

An Archetypal Interpretation of Irish Murdoch's *The Black Prince*

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ABSTRACT

After Europe experienced the horrors of Hitler and the conclusive loss of belief in God, long gloried as a writer of mythical, religious even grotesque novels, Murdoch adds in her major fiction *The Black Prince* many mythical factors. Adopting myth and archetypal criticism as the theoretical basis for the study, this paper intends to explore a series of archetypal characters and classical themes and interpret Iris Murdoch's deep moral concern and persistent artistic pursuit.

Keywords: *horrors, myth, archetypal, pursuit*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Second World War marked a watershed in nearly all the literatures of the west. The war not only shocked all the established western cultural values, but also created a new environment in political, social and ideological terms as well as in intellectual and artistic terms. According to Malcolm Bradbury, there are two main streams in the postwar English novels: one is social documentary, and the other is a visionary or philosophical strain [1]. The former seems dominant in the 1950s, and is heavily concerned with "making over into literary material the new social alteration and new social viewpoints of post-war Britain, often from a lower-middle-class or working-class perspective" [1]. While the latter primarily deals with an alternative reality which is not defined primarily in social terms. It probed into many central fascinations of the era, such as philosophical crisis of the existentialism and the metaphysical anxieties about the loss of identity and meaning in highly-advanced modernized society. We can find that in the work of Iris Murdoch, Angus Wilson, William Golding and other writers with a tendency towards the mythical, religious, or "grotesque" novel. These works share the conviction with the rest of the world that "the modern industrial society had corrupted the moral sensibility of those who lived within it, for individual in their relationships with other individuals, adopted that spirit of domination and of exploitation which industrial organization inescapably engendered"[2]. Then Iris Murdoch, under these

circumstances began her novel writing as well as her long goodness-pursuing journey.

2. IRIS MURDOCH'S CENTRAL THEME

Just as Malcolm Bradbury has pointed out: "those who have written about her[Iris Murdoch] work—a greatly increasing number—find her strangely hard to define or interpret" [3]. Murdoch has her career as a teacher of philosophy in Oxford and although she has repeatedly claimed that she is not a philosophical novelist, yet we do find her philosophical tendency permeating in her novels. To better understand her fictional world we'd better arm ourselves with her central philosophical thought.

The Second World War not only brought human beings material disaster, but left them mental trauma. More and more people lost their worship for God, trapped in belief crisis. At this time, as a serious observer, Iris Murdoch began her writing career. Murdoch meant to become a realist writer to record this cruel reality and was getting more and more interested in the modern concept of man, which is essential in illuminating her artistic as well as academic position in her time. Murdoch believes human beings' spiritual breakdown is by no means incurable. As long as they persistently pursue a higher-level realm—the true goodness, their existent dilemma will disappear. Therefore, we can find that Murdoch's novels usually contain allusions to certain influential philosophers such as Plato (429~348), Kant (1724~1804), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889~1951) and

Simone Weil (1909~1943). Especially, Murdoch thinks that Plato has meant a great deal to her. She feels very close to the aspiring and religious aspect of Plato's moral philosophy, which is the notion that good is very, very far away and that one's task is to transform oneself to discard selfishness and to undergo a very long process of conversion. What interests her most is Plato's system of moral values, many of which have a universal meaning for mankind. Later on, Murdoch uses Plato's cave analogy to convey the goodness as the highest virtue. In the Platonic view, beauty is the most immediate candidate for virtue. Beauty is the most accessible form, which we perceive through the senses as well conceptually. However, Murdoch's vision of Good is that it cannot be attached to any one particular thing, nor can it be evil. She claims the true "goodness" almost impossible to be clear about the life, but can be discerned in art. Thus, at the nib of her pen, Murdoch constructs in her fictional world good characters to fulfil this principle. "In a world without God, the good is not the God in disguise, but rather that the old God symbolized" [4]. Therefore, she mythicizes her characters as Holy God or Jesus Christ and leads them to an ever-lasting pilgrim's progress.

