

Treatment of Good and Evil in Iris Murdoch's *The Time of the Angels* (1966)

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of 'good' and 'evil' are difficult to define in terms of absolutes due to their vagueness and abstraction. This paper deals with Good and evil refer to ethics and morals applicable to all fields of life. It underlines Murdoch's view, Good is steadfast and consistent, as well as Murdoch's treatment on Neo-Platonism dimensions and innovation.

Key Words : Treatment of Good, Evil, Murdoch's view, Time of the Angels

INTRODUCTION

In social as well as literary parlance, it has been a difficult task to define the concepts 'good' and 'evil' in terms of clear-cut absolutes, at least in so far as a sense of vagueness and abstraction goes with them. Good and evil may refer to ethics and morals applicable to all fields of life. Broadly, 'good' is something that appears just and is acceptable to normal and healthy thinking while bad or 'evil' is taken as something that appears just and is acceptable to normal and healthy thinking, while bad or evil is taken as something that appears unjust, perverted emotionally, unhealthy, and all that lacks steadfastness. In the visualization of Murdoch Good is steadfast and consistent; it has the inherent quality to preserve itself. Speaking in reference to evil, she has described the badman as "various, entertaining, and extreme." With this clear idea in mind, we may proceed to evaluate Murdoch's treatment of good and evil in *The Time of the Angels* (1966). Murdoch has depended on the dimensions of Neo-Platonism as seen by her, besides modification, which is subject to innovation and experimentation.

The late fifties, which Murdoch calls 'the time of the angels' has an undercurrent that this is 'the time of fall,' present a difficult, distorted, and quotidian and iridescent life around, and such a complexity compelled

her to create a structure suitable enough for that. So she relied on a standard form of realism and sought to modify it according to the current needs. Like an intelligent rationalist, she proceeds syllogistically; taking up dimensions of Platonic realism, she analytically weaves her modifications, making them qualitatively presentable in the post-modernist situation. The concept of good and evil forms only one part of this six-fold Platonic realism, the aggregate of which is the something as total life. Therefore, the investigation of one of Platonism's fundamental mysteries conveyed via Murdochian alterations is the focus of this paper, which is set against the context of probing the notion of wholeness in life. Each individual in Murdoch's world is subject to the infinite reverberation of every moment of his experience; human beings are constantly haunted by the value judgements that apply to all their activities, and these judgements have both negative and positive poles. Therefore the moral element becomes related to the fundamental situations of life in their totality, and that is one of the aspects that *The Time of the Angels* deals with.

The particular situation presented herein can be easily, conveniently understood by discussing broadly the following features:

I. That which conserves itself is knowledge, and the pursuit of all meaningful knowledge leads to the

perception of good.

II. Good conserves itself, while evil is self-destructive.

III. The remoteness of good from the center where life is lived makes conspicuous the need for it.

The novel would incorporate each of these elements one at a time.

I. The total treatment of the novel is relevant to the fact that the individual is motivated by inner urges to acquire knowledge. Good enlightens and leads to progress, and therefore, implicitly, the pursuit of good is an activity in the direction of knowing oneself. This is so because knowledge has goodness as its object, and deductively, no man sins on purpose. The characters in the novel seek knowledge, but they lack wisdom. And hence they fumble and waver as to the choice and pursuit of the truth. The novel's main plot revolves around the question of God's endeavors and manifestations as both an actuality and an ideal (reality). In this light, the bishop's interview presents an important view of contemporary, secularized religious thought, which is carried to a state of devastating mysticism. For him, morality and theology have the same purpose initially, and he believes that Marcus, who insists so strongly and proudly that he is not a Christian directly serves the progress of a new theology that has jettisoned the old Trinitarian symbols. Claiming that we live in an interregnum, he says:

"It is time when . . . mankind is growing up. . . . Much of the symbolism of theology, which was an aid to understanding in earlier and simpler times, is, in this specific age, simply a barrier to belief. It has become something positively misleading. Our symbolism must change. . . . Those who have come nearest to God have spoken of blackness, even of emptiness. . . . Obedience to God must be obedience without trimmings, obedience in the sense of nothing. The church will have to endure a very painful transformation. . . . What we have to experience is not the destruction but the purification of beliefs".

