



# On Iris Murdoch's Literary Interpretation of Her Moral Philosophy: A Case Study of *The Bell*

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## Abstract

As one of the most influential writers and philosophers in British literature in the twentieth century, Iris Murdoch's relationship between her novel writing and moral philosophy has always been a topic of debate among critics. This article interprets Murdoch's fourth novel, *The Bell* expounds the writer's moral philosophy that integrates metaphysics and empiricism in a literary manner. In the novel, the experimental life on Imber Court, which lies between the life in Imber Abbey and the secular life in London, represents Murdoch's attempt to reconcile the two moral concepts. In terms of character portrayal, the critique of conventional type and neurotic type characters, as well as the depiction of those who bravely strive between responsibility and spiritual transformation, reflects Murdoch's efforts to strike a balance between the moral concepts of metaphysics and empiricism. A literary interpretation of Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* helps readers better understand Murdoch's intentions as a writer and philosopher, as well as her approach to the relationship between literature and philosophy. The philosophical tendencies evident in her novels align with postmodern ethical concepts, reflecting a unique modern ethical perspective that sets Murdoch apart from her contemporaries.

## Keywords

Iris Murdoch; *The Bell*; moral philosophy; literary interpretation

## 1. Introduction

The British female writer Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) is a renowned contemporary British novelist and philosopher, enjoying wide international acclaim in the fields of Anglo-American literature and philosophy. Her literary works have achieved considerable sales in the world. She is not only a favorite in the world of serious literature but also a much-pursued figure among the general reading public. After Charles Dickens, she is one of the rare prolific writers in the British literary world. As a distinguished and productive writer, her creative output includes 26 novels, six philosophical treatises, as well as a number of plays and poetry collections. During her creative career spanning over forty years, she was nominated for the Man Booker Prize six times and finally won the award in 1978. In 1982, she was elected a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1987, she was conferred the title of Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Murdoch's main profession was philosophy. She studied philosophy at the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge for many years and later taught philosophy courses at Oxford. She thought that studying philosophy was to explore one's own temperament, but at the same time, to attempt to discover the truth. As a writer and philosopher who had a significant influence on the Western literary world in the 20th century, while engaging in literary creation, her moral philosophical thoughts continued to develop and mature. The relationship between her novel writing and her moral philosophical ideas has

always been a topic of debate in the critical circle. Her moral philosophy anticipated many of the core issues in contemporary ethics, including the importance of perspective and imagination in moral reasoning, the revival of moral psychology, the turn towards narrative ethics, and so on.

In this article, Iris Murdoch distinguishes herself with her profound exploration of human nature and her serious reflection on moral issues in modern society, emerging as an indispensable figure in the contemporary British literary world. Murdoch's philosophical reflections on the relationship between human nature and social morality are characterized by a distinct dialectical flavor. On the one hand, she holds the belief in the existence of a unified moral standard that is external to humans. On the other hand, she argues that the existence of this unified standard should not overshadow individual habits, preferences, desires, capabilities, and wisdom. True morality is not merely a metaphysical process of self-sacrifice (unselfing) to comply with the established moral standards, but also a process of uncovering the truth of experience and expressing one's own desires. Many critics, represented by Conradi (2001), have taken note of this characteristic of Murdoch's moral thought. They depict Murdoch as an anti-Puritan, emphasizing her moral philosophy that combines severity and tolerance.

As a philosophical novelist, Murdoch believed that philosophy can only express, and the novel can show. Murdoch's novels are the literary interpretations of her philosophy in a sense by presenting abstract philosophical ideas or viewpoints through specific characters and stories. *The Bell* (1958), written in the 1950s, is Murdoch's fourth novel. As a work in which she first completed the construction of her own ideological system, it is one of the more mature literary interpretations of her moral concepts. The novel demonstrates Murdoch's reflections and explorations on morality through the experimental reconciliation of the conflicting moral values of secular and religious communities lying between the secular and religious worlds by Imber Farm, and through the portrayal of the characters' wavering and struggling between the two moral concepts.

