

**IRIS MURDOCH THE PLAYWRIGHT  
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TECHNIQUE**

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## INTRODUCTION

The present study is an evaluation of Iris Murdoch's contribution to the theatre. It attempts a detailed analysis of four plays, two of which are adaptations from novels written originally by Murdoch. The study is divided into an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter One, Novel into Play : A Severed Head (1964), is an analysis of Iris Murdoch's attempt to adapt her novel of the same name to the theatre, through a collaboration with J. B Priestly. The play is an uncovering of the 'abyss which lurks behind apparently civilized behavior.' It traces the development of the protagonist, Martin Lynch-Gibbon, until he arrives at a 'reorientation of vision' that enables him to start his life on a basis of truth and clear awareness of the surrounding world.

Chapter Two, Novel into play : The Black Prince (1987), is an exhibition of Murdoch's interest in 'the nature of art, especially in its connection with sexual love and moral action'. The play summarizes Murdoch's views on art, and puts before the artists an ideal pattern that combines perfection and steady productivity. The Black Prince is also a play about 'love' and its 'shattering effect' on people's lives.

Murdoch's interest in Shakespeare appears at its peak in The Black Prince where Hamlet becomes a frame that Murdoch's work inhabits. Murdoch's protagonist is compared to, identified with and measured against Hamlet. Hamlet functions as the ultimate end towards which artists should aspire, in addition to being a thematic link between the various issues examined in The Black Prince.

Chapter Three, Murdoch the Melodramatist : The Servants and The Snow (1970), is an analysis of Murdoch's first play written originally for the theatre. The play lends itself to several readings as it could be interpreted politically, religiously or socially. However, the present study examines it as a work for the theatre where it becomes an assessment of the attempts made by a 'good, well-meaning, but weak man'. The chapter cites the drawbacks of the play, namely, its oversimplification, resort to pedagogy, tendency towards didacticism, in addition to the unawareness of what is theatrically plausible.

Chapter Four, Murdoch the Dramatist : The Three Arrows (1972), is an analysis of Iris Murdoch's second play for the theatre. The study traces the development in Iris Murdoch's ability to deal with the stage. The drama of choice, the power-relationships in the political arena, the connection between freedom and clear vision, in addition to love and its connection with truth are all tackled in a maturer manner that reflects a writer who exerts effort to remedy the drawbacks of her earlier experience.

Despite the fact that Iris Murdoch is a well-known philosopher and a renowned novelist, her contribution to the theatre attracts the attention of no drama critic. Therefore, the study adopts an analytical approach and depends mainly on the text since it is the first lengthy study on Iris Murdoch as a playwright.



CHAPTER ONE

NOVEL INTO PLAY : A SEVERED HEAD (1964)

A Severed Head has the same qualities of delicate control and fusion of several styles and subject-matters; drawing-room comedy, shading into French bedroom farce, combined with Jungian psychoanalytic myth and cool philosophical wit.<sup>1</sup>

The thematic structure of the play shocks the audience due to its varying range. The scope of the play is at times broad enough to encompass life and act as a microcosmic representation of human dilemmas in general; while at other times it becomes so narrow that it can function only as an individual representation of some peculiarly odd relationships.

The audience struggle with "several levels of meaning in the play."<sup>2</sup> A Severed Head concerns itself with "the extremes of indifferenced love,"<sup>3</sup> as well as the distilling of "the moral, intellectual and emotional ethos of the immediate present."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, dismissing the play as merely a "comedy about sex,"<sup>5</sup> or suggesting that all it deals with is "a group of people either trapped in the toils of illicit sex or eager to be,"<sup>6</sup> would be a serious undercutting of Murdoch's message. "Her interest lies more in thoughts and feelings :

the inner drama of emotional entanglement."<sup>7</sup>

Murdoch acknowledges the recurrence of a "fundamental pattern of the psychological dilemma of three or four characters"<sup>8</sup> in her work. A Severed Head is one of Murdoch's plays that explore "the mental and psychological aspects of personal relationships."<sup>9</sup> It is also a play in which

the mechanical substitutions of low Eros marry intimately with the idea play, and are taken to their reduction ad absurdum. The familiar twentieth-century theme of the mandarin- educated-by- passion, which figures in The Italian Girl and (differently) The Black Prince, becomes high, painful comedy.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, "Freud is worn pretty thin"<sup>11</sup> and psychoanalysis is ridiculed and subtly attacked. This could be attributed to the fact that Murdoch is "primarily interested in prescientific dimensions of experience, in magic and enchantment and possession."<sup>12</sup>

Next to Murdoch's interest in psychology comes her interest in Shakespeare, whom she considers the "patron saint"<sup>13</sup> of all writers. Shakespeare's effect on A Severed Head could be traced in three main elements : the setting, the characters and the ending. In an interview with

Ronald Bryden, Murdoch acknowledges the "court element" in her work; the existence of "little Shakespearian courts often living under one roof."<sup>14</sup> The six characters comprising A Severed Head's cast form a small court not unlike many of Shakespeare's. Concerning the characterization, Murdoch's allusion to many of Shakespeare's characters - especially Hamlet and Ophelia - cannot be overlooked. Hamlet connects directly to the title of the play and provides one of the several readings of the severed head, namely, excessive rationalization. As for the ending, Iris Murdoch deploys the Shakespearian technique of multiple marriages. "The ending of A Severed Head disposes of virtually all of the very small cast in this way, and it does so after several permutations have been attempted and found insufficient."<sup>15</sup>

