

The Kafka Factor in Iris Murdoch's Fiction

Maria Peacock

The impact of Franz Kafka (1883-1924) on Iris Murdoch's writing is not generally acknowledged. However, his writing informed her view of the world in the post-war years, and she knew and admired his work. Although Murdoch was ready to admit she aspired to and emulated other writers, she found it hard to say what she owed to Kafka. Murdoch always had sympathy for people who were alienated and particularly refugees, and this affinity was linked to her association with Franz Baermann Steiner and Elias Canetti both of whom were Central European exiles fleeing from the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime.

Steiner identified closely with Kafka as they were both middle-class German-speaking Czech Jews and there are uncanny similarities in their lives. Steiner projected onto Kafka his own history, his Jewish identity and his sense of alienation. Murdoch and Steiner's shared admiration of Kafka was a powerful element in their love affair, and they were reading his short stories in the days before Steiner's death in 1952.

When Murdoch worked in the resettlement camps after the end of the Second World War, the inefficiency and heartlessness of the official agencies set up to rehabilitate displaced people made her despair, and Kafka's portrayal of helpless human beings in the face of an unseen authority resonated with her concerns. Murdoch started to write *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956), a main theme of which is deracination, in the months after Steiner's death, when she had become involved with Canetti, who was a powerful influence on her thought and writing. Canetti made the workings of power the object of his life's study and he admired Kafka for his ability to depict every aspect of power in everyday life by portraying helplessness in the face of the authority of social institutions.

Canetti's thought and the influence of Kafka can be detected in her depictions of uprootedness with regard to her treatment of power and the powerless, the oppression and absurdity of institutions, and like Kafka, Murdoch also brings humour when she shows the absurdity of official organisations. She believed that through Kafka's writing we can see 'the real horrors which lurk in life', and his inspiration can be detected in her post-Holocaust novel *The Message to the Planet* (1989). In this work, which she wrote towards the end of her creative life, she transcends the boundaries of realism by bringing the shade of Kafka into the text, and elsewhere in her fiction he can be found not so much as an influence, as a presence.

(Iris Murdoch Research Centre, Chichester University)