

The Dual Nature of the World in *The Bell*

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The Bell (1958), Iris Murdoch's fourth book, has been described as the most 'artistically coherent' of her twenty-six novels, while Murdoch herself thought of it as a 'lucky' novel, one that achieved the aims she had set herself in writing it. It was a critical and popular success, earning its author plaudits as the foremost writer of her age, with Chatto, Murdoch's publisher, printing 30,000 hardback copies within ten weeks of its first appearance. *The Bell*, the tale of a lay community attached to an Anglican abbey, is also one of the most apparently conventional of her works, taking place in a recognizable contemporary Gloucestershire that is peopled by recognizably human characters.

The Bell is a novel filled with doubles that often form contrastive pairs, representing a world of opposites, of duality. *The Bell* is full of symbolic opposites. The superficial or the 'apparent' is often different from 'reality,' the secular life contrasts with the sacred, hatred is opposed to love, the unconscious mind knows truths that the conscious mind either is unaware of or is reluctant to admit, and the agonies of the human drama are played out against the backdrop of a physical world characterized by beauty and change, with the passage of time signaled by hot weather succeeded by cold, by summer followed by winter. Nature is indifferent to human hopes and fears. It exists outside the realm of human concerns; its 'otherness' counterpoints the subjectivity of human emotion and ambitions. But an empathy for nature and its creatures betokens a kind of 'goodness'.

According to Peter Conradi, Murdoch's biographer, *The Bell* is Murdoch's first novel to be fuelled by Platonism, in which 'Good substitutes for God, and any authentic spiritual tradition, including appreciation of the visual arts...provides a means of ascent'. This 'Good' supersedes the apparent dualism of the world and its sets of contrastive pairs. Plato had posited two sets of reality: the world of 'being' and the world of 'becoming'. 'Good' belongs to the eternal, to the world of 'being,' while the finite and the temporal are manifestations of 'becoming,' of the deceptive reality humans perceive through their senses. This 'Good' is love, and it is the ultimate teacher and the perfect healer. In Conradi's opinion, the novel's bell is a symbol, albeit a deliberately clumsy one, of Murdoch's main idea that 'Eros [Love] is mixed and requires patient purification'.

We humans are imperfect, deluded creatures who torment ourselves with mental phantasms, with figments of the imagination. We brood about the past; we dream about the future; we live in a self-imposed hell of subjectivity because of our reluctance to live in the 'here and now,' to engage with present reality. Our only hope is to find solace in a love that can transcend the apparent dualities of existence. The Abbess, whose view Murdoch obviously endorses, provides the fitting epigraph for *The Bell* in advising a path that cultivates compassion and optimism: 'all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected, but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back'.

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