

SOME MOMENTS OF DISTORTION OF REALITY IN IRIS MURDOCH’S NOVEL “UNDER THE NET”

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Abstract

Life is full of adventures that we might be a victim of. Life is also a playful net which throws on ourselves interesting moments in order to make us face ourselves in the process of coping with them. This is the net which is thrown on us day after day, moment after moment, there are moments that we lose a complete view and reflect a lot of negative energy. On the other hand we try to create our own net, as a counter reflection of the first net, and thus put the two of them in a constant struggle. This is done to create our own reality. A reality which reflects our deep inner self which is in a constant struggle with the outer, already established reality. So it is up to us to make these kinds of struggles if we want to break free from the stultifying movements of the life waves.

Keywords: Net, reflection, reality, life waves

A Short Biography

“Acompulsive writer since the age of nine” is the famous characterization of the famous Irish writer, Iris Murdoch. An excellent expert on classics, ancient history and philosophy, forever on the side of the protestants even though there came the moment when she became disillusioned by her political views, and abandoned them forever, involved in many love affairs, and this was her famous explanation about these affairs “I admired the man I was involved with for their personalities and their minds, and I both wished and needed to learn from them”, tried to formulate this explanation Times Obit.

So all the people she was in love with, for the above mentioned reasons, are very much present and brooding over many of her novels. She is the author of more than seventeen novels, but she definitely excels in her unforgettable novel “Under the Net”. She is a real warrior whenever she decides to write, and to contemplate about life, and everything that surrounds us, thus being a real artist of all times. The term of art in Greek (*tekhne*) and Latin (*ars*) does not specifically denote the ‘fine arts’ in the modern sense, but was applied to all kinds of human activities.

Art was characterized by Aristotle as a kind of activity based on knowledge and governed by rules. An individual became a painter or a sculptor, or even a shoemaker, by learning the rules of the trade, and Iris Murdoch learned the rules of life in a perfect manner and she perfectly used to combine them with the sometimes cruel process that all of us are undergoing, called “life”.

Moments of Distortion of Reality

In “Under the Net” the recurring theme is that of reflection: Jake is continually thinking about ideas, different kind of ideas, as a matter of fact whatever seems to pass through his mind, and he is also forever trying to see himself as he really is.

Through this work of fiction, the author tries to show us the reality, her lifelong desire which she never hid, but very successfully revealed in front of the reader. The plot has been introduced at such length not without a purpose: the task of ‘trawling’ for crime truth and morality issues, has by no means to be fulfilled. It has been quoted previously that “the respected author’s intention is to explain how deep are people’s minds and souls and how they affect each others’ lives”. She also never forgets to raise the question of discovering the means by which work and love, wealth and fame are reached.

It is true that Jake is the main character, that is the protagonist, and the narrator as well, but being the narrator he recounts the events from his point of view and as he pleases. So the reflection upon the reader is very successful in beginning the process of thinking exactly as he does. Thus by accepting his conclusions, we distort the reality.

The question that might be immediately raised is, would it be distorted if we made an effort to make our own conclusions?

However, Jake is not passive. He, of course, lives by his own ideas and distorts reality by hypotheses, but being on the other hand, rather curious in verifying the truth of his assumptions. Being an epitome of a truth seeker he faces defeat. From the beginning up to the end, he has lived by his own concepts. He has lived in a world of fantasy, covering the truth and facts with the net of his own imagination. His hypotheses fail, but he does not fail to

accept reality. It is true that he reaches this at the end of the novel, but the most important thing is that he is a changeable being. His state, at the very end reflects his state at the beginning: he is without a job, he has little or no money to live, and he is without a place to live. What makes him different is that he has got rid of his ideas and has embraced the reality. That is why he feels free like a fish in the water because his own life counts more:

Like a fish which swims calmly in deep water, I felt all about me the secure supporting pressure of my own life. Ragged, inglorious, and apparently purposeless, but my own. (p.250)

As in *a Severed Head* and *A Word Child*, in *Under the Net*, too, the main characters, because of spiritual blindness, suffer defeat – in life, in day-to-day concerns, in love, and in their self-assured plans. But if we look at the lives of them from a higher level, from the point of view of morality, -as both the book's structure and style invite us to do – we see that it is fairly "honorable". Why? Because their spiritual blindness is conditioned by the society. Society itself "explores" them and they cannot understand it. They just go on living "under its net", without realizing that the truth has deeper roots than they think. It is society which conditions people. We all fail when it comes for the revelation of truth. We cannot blame Jake for his wrong ideas, because society distorts reality for him. It happens just like in real life. That is why the characters can be freely divided in two groups. This comes as a reflection, a very natural one having finished the book and from the reader's point of view. Had one been in the role of Jake, and an individual in society, one could not have been able to distinguish between people. This is what happens with Jake: he cannot distinguish between the gentle and noble persons like Dave, Hugo, Anna and Finn on the one hand, and corrupted ones - Madge, Sammy, Sadie and Lefty on the other hand.