3. OVERVIEW OF TARGET WORK AND MAIN CHARACTERS

The Black Prince—Murdoch's sixteenth novel, arguably her finest, is set in London during the 1960s. Bradley Pearson's story opens on a day when he intends to leave London for a rented hideaway in the country named Patara, where he hopes to write a great book that he has been aspiring to write all his adult life. He is a retired minor official in British income-tax bureaucracy at the age of fifty-eight, who has published a bit. His departure from the city is, however, interrupted by an unusual sequence of circumstances. Francis Marloe, his ex-wife's brother who is a doctor barred from medical practice, arrives to announce that Christian, the partly Jewish ex-wife, is now her second husband's widow and is returning as a wealthy, unattached woman from long residence in the United States—and that she may wish to see Bradley, who on his part has tried to forget her very existence. The conversation is interrupted by a telephone call from Arnold Baffin, who fears he has killed his wife Rachel in a domestic quarrel and asks for help. All thought of departure for the country vanishes as Bradley and Marloe go to aid the Baffins.

Rachel recovers quickly from the blow inflicted by her husband and proceeds in the ensuing few days to attempt a love affair with Bradley, who is unmoved by her advances, albeit sympathetic. His attentions in their turn suddenly focus on Julian, almost forty years Bradley's junior. Julian seeks to have Bradley help her become a writer, and her pursuit of this aim facilitates their relationship's becoming a love affair. To add the

tangle, Priscilla Saxe, Bradley Pearson's sister, arrives in London in a distraught state to seek her brother aid; she has just left her husband. Her emotional state, in which she threatens suicide, is a further complication for her brother, especially when he learns that Priscilla's husband does not want Priscilla to return, as he wishes to marry his young and pregnant mistress, with whom he has begun living openly at his home. Christian Evandale also intrudes into Bradley Pearson's life by taking up with Arnold Baffin and helping to care for Bradley's unstable sister. To add to his problems, Bradley Pearson, who has been asked to write a review of Arnold Baffin's most recent successful novel, finds he wishes to write a hostile review, but he cannot decide whether the hostility is directed against the book or his friend. Caught in these situations, Bradley seizes an opportunity to go off in a rented car to Parata, his secret hideaway—not to write his great book but to make love to Julian Baffin, who has also declared her love for him. Their attempts at physical union are unsuccessful, however, until Julian shows her lover how she once dressed as Hamlet, the black-clad prince in Shakespeare's play; aroused by her appearance, Bradley finds himself sexually adequate. This success raises the new question of whether Bradley is a homosexual in his tendencies. Nor is this the only new problem: Julian's father arrives to disclose that Bradley Pearson knew of his sister's suicide and refused to return to London, preferring to make love to Julian. The announcement, coupled with her lover's real age, makes Julian find Bradley suddenly repugnant, and she deserts him in the night.

Returning to London, Bradley retreats into his apartment, attended by Francis Marloe. Once again, a telephone call summons him to the Baffin's home: this time Rachel Baffin has struck and killed her husband in a quarrel, with the same poker he had earlier used to strike her. Attempting to help Rachel create an illusion of accidental death, Bradley leaves his own fingerprints on the murder weapon. Rachel allows him to be tried, found guilty, and sentenced to prison for the crime she committed. In prison Bradley dies of cancer, but not before he writes his "great work", which turns out to be his memoir of the events leading to his imprisonment. Furthermore, Bradley never truly defends himself by suggesting that Rachel commits the crime. Therefore, everyone believes Bradley to be a cold, calculating figure and the story ends tragically.

4. ARCHETYPAL ANALYSIS OF CHARACTERS—THE QUEST MYTH

Northrop Frye highly appraises the important influence of The Bible in the imaginative tradition of western literature. He describes the biblical myths as "core myth" [5] and The Bible has built an imaginative framework which is a mythological universe, and western literature had operated down within it to the

eighteenth century and is still operating to a larger extent. Therefore, many characters, themes, plots and symbols in The Bible have appeared in so many literary works that without a doubt they become literary archetypes.

Quest-myth occupies an important place in mythology, and constitutes the central archetype of many literary works. "All literary genres are derived from the quest-myth [...] the quest-myth will constitute the first chapter of whatever future hand books of criticism." [6]. Abundant Quest stories can be seen in Greek and Roman myths and run through literature as well. Like Apollo-Marsyas myth and its mythic variants are often read in modern literature.