## 2. Literature Review

As a prominent writer and philosopher in the Western literary world in the twentieth century, her moral philosophy continued to develop and refine while she engaged in literary creation. The relationship between her novel writing and moral philosophy has always been a topic of debate among critics. For example, Frances White (2014) commented that the world of Iris Murdoch's studies was expanding geographically and had been continuously deepened through the talents of the scholars engaged in this research. Nowadays, the Iris Murdoch Society has been established and hosts international academic conferences, seminars, and lectures regularly. The Iris Murdoch Society is thriving and holding an international conference every two years to celebrate and summarize significant academic achievements in Iris Murdoch's studies worldwide. An Iris Murdoch Library has been set up at Kingston University for researchers to consult. The development of Iris Murdoch studies abroad exhibits phased characteristics. Early Iris Murdoch studies mainly focused on the typical characters she created and themes frequently explored in her novels. In the 1970s and 1980s, Iris Murdoch studies made substantial progress with diverse research directions and critical methods. Researchers explored the relationship between Iris Murdoch's novels and the prevailing existentialist movements, as well as the creative characteristics of her works across different periods. Since the 1990s, Iris Murdoch's literary creations have delved into more modern philosophical issues, and her expression methods have become more varied. With the diversification of Western literary theories and the increasing variety of literary criticism approaches, Iris Murdoch's studies have gradually deepened. Research on the artistic style shift in Iris Murdoch's novels and the influence of moral philosophy in her works has extended into new topics. During her lifetime, Iris Murdoch exerted a significant influence on the realm of moral philosophy. Her intellectual contributions left an indelible mark on renowned thinkers such as Taylor (2011; see also Martinuk, 2014) and Diamond (2010). Additionally, she inspired philosophers to go on writing about moral education. (e.g., Blum, 1986). For several reasons, however, she was relatively neglected as a moral philosopher in her own right until recently. In the past two decades, a growing body of academic interest has emerged in her philosophical writings. Scholars, including Altorf (2011), Antonaccio (2000), Broackes (2011), Browning (2018), Forsberg (2013), Hämäläinen (2013), Hämäläinen and Dooley (2019), Hopwood (2017), Robjant (2011), and Widdows (2006) have delved into her philosophical ideas, highlighting their importance. Among those influenced by Murdoch's philosophical perspectives are notable figures like Martha Nussbaum and Charles Taylor, as noted by Antonaccio (2001). Anne Rowe and Avril Horner (2016) characterized the style of Murdoch's novels published between 1955 and 1962 as mystical realism. Although Horner and Rowe do not directly explain the specific meaning of mystical realism, it is evident that this concept is related to Murdoch's inheritance and development of realism, as well as her moral philosophy. The research perspectives and critical methods exhibit

characteristics of interdisciplinary, cross-field, and diverse approaches. In China, Iris Murdoch is more often regarded as a novelist than a philosopher. The introduction and study of Murdoch and related to her works in China began in the 1980s. Wei Ruan (2004) regarded her as the first person in British novel history to combine narrative art with professional philosophical thought. Weiping Li (2011) thought the art in Iris Murdoch's novel embodies a great tradition of philosophy and literature. Weiwen He (2012) argued that Murdoch explored the theme of morality in her works through the definition of goodness and how it guides and elevates life. It aims to illustrate how Murdoch assigns a lofty mission to art and artists in her works, persistently examining how great art functions to help individuals achieve moral goodness. Mingying Xu (2018) aimed to analyze the current status and trends of the translation, introduction, and research of Iris Murdoch in China, revealing that China's translation and introduction exhibit obvious tendencies in the selection of literary genres and work contents.

Current research has already noted the attention to themes such as self, freedom, and goodness of her art and moral thought in Iris Murdoch's works, as well as her reflection on the prevalent solipsism (egoism) in the 20th-century Western society. It leads people to imagine, think, and know how to recognize the operational form of characters' psychological activities in the space extended by literary works, analyze the forms and narrative strategies used in novel creation to analyze Murdoch's character shaping, and explore the ethical implications contained in Murdoch's works comprehensively. However, criticisms of Iris Murdoch and her related works as both a writer and philosopher, and studies on the literary and philosophical ideas they embody, still require further exploration in the world. They remain insufficient and lack depth and comprehensiveness in terms of research perspectives, methods, and content. Therefore, it is necessary to summarize and analyze the historical trends and current status of the translation and studies on Iris Murdoch and her related works in the world to identify the shortcomings and gap related to studies on Iris Murdoch and her related works, providing references for future development of Iris Murdoch and her related works in China and the world, also offering insights for the translation and studies on British women's novels in the 21st century.