According to him, God gives no reward, and therefore we must change the idea of a personal god to a darker, deeper spiritual concept. The abstract Bishop, therefore, not only participates futilely in the theory of demythologizing and depersonalizing Christianity but is also separated from human striving and the simple morality to which his pastoral life attaches him. How dark his knowledge is, we come to know by his justification (i) of Carel's loss of faith and his evil behavior as a part

of the step forward for the soul, and (ii) that of rejection of such symbolic ideas as Christ.

Marcus also pursues knowledge and plans to write a book entitled "Morality in a World Without God." He is initially upset and shocked as he says to the Bishop, "Suppose the truth of human life were just terrible, something appalling, which one would be destroyed by contemplating? You have taken away all guarantees."³ Although he is writing on what he proposed to call 'demythologizing of morals,' yet he considers that the mythological structure of Christianity believed in by Bishops and priests like Carel has an essential role in keeping the terror of meaninglessness at bay. He stands for the sensible man who suggests relying on the secular order but acknowledges that a mythical system like Christianity is associated with inconceivable evils. He desires to be a secular man and to make spiritual ideas like 'beauty' and the 'good' non-metaphysical, and so he is absolutely attached to the cultural alternative presented by myth.

Marcus's narrow and secular Platonism is actually closer to a modernist, diluted form of religion, a cozy reliance on the authority of "good," which is so endearingly associated with lofty notions including "perfection," "beauty," and "the transcendent." Marcus strokes himself on the back for having an elevated thought process, which involves analyzing the truth. But in the actual world, his complacency exposes to us his distorted intellectual state in that he subconsciously live. TOA, p. 103

Avoids ideas that are obscene or terrifying. Additionally, he is unable to move forward with the chapter "Some Fundamental Types of Value Judgement" since all he can think about are Carel and Elizabeth, who swiftly take on legendary proportions in his mind and are mysterious and unapproachable. The Bishop's and Marcus's knowledge does not conserve itself because all their intelligence and theology fade away when confronted with the power of Carel's demonic vision. This suggests that they have an easy morality and simple virtue that has been easily influenced by Carel's existential and evil beliefs. Clearly, they symbolize lack of clarity and half-hearted and ill conceived pursuit of purpose and knowledge.

Through his creative imagination, Carel likewise conjures up illusions, but they're bound to disintegrate when knowledge eventually substitutes them. His opinions represent a worrisome inversion of conventional wisdom: "There must be one goodness if there is one...."

Multiplicity is not pagonism; rather, it is the victory of evil, or more precisely, the triumph of that which was once termed evil but subsequently given no name. God's absence leaves more than just a vacuum for human reason to fill. The angels are free because of God's death. Furthermore, they are awful. At least, we believed that God constituted referred to by the title of a thing we believed to be wonderful. The realm of spirituality has subsequently dispersed and consequently the term has vanished. Nothing can stop the enticement of numerous spirits.

Having rendered God dead, he remarks that theologians have no knowledge of truth and that good is fruitless. This is clear from the following lines, where he says:

"We don't know the truth because it is something that cannot be endured. People will endlessly conceal from themselves that good is only good if one is good for nothing. Without sense or reward, in the world of Jehovah and Leviathan, goodness is impossible. . . is non-existent. . . . With the death of God the era of true spirit begins, while all that went before was a fake. . . . God made it impossible that there should be any true saints. But now that he is gone, we are not set free for sanctity. We are the prey of the angels."

