

Goodness and Love: Murdoch's Exploration in "The Sea, the Sea"

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Abstract. In this novel, the author mainly tries to inquire into the relationship between love, art and moral goodness, by relating a very affecting love story. After the protagonist confronts with the tidal rips of love, also with the help of art, he effaces his "ego", begins to attend to the "otherness" of the other people, and meanwhile, is becoming nearer and nearer to the truth of goodness.

1. Introduction

Iris Murdoch (1919- 1999) was born in Dublin in 1919, she was both a novelist and an ethic and moral philosopher, and also she is the first novelist in the history of English literature who combines literary art with philosophical idea. During her whole life she has created many novels, such as *Under Net*, *The Bell*, *The Black Prince*, *The Sea, the Sea*, and so on, all of which can be called the philosophical novel through which the novelist always interprets and transmits her some certain philosophical ideas to the readers, and also through which she has won her many literary prizes including Booker Prize.

The Sea, the Sea which was published in 1987 and won her Booker Prize has been regarded as the highest achievement of her novel writing. In this novel, the author uses the first personal point of view to relate the story about Charles Arrowby, leading light of England's theatrical set, who retires from glittering London to an island house by the sea. He plans to write a memoir about his past physical and spiritual life. And by doing so, he wants to make himself feel more relaxed, become purer in mind, and get higher morality. But at the beginning of doing so, he met his childhood lover Hartley, and he always thinks that Hartley has been missing him as he did to her. But in fact, Hartley didn't love him at all, and never thought important of him in her heart. And she has already had a happy marriage and a good husband. But unluckily, Charles preferred to live in his own fantasy that Hartley still loved him, and would leave her husband and come back to his side. Compared to her other novels, in this one, her consideration about the highest state of moral perfecting one can reach through one's appreciation and experience of love and art is embodied in a more obvious way.

2. Goodness as the tenet

Murdoch's understanding of goodness has its profound social, cultural and historical background, it is her rethought of the western society after World War Two. Iris Murdoch has experienced the World War Two herself, and saw the War and the economical crisis cause the people to suffer much both physically and spiritually. The idea "Death of God" furthermore destroyed the traditional reason and moral value in man's heart. And meanwhile, the absolute freedom advocated by the existentialists makes the people, especially the intellectuals feel panic. But Iris Murdoch believes that the death of God can't represent the dying out of the religion and theology, and it's not the trauma caused by the society that caused the loss of the traditional reason and moral value, but it's the people's misunderstanding of the religion. In fact, religion is just a kind of model of belief, it places the goodness and virtue at the highest point in human life, so religion is really a activity to love and adore goodness, and it's the true basis of morality. Religion and morality both have the goodness as the highest moral value, so ethics should be a kind of theology that has no God, it's central value is goodness, and the "goodness is not the disguised old God, but is the thing symbolized by the old God." (On God and Goodness) So Murdoch points out that it is the goodness that should be believed in, it is the background of value in a person's life. Meanwhile, Murdoch use Plato's "sun" to explain "goodness". It is a story about a group of prisoners. All of them live in a cave generation after

generation, because they were locked there all the lives. And they could never turn back their heads. Behind them there was a fire, and there was a wall between the fire and them. When someone held some statues walking behind the wall, the fire projected the shadows of the statues on the wall. And all of the prisoners took the shadows as the real objects of the statues. They have been accustomed to this kind of life. But finally one of them broke off the lock, found the light of the fire by turning his head. The light dazzled his eyes, but he still saw the fire clearly, and also saw the statues, and found out the objects on the wall were only the shadows. Later on, he walked out of the cave, came into the sunshine, though the sunshine was also dazzling, he still saw the objects themselves, then he saw the sun, too, and knew the sun was the source of all things on the earth. Here, the sun symbolizes the idea of goodness, only under the sunshine, the truth can be seen clearly [1]. So “goodness” is the basis on which the human being can live on, and also is the source from which the man gets their knowledge. In a further way, Murdoch also points out that: “goodness has a real though abstract existence in the world. The actual existence of goodness is the way, it is now possible, to understand the idea of God.” [2]. It means that goodness is invisible, though we can see other things through it, it isn’t the object which can be seen by the human’s flesh eyes, but it is the basic thing like the truth in human’s life, it exists truly and absolutely, it is a kind of transcendental existence. “Goodness is not the old God, But everything the old God represents.” And in all, with such a kind of belief in the “goodness”, Murdoch thinks that all of the good novels regard the goodness as their theme, advocating the goodness, but restraining the evil.