### 3. Methodology

This article conducts a close reading of the text of Murdoch's fourth novel, *The Bell*, through a literary approach, interpreting the writer's moral philosophy of combining metaphysics and empiricism. In the characterization of the novel, the contrast between the critique of conventional and neurotic characters, as well as the portrayal of those who courageously attempt to balance between responsibility and spiritual transformation, reflects Murdoch's endeavor to strike a balance between the moral concepts of metaphysics and empiricism. The interdisciplinary research on a literary interpretation of the moral philosophy in Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* enables readers to better understand Murdoch's creative intentions as both a writer and a philosopher, as well as her handling of the relationship between literature and philosophy.

#### 3.1 Imber Court: A Buffer Zone for the Blending of Polarized Moral Concepts

In Murdoch's moral philosophy, there are two concepts that seem contradictory but exhibit a certain dialectical relationship, namely, metaphysics and empiricism. First of all, Murdoch does not agree with the practice in contemporary ethical philosophy of excluding metaphysical theoretical deductions and imaginative thinking from moral philosophy. She believes that this practice is actually a destruction of the rich creativity of human thought. In her moral theory, metaphysical theoretical deductions are highly necessary. They enable humans to outline an abstract yet clear moral picture, which serves as the blueprint for human moral life and practice. However, Murdoch's moral philosophy is a typical philosophy of two-way movement. In her view, people not only need a metaphysical way of thinking that unifies into one to bring a comforting formal unity to a world without form and full of contingencies, but also need to take into account an empiricist philosophical attitude of treating specific situations and circumstances differently, and to pay non-systematic attention to ever-changing ideas and feelings. Both metaphysics and empiricism need to be taken into consideration. A moral concept that leans towards either extreme is bound to deviate in moral practice and cause chaos. Only by carefully finding a suitable point where the two can be integrated can a true moral state of existence be achieved.

In *The Bell*, Murdoch establishes an experimental living space, Imber Court, which accommodates both metaphysics and empiricism to demonstrate and explore her endorsed moral philosophy. As a moral space integrating the two, Imber Court was defined by this nature from its inception. Founded by Michael Meade on the advice of the Abbess of Imber Court, the farm was established for those who are dissatisfied with mundane life but lack the strength or

temperament to fully abandon the secular world, and it attempts to integrate the metaphysical religious life with the empirical secular life, thus being called a secular religious community. The Abbess explicitly describes life on Imber Court as a buffer state, which is between the abbey and the secular world, a form of reflection, a kind-hearted and useful parasitic place, and an intermediate state of life. Through a year of moral practice at Imber Court, Murdoch not only demonstrates the feasibility of integrating metaphysics and empiricism but also fearlessly reveals the contradictions and crises that this integration may bring, reflecting her serious attitude toward moral issues.