The pure reason they have become corrupted, is not difficult to be detected, they have searched for nothing else but fame. They want to corrupt Jake, too. Jake, on the other hand, being not used to the world of corruption, refers to himself as an 'unauthorized person' (p.139) and is constantly asking himself, for instance, if he 'belongs to a social class which takes money in situations like this'. In this respect he appears a real character to us – he is an 'outsider', he is uncommitted politically or emotionally, opposed to formal work, socially classless.

Murdoch has presented him as an intellectual with a precise purpose in mind: being an intellectual, a writer, he has a big world of ideas. He is not an ordinary person. He is not without ambitions. His enthusiasm is enormous. His appearance gives the impression that he is 'harmless', but he is extremely sensitive, and that is the reason that his soul is troubled by every kind of idea. Being not stable he is set in motion. His ambitions make him

react and reflect. He gradually begins to have a qualm of conscience and his life changes.

At the beginning, Jake is a sponger. When Madge decides to throw him out, he did not expect it. It was a sudden shock for him and blames Madge for not pitying him and ‘putting’ him ‘out and all for a man that lives on the people’s vices’.

‘We all live on other people’s vices’, said Madge ‘I do, you do, and you live on worse ones than he does.’ This was a reference to the sort of books I sometimes translated.

Jake seems to pay no attention to her words. But it is a truth in what Madge says: Jake is not a real writer and this is the key which ‘ignites the fire’ inside him. He accepts that he is ‘talented but lazy’. It is his laziness which has distorted the reality for him. He thinks he lives in his own ‘universe’ and other people are ‘inhabitants’ of it. “It is not in my nature to make myself responsible of other people”. (p.12) He sees himself as an orbit round which other people ‘rotate’. But life is not all flowers. It is contingency, that he ‘hates’, which changes the flow of his life. The very fact of becoming homeless so suddenly is contingent or uncertain event and bewilderment for him. He, gradually, begins to realize that other people live in their own ‘universes’, they have their own lives and no one can interfere with them. They are free agents like him. (Madge has a right to get married and to throw someone who pays no rent.)

Jake has ‘shattered nerves’ and ‘one effect of this is that I can’t bear being alone for long’. And it becomes clear from his relationship with other characters that his detachment is nervous, a kind of instinctive protecting himself from life, rather than a purposive search for ‘freedom’. This is his first pitfall, not seeing people, who surround him, as friends or simply as individuals in a society, but as objects of protection.

At the beginning of the book he refers to Finn as his ‘servant’, who never seemed to have his own ‘inner life’. He thought he could see persons as he pleases, but in the end Finn abandons him. Here we have hint of Jake’s trouble – a liking for ‘aspects’, a dislike for objective statements, a belief in his own inner life and a lack of respect for Finn. Lack of respect is an offense toward friendship and morality. Jake tells us that Finn talks a lot to Dave about religion and ‘is always saying that he will go back to Ireland to be in a country which really has religion, but he never goes’. Jake obviously does not take this in Finn seriously. This is another wrong angle of vision. Jake is not considerate and Finn talks to someone else – Dave. This is rather meaningful. Jake does not treat him as a friend. He does not enter his world and make him confide him his secrets.

It is Finn’s return to Ireland that finishes Jake’s isolation. Finn lives his own ‘universe’. Thus, in the case of Madge, Jake is seeing what he

pleases, and as in the case of his views of Sadie's and Anna's real relationship with Hugo, he is distorting reality to fit his own needs. He says at the end:

I felt ashamed, ashamed of being parted from Finn, of having known so little about Finn, of having conceived things as I pleased, and not as they were. (p.274)

Murdoch herself says: "It is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place." A wonderful definition, said by a wonderful writer, that should very frequently be our life slogan, in order to make ourselves be in a continual search of progress and freedom and unity of our mind and the Universe.

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