and his short grey hair. How could I introduce into this picture, which I had known so well for so long, the



notion of a good novelist? It wrenched me, like the changing of a fundamental category. A man whom I had taken on as a business partner had turned out to be a rival in love . . . Why should I waste time transcribing his writings instead of producing my own? (1982, p. 171)

Although it seems here that Jake questions the validity and the meaning of his efforts, it does not necessarily mean that this situation promises a different Jake in the near future. In other words, Jake will most probably be the same man in the following stages of his life for he has not yet offered any encouraging presence.

On the other hand, there is an argument about the special way Murdoch depicts her characters, which should not be ignored altogether here in the discussion. Among a number of interpretations of Murdoch's special character portrayal – why Murdoch who calls herself a traditionalist novelist has created rather non-traditional characters in her fictional works – the one quoted below makes an analogy between the assumptions of Shakespeare and Murdoch about their particular understanding of the meaning of a traditional character. The idea is that Murdoch's notion of the character, like that of Shakespeare, is a subversive approach to the established traditional norms of characterisation. It is stated that "Iris Murdoch has proposed [Shakespeare] as the father of fictional realism – not for the commonplace reason that he drew from low life . . . but because of the revolution he made in character (Watson, 1998, p.497). When Hamlet, for example, is interpreted, the conclusion will most possibly be that he is a traditional character; but at the same time, due to, for example, his endless doubts and questions, he is not. Therefore, what is especially pronounced in the same argument is that

Shakespeare was the pioneer of what she called free character – of characters which, like Falstaff and Hamlet, grow into humanity beyond any pattern imposed by principle or plot. They are supple and undulating . . . A free character can live a life of contradictions, it should be remembered, since real beings are compounded, like Falstaff and Hamlet, of contradictory elements. We are none of us consistent, and all of us are more people than one . . . it is inconsistency of character that makes people, in the end, credible and interesting. (Watson, 1998, p. 497)

Therefore, it is not improbable that Murdoch might intend to portray her protagonists not exactly in accordance with the traditional mimetic theories of the character construction but rather in accordance with her particular understanding of the meaning of those traditional approaches.

Conclusion

Although Murdoch identifies herself as a traditionalist writer and associates her fiction with the nineteenth-century English literary realism, the way she formulates her protagonist in her first published novel complies with the guidelines on the character formation issued by neither Aristotle nor any other later theorists who speak about the fundamental elements of realistically portrayed fictional characters. This situation is essentially due to the fact that Murdoch's protagonist, even though he is a fictional character modelled on a conventional pattern, has been subject to definite weaknesses in his ability to recognise the nature of the developments especially in his relationships with friends. Jake is so unable to do this that his weaknesses evolve into misconceptions and misjudgements, which at the end effectively generate disillusionments with himself. These disillusionments, as a result, prevent Jake from being a fully developed character for they limit the prospect of advancing his potentials to a better friend, a better lover and perhaps a better writer.

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