Imber Court functions as a buffer zone where two opposing moral ideologies converge, striving to achieve an ideal balance between the world of forms and the world of contingency. On one hand, the inhabitants of Imber Court consciously adopt the monastic rules of the neighboring abbey as the ideal blueprint for their moral existence. They discipline themselves, actively distance themselves from the secular world, and lead a metaphysical moral life characterized by self-discipline, piety, and purity. People refrain from idle talk about the past or prying into others' privacy, focusing instead on tangible realities in the present. Labor and prayer are daily rituals for members: they collaborate to cultivate vegetable gardens and orchards to sustain daily life on the farmstead, while a dedicated prayer room hosts weekly gatherings for prayer, sermons, and spiritual purification, upholding a devout spiritual life. On the other hand, unlike the abbey, Imber Court does not entirely isolate itself from the secular world or adhere rigidly to predefined formal moral codes. Within Imber Court, community members enjoy a degree of empiricist openness and freedom. Membership is not a lifelong commitment, allowing individuals to leave at will. Pubs and train stations are a few kilometers away in nearby villages and enable residents to engage with modern consumer culture, such as drinking, dancing, and traveling freely to connect with the broader world; and crucially, there is no requirement for a unified moral consensus. Contradictory ideas coexist and can be openly debated. Imber Court is led by two figures, James Tabor Passey and Michael Mead, who hold nearly diametrically opposed views on foundational questions of morality, good, and evil, including their divergence between metaphysics and empiricism. James argues that humanity's greatest mission is not to acquire knowledge and freedom through experience. Instead, the primary requirement of a good life is to live entirely without the image of the self, maintaining that metaphysical moral standards serve to restrict and control the self. Michael, by contrast, posits that the primary requirement of a good life is for individuals to recognize their own capabilities, asserting that people should discover a moral life aligned with their own abilities and temperaments. Yet within Imber Court's foundational ethos of tolerance, these divergences did not fundamentally threaten daily life. A delicate balance emerged through negotiation and compromise, exemplified by the weekly Saturday morning general assemblies. During these meetings, members freely expressed their views, reaching resolutions through deliberation, compromise, or voting. Imber Court sustained this moral practice of accommodating contradictory ethical ideals for an entire year. Though the secular religious community ultimately dissolved and the Imber Court life abruptly ended, many participants underwent moral growth. James developed skepticism toward his own rationality. Michael reassessed his capabilities. Dora regained the confidence and courage to live. All fostered within an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and compromise between the two moral ideologies. Through the moral experiment of Imber Court, Murdoch demonstrates the possibility of integrating metaphysics and empiricism, as well as their ethical significance.

Murdoch does not shy away from addressing the problems that arise in her exploration; instead, she bravely engages in self-questioning and even self-negation. As critics have noted, her novels are not merely illustrations of her moral philosophy but further reflections on its perspectives and positions. In *Imber Court*, as the exploration delved into the deeper fabric of communal life, inevitable moral dilemmas emerged, leading to the premature collapse of the secular religious community. While debates among members were often fruitful, they frequently descended into the dilemma of choosing between metaphysics and empiricism: issues logically coherent within empiricism often defied unified understanding in metaphysical frameworks. For example, Michael viewed introducing farm machinery to improve efficiency as consistent with empiricist common sense, and opposing cruel hunting as equally logical, but when these two positions collided, he realized their contradiction that he supported mechanization for efficiency, which was natural, but when he opposed hunting with guns as improper, he did not consider that this was also a form of efficiency. As such dilemmas multiplied, community members recognized they could not devise a morally consistent framework across all contexts, therefore, the farmstead's secular religious life appears transient and uncertain. The farmstead's struggles reflect Murdoch's own self-negation and doubt. Yet such negation and doubt are integral to her moral philosophy. Just as she rejects fixing life's fluid complexity within predetermined theoretical molds, she does not advocate any moral ideology as ultimate, instead pursuing the highest good through continuous exploration. In Murdoch's view, a new, thoughtfully crafted moral idea, though potentially flawed, always yields insights and guides progress, even in failure.

### 3.2 Members of Imber Court: Moral Bearers of Responsibility and Spiritual Transformation

In *The Bell*, Murdoch's moral exploration is manifested not only in her construction of Imber Abbey as a buffer space that reconciles two opposing moral frameworks but also in her classification and portrayal of the novel's characters. Murdoch's typology of characters reflects, in part, her moral philosophy. Corresponding to her dichotomy of metaphysical and empiricist moral concepts, Murdoch divides her characters into two distinct categories. The first type is referred to as conventional characters. These individuals are embedded within the social whole, which dictates their relationships with others without ever being questioned. Their actions are constrained by the metaphysical dictates of society, leaving them almost no room for personal freedom. The second type consists of neurotic characters, who are entirely enclosed within their own fantasy worlds, projecting everything external into this illusory realm. They make no attempt to understand the reality they inhabit, nor do they seek a mode of existence independent of their delusions. Such characters are mired in their subjective experiences, oblivious to the demands of others or the constraints of reality. Thus, the two character types isolate themselves from the dialectical unity of self and world, duty and freedom in diametrically opposed manners. For Murdoch, such polarized existences inevitably lead them further away from authentic morality on their life journeys.

