

## Freedom and Art in Iris Murdoch's novel "Nuns and Soldiers"

**Abstract:** Iris Murdoch is the twentieth-century prominent British novelist. Her novels are famous all over the world and they are exceptional as she always talks about the different causes of the problems of the main issues in her novels and at the same time proposes possible versions of overcoming these difficulties. This particular novel is not an exception. Her aim is her characters to strive, have hope and faith that they can do everything and asks the readers never to give up and to struggle for their aims.

The aim of this article is her characters to analyze what mission they have and lead free exciting lives. The ending of this novel is hopeful and on the final lines, we read "Ann stood (in the street) feeling lightened of her burdens" (Murdoch, 1981:512). This passage suggests to us, the readers that there is always a way out and the final word is always left for us.

**Keywords:** *love, art, freedom, finding self, Murdoch.*

Iris Murdoch's novel "Nuns and Soldiers" is full of contradictory topics. Even the title provokes a lot of questions, not to say anything about the plot. Why nuns, when there is only a nun in the novel or why soldiers, while only one character holds this title. One of the researchers of Iris Murdoch's fiction writes „The count is a Pole for no Poland as Anne is a nun for no God” (Byatt, 994:289). The author uses irony in the title and presumably, these words in the plural involves all the character, as they all are united around one main idea. Everyone together and independently is trying to hide real feelings, problems and they defend their life so as the soldier defends his country.

In Bakhtin, we read: „love lives on the border of hate, which it knows and understands, and hate lives on the border of love, and also understands it. Faith lives on the very border of atheism see its reflection in atheism and understand it, and atheism lives on the border of degradation and baseness...the love of life is neighbor to the thirst of self-destruction ...purity and chastity understand vice and voluptuousness" (Bakhtin, 1973:148). The same is true with Murdoch, the author in his novels always describes contradictory concepts, opposes them to each other, tries to distinguish bad and good, always warns us about forthcoming results and the choice is always left to the reader. Everything these is quite well described in the novel "Nuns and Soldiers" employing the main protagonist Anne Cavidge. Anne, who is Gertrude Openshaw's old friend, comes back into reality. Everything is much more difficult for her as she has ever imagined, she has to overcome lots of obstacles, for the society she is just a nun and that is all. She is invisible in this world, but she insists to be known to everyone, to be loved, has a great desire to establish herself in this society. Anne realizes everything this and is sorry for this fact, she wishes to live like an ordinary person. She is also aware of the fact, that she has got a particular mission in this world, she is sent for something but for what? To console Gertrude? To find her inner self? In the novel, we read: „If ever one was sent to another I was sent to her. But life changes, and how will I be, and how will this be a part of my mission, for it must be only a part? And indeed have I a mission, why do I think I have been sent back into the world” (Murdoch, 1981:147). Her thoughts are logical as she wants

to get to know her lost self, she does not want to be left as „invisible strengthless spectator” (Murdoch, 1981:146). For Murdoch’s characters awakening, refreshing, finding their lost selves is very characteristic. A good example of this is Anne. She dreams of our savior Jesus Christ. Christ is directly associated with hope, survival for every person. Christ promises her that everything will be as she wishes. Anne is eager for survival and asks if there is a way of survival anywhere. The answer to this question is typical of Murdoch-

You must do it all yourself, you know...I am not a magician, I never was. You know what to do. Do right, refrain from wrong” (Murdoch, 1981:297). There is always a way out. It is important to search for it, not to be afraid, never give up and in the end, everything will change for the better. This dream gives hope to Anne, Christ assures her that everything is temporary and one day all the pain will be forgotten, and the main thing in life is love. This passage of the novel is significant as the author talks about Christ, love, hope. Finding the love of Christ is connected to finding freedom. Anne lives in ambiguity, she does not know how to behave, is like a bird in a cage. After this revelation, she is frustrated, whereas the reader thinks that she might have been more hopeful.

„In Anne’s case the change was the other way round; she was destined to become wingless and weak and small. Only for now she was dead, pale, unseen and without significant images of her life” (Murdoch, 1981:147).