The Apollo-Marsyas myth which indicates pulling the self from the self has hung in the background of western art for centuries. Its connections to the moral-spiritual aspirations of mankind are strong and its applications to our experience of life are profound. In the myth, Marsyas—a mortal of uncommon musical abilities, hubristically challenges the god of music Apollo to a contest, which Marsyas of course loses. His penalty is flaying—a horrible and painful death. In Ovid's version, he cries out in agony: why do you draw me out of myself? According to Edgar Wind, this pulling of the self is a Bacchic pain leading to the clarity of Apollo and Lorenzo de Medici declares that the way to perfection is by this road. The ordinary human who aspires to the transcendent is overwhelmed and shrinks with pain under the disproportionate strength of the god: to aim so high involves tearing off the earth to achieve the divine ecstasy. The longed-for confrontation with the god involves pain to the death, and the achievement of art surprises by the disproportion of this awful demand to our human, quotidian frame. The Christian centuries perceived the myth as a poetic theology, a perfect fusion of art and reality [7].

Heroes in quest-myth all have such common journey: A hero separates his parents or home, starts his long journey, conquers hardships, fights against all devils and finishes his mission. Heroic figures go through the classical stages of the universal adventure in order to see what has been revealed; the singleness of the human spirit in its aspirations. In *The Black Prince*, Murdoch applies Apollo-Marsyas myth to the Bradley Pearson's life experience as the process of the loss of the self and the loving attention to the world. As a questing hero, Bradley's story is likened to the quest-myth in more ways than one. His life undoubtedly follows the separation—initiation—conquest pattern, which is a manifestation of human permanent pursuit. Yet instead of the final victory, Bradley's pursuit only gets a glimpse of light of artistic goodness.

At the beginning of the novel, Bradley is retired from the income-tax bureaucracy and wants to leave London to live a quiet and comfortable life at the seaside. Meanwhile, like Marsyas, he believes himself has the

extraordinary talent and aspires to become a true artist. While quietly enjoying life, he intends to achieve his artistic zenith—to finish the immortal writing about retrospectively his adult life. Bradley describes himself as a perfectionist, a fastidious, easily disgusted self-absorbed person. He fantastically believes life is routine and regular, therefore he prefers to fix appointments with his sister weeks ahead and insists to write it through letter. Bradley is afraid of missing trains and arriving too early that he has spared only a few minutes in advance to catch the predecessor of the train. He is a puritan who fears contingency. However, it is his experiences in life that shock his egocentric fantasy at last.

The sign of Bradley's "reform" is caused is the irruption of routine life and the subsequent attenuation of his ego. Fears suddenly break in and This fear is chiefly that of failing marriage, sad love, and the "betrayal" of friends, but is seen again and again and explicitly attached to other forms of horror for which these are a shorthand. With the emotional and physical violence, the Baffin marriage figures starts anew. From that moment on, Bradley's quiet life is broken and he begins to experience a series of horrors and hardships. The opening episode epitomized the confusion for the narrator. Bradley is drawn into the marital rift between his best friends Rachel and Arnold, an action that ultimately leads into all of this book's complications. Arnold retells to Bradley the fighting between the husband and the wife, yet Bradley discovers that even when literally invited into the bedroom of a married couple he cannot get more than a confusing glimpse of another's private self: "I had known her for over twenty years, almost as long as I had known Arnold, yet at the time I speak of I did not really, as I later realized, know her well. There was a sort of vagueness" [8]. Then Rachel tries to get closer to Bradley to compensate for the pain and frustration in her marriage. She early tells Bradley that "you can't separate me. You'd have to focus your attention on me very hard to do that, and you won't" [8]. And as she says to him toward the end of the novel, although her marriage has entangled him, even exploited him, it is finally always imperious to his understanding. In narrating his story Bradley must therefore take into account his limitation both as an egoist and a fantasist. He cannot see people as separate individuals. "Then I saw her again, and again and again. Oxford Street was full of tired aging women with dazed faces, pushing blindly against each other like a herd of animals" [8]. We can conclude that Rachel here seems to stand for the horror of predatory unloved middle-aged women in his life.

Yet, Saxe marriage repeats in more peculiar form. Poor Priscilla says to Bradley: "Roger hated the sight of me, he said so. And I used to cry in front of him, I'd sit and cry for hours with sheer misery, sitting there in front of him, and he'd just go on reading the paper" [8].

Among the huge sadness Roger has devised for Priscilla has been an unforgettable episode in which he pretended to poison her. And then, Francis retells another terrible marriage about his dad, a mob man, probably killed his mum. Christian spends most of the time in her second marriage praying for her husband's death. Moreover, these visions recur in the world again: the London of this book is repeatedly full of defeated and hopeless people.