At the beginning of this novel, the protagonist Charles retired from the noisy and chaotic stage life to come to an isolated house by the sea, with the plan to write a memoir about his past life of sentiment. By doing so, he wants to make himself become more reasonable and virtuous. As Charles himself said: “The theatre is certainly a place for learning about the brevity of human glory: oh all those wonderful glittering absolutely vanished pantomimes! Now I shall abjure magic and become a hermit: put myself in a situation where I can honestly say that I have nothing to do but to learn to good.”[3]

Aris Murdoch also believes that the evil is only the result of the misunderstanding of goodness. In this novel, from the beginning when Charles lost Hartely when they were still very young, Hartely has become a symbol of perfection in his heart, and has been the “light-source” that enlightened his whole life. She was one of the parts that make of the “goodness”, and a living evidence for him to live on. So when he met her even after so many years, he was compelled to pursue her again just out of his desire to regain the “light-source,” that is, the symbol of goodness. As he said, “---wandering in my cavern, I have in fact come near to the great light-source and ready to speak about my first love.”[4] But at the end of the novel, after so many troubles even some disasters caused by him just because of his misunderstanding of his love and feeling of other people, and also after after James’s persuasion of so long a time, and as the result of James’ death. Charles realizes that what he is pursuing is really a dream, it is a kind of “pursuit of a lost dream”, and is also just fighting for a “phantom of Hellen”. It is just at this time, that he wakened from a false understanding of goodness, and then he can have the ability to unstand what is the truth of the goodness through a more reasonable thinking.

3. Love and art as the media

3.1 Love as the way by which one can reach moral perfection

Murdoch thinks that the love can reveal the most secretive parts of a man, because a man may show his personality fully only under the intoxicated and/or crazy state of love. That is, she believes the love is the best way to reach truth. And love has the cognitive function, the idea love can lead a man to goodness and beauty. As the idea is showed in her words below:

What counteracts the system [of self-centered fantasy] is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love.” [5]

“The direction of attentio is, ---away from self which reduces all to a false unit, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love.” [6]

“The insight we have into the other through love, (similarly as in the process of learning a language) acts upon us and draws us to see goodness in that person, independent of the need to provide an evaluative rationale endorsing that person's behavior.” [7].

In Aris Murdoch's view, there are two kinds of forms of love: unadvanced form and advanced form. Unadvanced form longs for the right and possession. More exactly to say, it is a kind of mechanical and repetitive power, which makes oneself stay in the same place. In *The Sea, the Sea*, Charles tries to have love affairs with many other women, just wants to look at all of them as the image of his lost young lover Hartley, this love is the love of unadvanced one, especially when he traps Hartley and keeps her just as a prisoner, at this moment, what he is really attending to is just the image of his lost childhood lover Hartley, not to the real one now who is just an old, thoughtless, and a dowdy woman. So this kind of love can't help him to see and understand the human life more clearly, and to realize the pursuit of the goodness, which is the aim to be searched as he has decided when he came to the seaside, and only under that crazy state of love, it is very possible for him to betray himself very unconsciously to show his selfish, self-interested and strongly possessive nature to the other characters in the novel, even to himself at last after he experienced so much troubles and tortures.

The love, in its advanced form, longs for knowledge, and God. This is such a kind of power as can save the prisoner from the “cave”. In this novel, the torturing process of Charles's seeking love (which he thought represents the idea of goodness which has deeply rooted in his heart since his early day, and through which he also thought he can regain such a kind of goodness.) is also the process of painful changing, it is the changing from the self-centered unadvanced love to the advanced love which only pays attention to the truth of others. In *The Sea, the Sea*, after Charles experienced and suffered so much in the course of his seeking for his lost love for his lost young lover Hartley, after so many troubles and even disasters happened to the other characters and himself, just as the result of his possessive, right-holding, unadvanced form love seeking, and after his cousin (a Buddhist) continually admonished him of his self fantasy of his love for Hartley and he was shocked by his cousin's sudden death, (which he thought was caused by his foolish but stubborn behavior because his cousin always secretly helped him just out of his love for Charles, it is also a unselfish love of advanced form.) he gradually and finally realized the love he had been pursuing was just his own selfish, self-interested fantasy, other than the love that represents the truth of the others and the outside reality. So by now, his love has developed from the unadvanced form to the advanced form, meanwhile he can become more reasonable, understanding and sensible, and has the ability to love all people around him and the desire and interest to find the knowledge of the truth of all the other people and the whole situation.