Thus, Carel assumes the demonic persona of God and crafts a mocking miniature version of the huge conventional universe of the Christian God. The act of paper-dart throwing and the filling of his room with low-gear cosmic harmony such as 'Swan-Lake' music imply this. His fantasy works towards a substitute of the original Trinity (of Christ, Holy Ghost, Judas). He tries to become a god, possessing both black and white as is clear from his words, "Lucky the man who has the sugar-plum fairy and the Swan-princess." Pattie [here a substitute of Judas], his long-time mistress, whom he has trapped in "religious-sexual slavery" is his 'sugar-plum fairy,' and 'dark-angel.' Before identifying her this way, he catechizes her on the subject of God and redemption, asking her to be crucified for him and to bear any pains for him, and he says, "I meant to make you my black goddess, my counter-virgin, my Anti-Maria,"⁸ and proceeds to his love-making with a parodic, "Hail Pattie, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women." His 'swan-princess' [here a substitute of Holy Ghost], we learn with a sense of shock, is his niece Elizabeth (identified later as his daughter), whom he possesses sexually and has carefully separated from

normal open life through the convenience of her semi-invalidism following a back ailment. "Incest is only one of the ways in which Carel mocks his [Christian] vows as well as the corruption of the young." Carel's ideas on God and, his treatment of Elizabeth and Pattie fall out of harmony with his assumed stand as a redeemer because it is an illusion and a lack of knowledge.

Another trio, Carel, Marcus, and Julian, disintegrates because they are unable to give and receive from one another without self-interest. Julian and Carel were fighting for the same female. In response, Carel begot Elizabeth by seducing Julian's wife, and Julian fled with the girl. Consequently, Julian committed suicide. This brief doomed trinity functions as an allegory of the death of (a trinity) God. Carel the eldest, here, is the God -the father figure. Julian represents the killed Christ, but a Christ whose death is not redemptive but indicative of spiritual defeat by another figure in the trinity. Marcus, the third figure of trinity, "despite his descent into hell [Carel's reclusive diabolic factory] via the coal-cell is a version of the Holy Ghost, a sort of Platonic world soul uncertain of his materials."

Following the dissolution of this trio, Carel is by himself and appears to be in a dreadful state of mind, as evidenced by his strange, dark wrath and the sound of subterranean as a vision of hell underneath it.

Carel's pretensions and practices do not come to be conserved and are rather proved to be the other side of conservation and thus far from the real. The protagonists that work with him are all self-taught and systematic, having gone through stages of blindness, retaliation, disillusionment, astonishment, and finally fulfillment.

II. Then, the novel depicts evil as being self-destructive and good as an entity that has the quality of self-preservation, or conservation, as Plato calls it. In the Murdochian world, it is taken for granted that the idea or the presence of good is the given situation, but so is the powerfulness of evil. This implies that Evil have the ability to destroy, yet it's important to remember that Evil flourishes greatly before experiencing tragedy. Similar to an accomplished and imaginative artist, Murdoch has demonstrated the true nature of Evil and attempted to construct a fictitious framework that illustrates how it inevitably leads to destruction. Murdoch has aesthetically so created her characters that they fall into Plato's categories of personality: Carel, Eugene, and Leo represent the appetitive men; Marcus, Norah Shado-Brown, and the Anglican Bishop come into the category

of men of intellect; and Pattie alone belongs to the category of men of imagination.