The stage version of A Severed Head is the result of the collaboration between Iris Murdoch and J. B. Priestly. The two "replanned the structure of the play and altered some dialogue and cut large parts."<sup>16</sup> Arriving at a clear-cut specification of each collaborator's contribution in any piece of work is not usually as easy as it is with Murdoch's A Severed Head. An examination of both the novel and the play proves that Murdoch must have been right in needing help with the area of "dramatic technique"<sup>17</sup> only; an opinion which Bamber Gascoigne agrees with :

(J.B.Priestly) has had the tact to know that very little was required of him. Few novels can have been transformed so painlessly into plays. Miss Murdoch wrote the book in short, self-contained scenes and the play uses all but one or two in exactly the same sequence.<sup>19</sup>

The characters are much the same in both versions, with the only exception of eliminating the two lesbian secretaries in the protagonist's office. As for the dialogue, which Vincent Brome describes as "snappy," "sophisticated" and "different from any straight Priestly play,"<sup>19</sup> it is lifted straight from the novel with very minimal alterations. Hence, Priestly's role in the adaptation is more of an elimination process rather than one of addition. Murdoch needed his expertise to determine which parts of her work would not be theatrically plausible.<sup>20</sup>

The plot is basically the same in both versions. It includes six main characters; three men and three women. The three men are Martin Lynch-Gibbon, the wine merchant; Alexander, his sculptor brother; and Palmer Anderson, the psychoanalyst. The three women are Antonia, Martin's wife; Georgie, his mistress; and Honor Klein, the psychoanalyst's half-sister and an anthropologist. In the course of two

acts, the six characters "begin changing their minds and mates".<sup>21</sup> Hence, with each rise of the curtain comes a further twist in the plot allowing for a new regrouping of couples. Still, "its liaisons tend to be more languorous than dangerous, but that is certainly part of the jest."<sup>22</sup>

Despite the fact that "J. B. Priestly and Miss Murdoch have kept most of the complication (of the novel) in their stage version,"<sup>23</sup> certain themes were flattened and others were totally omitted. An example of the former case is Georgie's suffering, and her attempts to be 'seen'. In the novel, Georgie functions as the embodiment of Murdoch's female characters who suffer enslavement due to their relationship with "selfish men who like to keep them in 'cold storage'".<sup>24</sup> On stage, her character is marginalized and much of her suffering is omitted due to the swift movement of the plot. Of the omitted themes there is that of sterility, both literal and metaphorical. This is manifest in the novel through references to Georgie's abortion in the first chapter; then in Palmer and Martin's discussion about Antonia and the fact that their marriage never produced children; finally, when Martin congratulates Alexander and Georgie on their engagement, saying that it would be nice for Rembers (The Gibbons' country house) to have children in it again. John Fletcher attributes the omission of this theme to the

adapters' feeling that "this kind of psychological problem would introduce an element of complication which it would be difficult to render scenically."<sup>25</sup>

Apart from these changes, there are some other minor ones: Palmer's residence is changed from Pelham Crescent to Chester Square; Rosemary, Martin's sister, is a spinster rather than a divorcee; Martin is not an asthmatic; Rembers, the Lynch-Gibbons clan country house, is totally omitted;<sup>26</sup> Martin does not move out of his house to an apartment; Georgie's recovery bed is at Palmer's residence instead of the hospital. Most of the changes were dictated by the nature of the theatre that imposes a rather limited locale compared to the novel. Therefore, the whole action had to be confined to the apartments of the main characters.

The forthcoming study of the play analyses it sequentially, following the development of the plot from one scene to the other. In the course of the analysis reference will be made to any difference from the novel, along with an assessment of the nature of this change and the extent to which it has either enriched or devalued the plot.

The play consists of two acts; the first of which contains eleven scenes, while the second is composed of seven

only; the rhythm of the play as a whole is a very quick one, and its "naughtily civilized"<sup>27</sup> tone mingles hilarious comedy with semi-tragic revelations. Therefore, "the play's motion is not linear, in the usual sense, but more like the arc of a pendulum, swinging from hilarious comedy to chill terror and back."<sup>28</sup>

The curtain first rises to reveal a composite two - level setting: the first of which comprises the Lynch-Gibbons' house to the left and Palmer Anderson's study to the right, while the higher level exhibits Palmer's bedroom to the right and Georgie Hands' lodging to the left. The setting is indicative of the upper-middle class, which is not new for Murdoch as she usually sets her plots in "clearly defined circumstances" where "wealth, a secure social class and intelligence are pre-requisites."<sup>29</sup> Murdoch's persistence in depicting this particular world in her works could be attributed to her interest in highly intellectualized conversations, confrontations and self - discovery. Therefore her characters are always the type that shoulders no financial problems, but saves time and energy for intellectual matters.

Comparison and contrast are two important means through which the characters get introduced to the audience: the