Priscilla is abandoned at last and pathetically asks for Bradley to fetch "a few things of her own"[8] to offer a sense of her own continuity to her for the last comfort: "And the little ornaments, that striped vase" [8]. Unconsciously Rachel echoes Priscilla's complaint when she asks for "a little privacy, a little secrecy, a few things of my own. But it seems to be impossible" [8]. Both Priscilla and Rachel have climbed fully dressed into bed in despair for four times, and the last time Priscilla believes the bed is more like a coffin. When we read about Rachel the same sentences is reported over and over again. Priscilla does the same.

Priscilla early tells Bradley explicitly that he is blocked as a writer because "you understand nothing of horror." [8] So it's always difficult for Bradley to write. He repeated soliloquies and asked for more moral discipline to defend horror's breaking in. Bradley believes that: the world can ultimately be defined as a place of suffering that affects every serious artist and thinker, darkening his reflection, ruining his system, sometimes actually driving him mad. [8]

In the horror of life, Bradley seems to be too self-obsessed to pay attention to others. The important experience that produces the complete shift in his vision of the world is Bradley's sudden, overwhelming love for Julian. At the beginning of the novel, all the characters are much obsessed with approaching old age and decay. The women, Rachel, Priscilla, are particularly vulnerable, and Bradley's physical distaste for collapsing flesh and the smells associated with middle-aged distress are part both of his sexual isolation and of his vision of reality. He sees himself as an ascetic, and is repelled by Priscilla's distress, Francis Marloe's seedy homosexual misery, and even Rachel's attempt to involve him in adultery. The love of an old man for a girl is something which Bradley, from the outside, sees as "ugly and pathetic" in his brother-in-law, Roger, and Roger's mistress Marigold—and menacing in its immoral irresponsibility towards his sister, Priscilla's unhappiness. His passion for Julian converts all these negatives to positives in the context of passion itself. He assures her that he finds the smell of her sweaty feet delightful. He finds his own middle-aged body beautiful. He finds Roger and Marigold beautiful. He has a vision of cosmic order and a sense that he is face to face with the Good, the Real and the True. Bradley's artistic view relates to his assertion to Julian: "My book is about art"

[8], Bradley tells us at the beginning of the novel, and P. Loxia has said that "man's creative struggle, his search for wisdom and truth, is a love story" [8]. This might sound rather complicated. Then Bradley begins his love-pursuing process. He ignores the miserable and sick sister Priscilla in London and steals Julian secretly to the remote and quiet seaside. He wants to seek the artistic truth through his pure love toward Julian: "Human love is the gateway to all knowledge, as Plato understood. And through the door that Julian opened, my being passed into another world" [8]. During the process of his love affair with her, however, his knowledge continues to be imperfect. The pain he inadequately envisages is first his own silence (which, as Francis points out, he breaks almost immediately), then the impracticality of the whole thing because of the age difference. Julian's father Arnold arrives to disclose that Bradley knew of his sister's suicide and refused to return to London, preferring to make love to Julian. The announcement, coupled with her lover's real age, makes Julian find Bradley suddenly repugnant, and she deserts him in the night. At last, Bradley loses completely. Like Marsyas, he enters the game blindly and perhaps hubristically, but it takes only a few days for him to realize how desperate his situation is, how inevitable his failures will be. In this novel, Bradley's moral progress equals the progress to the good arts. However, he meets the evitable defeat. Having experiencing so many hardships—losing Julian and beloved sister Priscilla and being put into prison because of so-called guilty, he stands in court more sensibly. He doesn't defend for himself and blame to others. It is true with Bradley. After the trial, Bradley completes his moral process and opens his mind to the new world.

5. CONCLUSION

When Iris Murdoch believes this era has no God at all, she does make efforts to add mythical, religious even grotesque factors into her novel-writing. She insists that "in a world without God, the good is not the God in disguise, but rather that the old God symbolized" [4]. Thus, through a series of archetypal characters and classical mythical plots, Murdoch presents to us her moral and artistic pursuit—ideal goodness.

Although I can only make a tentatively valid judgment about Murdoch's contributions to British fiction, her novels do direct to moral focus. Her view of modern man denies the idea that she is a confused perhaps good-natured searcher for meaning in a meaningless universe. Recreating a series of mythical characters and classical themes, Murdoch adjusts her moral philosophy to novelistic conventions and gains the success. She also leaves this world an eternal theme: although the pilgrim's progress is hard, with light and hope, human beings are coming nearer to the promising land.

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