Then, what kind of people can discover reality and achieve a truly moral life? To answer this question and to endow human beings themselves with the identity of the bearers of morality, Murdoch puts forward the view that consciousness is the mode of moral living. In Murdoch's view, consciousness should replace external moral norms and the so-called rationality of human beings themselves and become the bearer of morality, because consciousness has the dual characteristics of taking into account both metaphysics and empiricism. On the one hand, consciousness has the metaphysical ability to unify. It forms a unity, intuitively integrating fragmented truths into a holistic cognition and seeking order from disordered details. On the other hand, consciousness is more concerned with specific events and situations in experience than with the formation of unified concepts. It perceives phenomena in the form of a value hierarchy, and the values themselves change as our understanding of things enriches. Based on these two functions of consciousness, Murdoch proposes that morality is both a kind of responsibility and a process of spiritual transformation. Responsibility means that people need to abide by certain external moral principles and regulations to achieve morality. Spiritual transformation, as another indispensable part of morality, is a manifestation of moral relativity. It means that consciousness needs to continuously update its judgment according to the changes in the real situation to make it conform to the ever-changing reality and true morality. Morality as responsibility without spiritual transformation will ultimately only become a formality and cannot become true goodness. Therefore, for Murdoch, a truly moral person is one who has normal consciousness and is willing to exert the moral function of consciousness. He not only abides by certain external moral principles, but also changes his stance and views as his understanding of events and people deepens, gradually attaining truth and morality.

In *The Bell*, the typical representatives of the aforementioned three types of characters can be clearly discerned. Firstly, Paul Greenfield, a visiting scholar on the farm, and Catherine, one of the farm members, respectively represent the neurotic type and conventional type characters. Paul is a quintessential image of a self-centered intellectual. In his marital relationship with Dora, he holds an absolutely dominant position. Paul demands that Dora follow him, center her life around his, and be attracted solely to him. In the name of love, he actually conducts spiritual exploitation and suppression of his wife. In *The Bell*, Paul Greenfield, who seemingly adheres rigidly to conventions and compromises in his marriage, is in fact the greatest villain in the novel. Because, in Murdoch's perspective, the greatest enemy of moral perfection is personal illusion: a psychological mechanism formed by the combination of arrogant and self-consoling desires and dreams, which renders it impossible for people to perceive the world beyond themselves. The evil of people like Paul emanates from their unwavering need to define and plan the lives of others in accordance with their own mode of existence. Eventually, Paul loses Dora and seeks solace in his research on ancient books. This is because only with these inanimate objects can he freely exert his desire for control.

Contrary to Paul, who is a neurotic type character, Catherine is a conventional type character who abides by herself and leads a moral life in accordance with external moral customs. Catherine, who was highly praised by James, the leader of Imber Court, follows exactly the requirement of goodness in his sermon, to discard the image of the self. Therefore, although she is beautiful, she doesn't care about it at all. Instead, she devotes herself wholeheartedly to pious labor and religious activities. However, the suppression and rejection of her own beauty also cost her dearly. When Dora first saw her, she found that her face revealed timidity and a look of being out of tune with reality, making it impossible for her to shine. Catherine's suppression of herself is also manifested in the denial and suppression of

her own sexual desires. She is deeply in love with Michael Meade, the owner of the farm, but buries this love in her heart and wholeheartedly pursues the monastery life that is isolated from the secular world. Her obliteration of herself makes the extremely ordinary desire for love become a bottomless pit of damnation for her. She believes that only death can atone for her sins. Therefore, on the day of the installation ceremony of the new bell in the abbey, when an accident occurred and the new bell fell into the lake, Catherine believed that this was God's judgment on her sins, and she jumped into the lake to accept punishment. Catherine, who was rescued from the water by Dora and others, still could not repair the rift between herself and the non-self. She suffered from schizophrenia and finally left Imber Court.

Of course, in *The Bell*, most of the characters at Imber Court are located between the two poles of the neurotic type and the conventional type. They may lean towards one of them and are likely to act in ways that harm themselves or others, yet they shoulder certain moral responsibilities. The spiritual change that catalyzes consciousness according to reality is the most important characteristic of their moral lives and the best way for them to approach goodness. By constantly adjusting the relationship between themselves and their responsibilities through consciousness, these characters have obtained a moral vision that is more important than the moral choices derived from human will. With this, they redefine the past, plan the future, and move towards true goodness. Take the balance between responsibility and spiritual transformation of the protagonist Dora Greenfield in the novel as an example to illustrate this point.

