

Between Symbolism and Realism: Death, Rebirth and Intertextuality in *The Book and the Brotherhood*

Fiona Tomkinson

In this paper, I discuss *The Book and the Brotherhood* in terms of a dialogue with various nineteenth and twentieth-century novels which it references. I also suggest that these allusions work to situate the novel between realism and symbolism. The novelists in question are Charles Dickens and the modernist authors, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence; I argue that Murdoch sets up a kind of dialectic between them, and also between the symbolic and realistic aspects within the tradition of the English novel.

Murdoch is situating herself within the nineteenth-century tradition as she aims for the kind of social realism embodied in Dickens's novels of London through her critique of numerous aspects of Thatcherite Britain, including unemployment, the pitfalls of sexuality and obstacles to social mobility. The example of Dickens is particularly apparent in Murdoch's grotesque portrayal of minor characters, in particular Tamar's mother, Violet, and the way in which the behaviour of such a character is shown to conspire with the socio-economic context in order to blight a person's life.

I focus on the influence of the key Dickensian text in *The Book and the Brotherhood*, *Our Mutual Friend*, to which we may be alerted by the presence of the unusual name 'Riderhood' in the novel, which brings to mind Dickens's villain, Rogue Riderhood. (The name 'Riderhood', however, also evokes Little Red Riding Hood and Jenkin Riderhood's role as the hapless victim of Crimond's wolf and thus forms a link with the world of symbolism.) Murdoch takes from *Our Mutual Friend* the realist themes of a corrupt and

money-obsessed society and its superficial veneer of civilisation and of the struggles of working-class people trying to gain education, sometimes in the teeth of opposition from a parent.

However, *The Book and the Brotherhood* also shares with *Our Mutual Friend* the theme (both realist and symbolic) of death and rebirth by water, a theme which recurs again and again in Murdoch and also in the late Dickens. This theme also links the references to Dickens with the worlds of the two modernist novelists directly referenced in the book – Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence (to which we may be alerted by the presence of works by Woolf and Lawrence at Rose’s reading party.) Woolf’s novels are permeated with the theme of water and her own suicide was a death by water; Lawrence gives us a number of deaths by water in works such as *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love* and *The Virgin and the Gipsy*. The novels by Woolf and Lawrence most clearly alluded to here are, I argue, *The Waves* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and the presence of these texts give us a hint that we should read the novel not only as social critique, but as an adventure in spiritual development and modes of being of a group of friends (whose characters correspond fairly closely to the six protagonists of *The Waves*) and also as a novel of mystical sexual awakening and apocalyptic protest with Crimond as a ‘failed’ version of Mellors (‘failed’ in the sense of succumbing to apocalyptic depression rather than succeeding in his relationship with Jean). I would argue that Crimond’s failure as a man mirrors the inadequacy of both symbolism and realism in the apocalyptic neo-Marxist world-view of his book: we are given hints that his book combines social critique with an apocalyptic note characteristic of certain aspects of the modernist tradition, and that Gerard’s reply to it will offer both a more nuanced view of social reality and tap into deeper layers of symbolism.