Charles's unconsciously seeking the true love (though he misunderstood the meaning of true love in a certain, and even a long time.) is really his most fundamental motivity and cause to overcome all difficulties and finally reach the highest state of goodness. And he can finally receive his cousin's advice and eventually awakened from his self fantasy by the shock of his cousin's death, it is also all because of his everlasting and persistent pursuit of the true love which he can never really give up. But the love itself is not the highest aim that one pursues in morality, only the goodness is the highest existence of all the ideals. But also at the same time we have known that there are two forms of love according to Aris Murdoch, it means that the love has a more general meaning than a specific kind of love which we usually refers to, it shows its desire to get knowledge. It shows the prisoner's desire to gain knowledge and their hope to reach goodness that they in the cavern turn their attention from the shadow of the statues to the objects in the light of fire, and then to the “truth” of the objects under the sun. And it is the power of love that leads the prisoners to leave the cavern step by step. So love is kind of spiritual seeking for goodness.

3.2 Art as another way by which one can reach moral perfection

We postmodern people usually don't think the art have the moral function. We are much more likely to think of art having intrinsic and hold the more-popular art-for-art's-sake point of view. We tend to think of art as, perhaps, edifying or enriching but not having much to do with how we act

towards others. But for Aris Murdoch, she has an opposite view, she argued “art for life’s sake.”[8] Art teaches us about our world and about human nature. For example, “what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare, what we learnt here is something about the real quality of human nature.

Great art is liberating, it enables us to see and take pleasure in what is not ourselves. Literature stirs and satisfies our curiosity; it interests us in other people and other scenes, and helps us to be tolerant and generous. [9]

The whole novel can be thought as a memoir or just a diary, as a memoir because it is written about all the things that happened to the narrator Charles in his past life, as a diary because all of the things happened in the novel was just written down at the very moment just after the time when the things happened. Just as Charles himself said at the beginning of the novel, “I spoke of a memoir. Is that what this chronicle will prove to be? Time will show. At this moment, a page old, it feels more like a diary than a memoir.”[10] So correspondingly, during the whole course of all the things happened to him is, simultaneously the course of his writing his memoir or diary, and also his , at least sometimes, “recollection in tranquillity”, by using his own words. This course of writing is the course of creating his own art, and also a course of his experiencing the difficulties. In all, this is a course of appreciating the art created by himself by thinking and writing down his own experiences. Though this course is also a painful and gradual one, it can help him to attend to the reality, to feel the suffering and sin of the other people besides himself, because “Art..., it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in.... Art gives a clear sense to many ideas which seem more puzzling when we meet with them elsewhere, and it is the clue to what happens elsewhere.”As in novel, when Charles a unexpectedly found the piece of paper(which is thought as a part of the memoir, that is, the art he created) upon which, when he awoke in the night after being ‘drowned’, he had written down that very important thing about how his cousin rescued him from being drowning, and after he reread it, he realized it is his cousin that has rescued him, that has always loved and helped him though secretly, and use his own words, “...at the idea that my cousin had used some strange power which he possessed to save my life I was suddenly filled with the most piecing pure and tender joy, as if the sky had opened and a stream of white light had descended.....I had felt myself at the start of a new and more open relationship with him, that had been the merest prophetic glimmer of what I felt now.....And I want to thank him...”. As Aris Murdoch said:

The appreciation of...art...is...a completely adequate entry into... the good life. Since it is the checking of the selfishness in the interest of seeing the real... It is important too that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self.(Murdoch, 1997: 352-353)

