

‘All The World’s a Stage’ : Theatrical Elements in Iris Murdoch’s *The Green Knight*

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Murdoch loved the theatre, with Shakespeare the reigning deity in the pantheon of writers she most revered. Murdoch’s penultimate novel *The Green Knight* contains many echoes of *The Tempest*, Murdoch’s favorite Shakespeare play, as well as of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In representing a novel incorporating many theatrical elements, it reflects Murdoch’s long-standing interest in writing drama. Its story appropriately revolves around Shakespeare’s famous observation in *As You Like It* that: ‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts’.

The Green Knight (1993) incorporates many theatrical elements and exhibits a special indebtedness to *The Tempest* and to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Like a play, this novel is divided into distinct acts. Its characters have clearly-defined roles and strong links to the theatre and serve, in turn, as actors and audience in the drama. There is little sense that they can exercise free will in the story; they are puppets obeying the direction of the stage manager: Murdoch herself. Two key scenes of the story are played out on the stages of theatres. The story’s action largely takes place in a few well-described settings, with Murdoch the playwright detailing the props necessary for these scenes.

The Green Knight is a novel in which Murdoch interweaves allusions to a rich mine of sources: to the theatre, to Christianity, to literature. The latter two are also seen as a kind of theatre: a venue for performances. Peter Mir is simultaneously the Christian Peter, an allusion to the tenet that ‘Peter is the rock on which the Christian church is founded’ and Shakespeare’s Prospero, while *mir* means both ‘world’ and ‘peace’ in Russian. There are also echoes of the Biblical, of the tale of Cain and Abel, in Lucas’s attempt to kill Clement.

The rituals of the church are likened to those of the theatre, and in the characters’ fondness for likening each other to literary, mythical, and Biblical figures, there is the sense that they are playing out a drama that has been enacted before. By constantly drawing attention to its own artificiality with its allusions and its improbable coincidences and characters, *The Green Knight* constitutes a meditation upon art and its uses. It rehearses Murdoch’s debate with Plato on whether art can be a force for good or ill.

Although Murdoch was to go on to write one more novel, *Jackson’s Dilemma*, it is perhaps appropriate that, just as *The Tempest* has been taken to represent Shakespeare’s farewell to the stage in Prospero’s renunciation of magic at the end of the play, *The Green Knight*, so replete with Shakespearean echoes and with its own Prospero in the form of Peter Mir might be considered Murdoch’s swan song as a novelist.

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