Carel's process of destruction is simple and natural, with Muriel as a "demonic catalyst." He is unable to fill the void left by the death of God, and his suicide seems most logical. Earlier in the novel, Carel says at one place, "Those with whom the angels communicate are lost." The relevance of this utterance is not far to seek when we discover that he knows too much of the horror of reality to be able to do without fear of both his knowledge and punishment and fear of hell. Pattie, who had physical closeness with him, apprehended "a great fear in Carel, a fear which afflicted her with terror and with a kind of nausea . . . she had always seen Carel as a soul in hell. Carel had become increasingly frightened, and he carried fear about him as a physical environment. His fear had curious manifestations. He saw animals in the house - rats and mice - when Pattie was sure there were none." Furthermore, he observed a black object that continually flew in and out of the house. He has since become a "lost" man as a result of his interaction with the angels. "The childish gaiety that marked his paper darts, his 'Swan Lake' music, and his cosmic dancing — as a part of his God game - are, no doubt, a brave face on his fear." And, now Muriel causes the final breakdown. Having the inclinations of fantasy as her father, she plants an idea and scenario for beo aiding him in his quest for an enclosed virgin, and in the process, she becomes privy to the incest between Carel and Elizabeth. She recounts Pattie for the incestuous relationship between Carel and Elizabeth after being told to leave the house in an attempt to vent her anguish by hurting her as much as possible. Pattie then tells her the narrative of Julian, Marcus, and Carel, validating Elizabeth as Carel's daughter. From this point, Carel's doom is sealed. Soon, fearing exposure he commits suicide. His demise serves as a statement that this evil God, the corrupted, modern, and conceited angel, must die by being spurned by the very humanity he created, loved, and mistreated. Carel's personality and his ironic demonism, substituting and mythologising result in Pattie's defection. Pattie has been the target of Evil but is also the hope of virtue because she is myopic for sometime—till the time she understands Carel's real intentions. She has a great deal of understanding and goes back to her noble instinct, which screams for survival. As a result, good—in the form of Pattie—survives.. For Pattie, "He [Carel] was the Lord God, and she was the silent earth that moves in perfect

obedience," but Muriel's revelation caused the dissolution of the image of power and control that Carel as a God figure, had planted there. Even though Carel has given her form and divinity through his mythologizing, "she retains a longing for innocence, touches of a devout Low Church Christianity, a sense of guilt (she smiled at Clara's funeral), and a non-mythical separateness that does not bend to Carel's power." Her intuitive Good resists the final excess of Carel's ereetien demonic persuasion. She, Carel's creation, now willfully separates herself from him in a firm determined 'non-serviam' as under:

"When Carel had said," Will you endure suffering and be crucified for me? She had assumed he meant the kind of routine hardship she had grown accustomed to. This was the one thing [Carel-Elizabeth relationship] she could not bear . . . Her whole body felt a tatters of wretchedness. After all, there was no salvation, no one to call the lapsed soul The house had fallen down . . . she would have to leave him at last. She loved him but could do nothing with her love. It was not for his redemption, rather for her own agony. She did not love him enough to save him, not that much, not with that suffering. . . . She could not make his miracle of redemption."

Pattie had often told Eugene how much she desired to be a saint, to serve with a generous and cheerful disposition along with an innocence that was distinct than her miserable service to Carel. She is ready to suffer, but healthily, as she believes, "A purely good person would do so automatically, just like Jesus Christ did." Now she is full of failure and pain, and "her ability to tear herself away from Carel's strangle hold is a just representation of the real suffering of the human soul, which wrenches itself from the destructive and unserviceable god." Carel is destroyed by Pattie's innate strength, which also shows how intuitive goodness may be broken and yet remain sturdy.

III. It is true that beneath the surface, Murdoch's novels deal with irrationality in its various manifestations, and they have also been described as "disturbing visions of a disturbed world" because of the elements of eccentricity and perversion present therein, but that is not the whole truth. The antithesis of the good and the wicked is portrayed in order to eloquently illustrate how morality is ever-present. Of course, efforts are made to offer a sound solution to the primary issue confronting our modern, secular society. The novel has also been rendered dark and bleak because of the primacy and

unjustified power of conscious, intellectualized evil over unconscious good. In actuality, the sternness, difficulty, and remoteness of Right from the center of existence do not lessen the intense attention it garners, and its seeming lack only highlights the necessity for it. Pattie's disillusionment and her decision to start again after learning about Good—which she obviously learned through very slow stages—crystallize this idea. The subtle indication nonetheless remains there, yet it cannot be said with bias or exaggeration that the novel was created with this assumption.

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