Beyond its teaching role, however, and more to the point about its relationship to ethics, art makes us the better people. Art “to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul;” it “improves us morally.” “We can receive moral help,” she observed, “by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, ...”(Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1970: 65) Even more significantly, art has the capacity to move us beyond ourselves. As for Charles, he always has the aim to get a higher moral state through writing his own story, no matter it is at the beginning or the end of the novel. Though at the middle of the novel his plan has always been interrupted by the unexpected events, he never completely really stopped it. For example, when he came to the isolated house by the sea at the beginning of the novel, he just wanted to write a memoir in order to “to repent of egoism” (Murdoch, 2001: 3), by using Charles’s words. And at the end of the novel, after a series of strange and unexpected events happened throughout the novel, and he awakened from all his fantasies, he decided to completely set down to write his story, in order to relieve himself spiritually. And after finishing writing and meditating all the events, he reached a higher moral level finally, and he could see the truth about himself and others, as he said, “but what a ‘fantasist’ I have been myself.” I was a dreamer, I the magician. How much, I see as I look back, I read into it all, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality.”(Murdoch , 2001: 493)

4. Truth as the end

Love is a kind of desire to possess things of goodness permanently, it is a kind of power that makes a man progress continually, and in the period of progressing comes the desire for goodness and pursuit of truth. In the novel, the course of Charles's suffering exploration of love is, in fact, the course of his exploration of the truth outside his 'self'. In the novel, Charles always ignored the truth in the reality, but believed what he thought was the truth. But if he always looks at the other people and the outside world through his own eyes, and ignores the existence of the state of 'otherness', he will be trapped in his own fantasy, and keep himself far away from the true nature of the objects outside. As Murdoch says, "The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness." (Murdoch, 1997: 376) It means the way to pursue goodness is to conquer the "self", to turn the object of attention from "self" to "truth", from the attention to oneself to the constant attention to other people, only by doing so, one can reach the truth of goodness. What Charles lacks here is just this kind of attention to other people and the world outside his 'self'. During the course of pursuing Hartely, he always thinks that Hartely has been missing him as he did to her, But in fact, Hartely hadn't love him at all, and had never thought important of him in her heart since they departed when they were still young. And as for Charles himself, so is the case, meanwhile what was trapping himself was just his own fantasy of his past love, that is, indeed what he loved and attended to was not the real Hartely at that time, just as his cousin James said to him, but the old image of his young lover Hartely in his mind. Here Just as what his cousin James said to him, "Some kind of fruitless preoccupations with the past can create such simulacra, and they can exercise power, like those heroes at Troy fighting for a phantom Helen...but what reality she has is elsewhere. She does not coincide with your dream figure." (Murdoch, 2001, 348.) So such a kind of love, such a fantasy couldn't help him to come nearer to the 'real' truth. But as we know, the course of Charles's pursuit of love is in fact his course of the exploration of the truth. Because whatever kind of form of love he was pursuing, the most basic and potential motivity is always the same, that is, his unconscious or later on his conscious exploration of knowledge of the truth of the other people or the situation outside himself. In fact, it is this kind of motivity that held him on to search for the truth, to endure the pain of many events, to finally overcome his self-centered ego. Although during the course, his cousin helped him with his transformation, the validity of that help still based on his deep and unconscious love for the truth and his realization of his cousin's love for him which also represents some truth of the other people.

In the road to reach goodness, a person must realize the reality is completely impersonal or "unselfish" as Murdoch called it, it exists outside the self, and we can only understand it by giving up the personal desire and eliminating the "self". In this novel, Charles's love for Hartely has experienced such a transformation as from the fantasy of his own to his attention to the reality, and only through this kind of transformation he can see and understand the outside truth, and can finally make him completely settle down to finish his memoir, and can make his morality to be promoted to a higher level.

5. Summary

Goodness, love, freedom, and truth are the everlasting themes that are explored by Iris Murdoch in her works. In "The Sea, the Sea", through the relation of Charles's experience of frustrating and constant pursuit of goodness, Murdoch discusses these themes in a more exact and profound way, and further points out that the people only eliminate their own fantasies, turn from 'self' to 'unself', from attention to the 'self' to attention to the other people and the reality of the outside world, they can reach the 'truth' of the goodness. It is finally at the time when he has experienced the love, that he began to realize the real meaning of human life. And he himself can turn to be a more reasonable, more understanding man from a selfish, self-centered man at end.

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