Dora Greenfield's empiricist moral life only becomes a truly moral one after she finds the metaphysics that suits her. Dora demonstrates a rare moral inclination in the details of life. For example, on the train to Imber Court, when she was about to get off, Dora saw a fluttering butterfly trapped in the crowded and dangerous train aisle. Her compassion for the weak life welled up spontaneously. At that moment, she even forgot her luggage, held the butterfly in her palm, and desperately squeezed out of the train to release it into the free world. However, under the metaphysical control of Paul, who has a temperamental incompatibility with Dora, these empiricist morals of Dora are negligible, while her shortcomings are magnified infinitely. Therefore, when she carelessly left the luggage retrieved from the train station in a nearby pub again, she examined herself according to Paul's requirements and thought that she was so stupid that there was no hope for redemption. In Dora's case, the metaphysical suppression that does not conform to her natural instincts can only bring depression, pain, and anxiety. Fortunately, at Imburg Farm, Dora found a metaphysical guidance that is completely different from the external constraints represented by Paul, which enabled her to see another feasible way of behavior. Regarding the lost luggage, Michael just smiled and offered to bring it back for her when he drove to the village at night. This smile immediately made Dora feel much more relaxed. It was as if all things became simple and stable because of Michael's smile. When Dora's rebellion against Paul led her to the craziest act, she and Toby plotted to drag the old bell from the lake and replace the new bell with it on the day of the new bell ceremony to surprise everyone and achieve the purpose of revenge on Paul. She rang the old bell on the night before the ceremony, subverted her own actions, and became the only one who accompanied Michael after the dissolution of Imburg Farm. Having finally encountered and chosen the right metaphysics, Dora transcended her original trivial and restricted life and obtained the lofty life defined by Murdoch. According to Murdoch, this loftiness is actually a reacquisition and enjoyment of spiritual power, which comes from the understanding and grasp of the huge and invisible power of the natural world. Dora finally obtained true spiritual power and achieved self-redemption.

#### 4. Conclusion

Murdoch holds that good novels focus on the struggle between good and evil, serving as a pilgrimage from appearance to truth. They expose the superficiality of outward show and cultivate inner humility. They are astonishing and moral. *The Bell* well illustrates Murdoch's conception of the moral requirements for a good novel, namely that the pursuit of superficiality inevitably brings about evil. In the struggle between good and evil, goodness can only gradually emerge when one sees through appearances and confronts reality. The efforts of Imber Court embody the pursuit of goodness. The farm attempts to reconcile the two extremes of "metaphysics" and "empiricism," striving to escape evil and seek a good life. Despite numerous obstacles, there must be some gains. Similarly, on Imber Court, Michael Meade and Dora Greenfield eventually break free from evil and find their own good life through their respective consciousness and different paths. They are both pursuers and beneficiaries of goodness.

Murdoch attempts to provide contemporary people with a metaphysical guiding principle that takes goodness as its ultimate goal in her literary works. She seeks to explore new models and techniques for mastering human spiritual

power in her literary texts, offering contemporary individuals a self-searching and survival guide with goodness as the ultimate aim. Based on her most authentic concern for society, Murdoch discusses and observes the inner spiritual life and psychological world of contemporary people, which carries profound practical significance. In terms of career choices, it would be inaccurate to claim that Murdoch completely shifted from philosophy to literature, yet she truly dedicated her creative life to literature. The characters in her works have long aroused readers' strong curiosity and unfamiliar respect for the complex spiritual world of humanity. As history, as a representation of consciousness, and as a dialectic of the human mind, literature has taken over part of the tasks and propositions originally fulfilled by philosophy from a broader perspective, continuously expressing experiences of goodness, truth, meaning, and freedom, as well as explorations of the complexity of mental forms and spiritual life. Throughout her long and prolific creative career, the writer leads us through literature to rediscover the burden of life, pursue an artistic realm full of idealistic spirit, and arm us against false consolations and fantasies.

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