Peter Conradi writes about Anne: „She had left the convent to come out into loneliness and a sort of renewed innocence and a sort of peace” (Conradi, 1989:303), but there is another question: “Is she able to do this?” Anne is a positive character. We might say that she a good one, is ready to help everyone, tries to hide her feelings not to harm others. She falls in love with Peter, but somehow she hides this even from her self, as Peter is in love with Gertrude. Two feelings fight between each other in Anne’s case-faith and passion. This character is pursued with lots of hardships. She is "a failed nun" (Murdoch, 1981:304) for this society. Anne would like to change this view and has willingness Peter to look at her as a woman, but she is fully sure of the fact that for Peter she is just a symbol of purity. Anne prefers to bear everything in her mind than to change Peter’s impressions towards her. Maybe two seconds might have been enough to come up to Peter, but Anne did not dare, she managed to control her feelings. I think this specific behavior is freedom, as with Murdoch, freedom means to act with your mind and not the heart. Anne was thinking: „If I cannot have what I desire I shall die. Now, in more despair, she thought, if I cannot have what I desire I shall have to live on with some new unredeemable horror of being myself” (Murdoch, 1981:309). Anne is disappointed, she does not know how to behave, cannot control herself, she thinks that Count’s life is the beginning of darkness; it is true that she saw Christ in her dream and was thinking that faith must be returned to her, but this does not happen. When Peter left her, she felt miserable and depressed. I believe that, when a person realizes the reality, then there is always a way out. Anne found the strength to follow her common sense and this will lead her to the truth. She analyzes the injustice of this world and does believe that she represents a threat not only for her life but for others as well. Anne has a dialogue with herself, discusses different subjects. There are cases when a person’s feelings and opinions comprise other people’s views. The author with this character emphasizes the fact that freedom is the only relevant thing. In the beginning, Anne

is afraid of this world, but in the end, we see that she is quite happy. She is happy as she found her inner life in the free, real-world, she discovered and made sure that Christ is love and is ready to follow her dreams. We all are nuns, it is important not to stay in this condition and should fight like the soldiers to discover inner freedom and establish ourselves in this society. This person seeks the truth and at the end of the novel, we see that she did it. She feels wonderful as she maintained her pride and wasn't defended by her feelings. „She had kept her mouth shut, she had never told her love, and that at least was for her salvation. She was still empty and clean, transparent and invisible, although the voice that said this was still the voice of her pride. And she was homeless and free” (Murdoch, 1981:506). Anne analyzes that she should continue life, should survive; she has a constant dialogue with herself, has opposing views, but finally, she reaches an agreement with her inner self that her future, free, peaceful life is depended on herself. „I have got to survive... (Murdoch, 1981:505).

For Murdoch, a novel is a fine opportunity for uttering truth and searching for freedom. She aims to create free characters, she wants the reader to identify what freedom means for Murdoch's characters. In this novel, the monologue of the characters might be identified as a dialogue between a reader and a narrator. It is a well-known fact, that Murdoch idealized Dostoevsky because of his characters are free ones. Their inner struggles and dialogues to their selves are exactly the dialogue between the reader. Bakhtin thinks, that Dostoevsky creates not slave characters, but free ones, who exist together with their creator. They can resist with their creator, this is what Murdoch aims at her novel.<sup>1</sup> In this novel, her character achieves the essence of freedom by using the form of dialogue. For Bakhtin, a dialogue means “The presence of two different voices in one utterance” (Vice, 1997:45). This is well noticeable in this novel, as I have already mentioned above, the characters have opposing ideas. Tim is also a significant character in this novel, an unfulfilled artist. At the beginning of the novel, we see, that all characters get together at Ebury Street, with the Openshaws. Tim, who used to go to the annual meeting at theirs, was unnoticeable for everyone. The only reason for her visiting was to take the remains of the provisions to keep his going through the week. The only person, who noticed this, was Peter. Tim was on the dole from Guy Openshaw, after Guy's death, he asks Gertrude for help. Gertrude is ready to help him in return for taking care of her house in France. Tim willingly approves of this suggestion. Going to France was fruitful for him, as here he manages to awaken after a long deep sleep. He analyzes his abilities and decides to change his life for the better. What is the main reason for his changes? Firstly, the environment and then, his loneliness. If, in the beginning, we see Tim as a mediocre painter content with himself, after going there, he changes this view. The landscapes of France help him to perceive what real art is. This revelation is followed by his so-called baptism when he falls into the deepwater canal, where he is grabbed by a demon and vanishes him from this sunny place. When he returns home, Gertrude is waiting for him, as she has decided to sell the house. Gertrude's arrival happens to be fatal for them, they get engaged, they views and impressions on each other are changed after Gertrude's baptism in a crystalline pool; For Gertrude Tim is a different man „...from the pallid

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<sup>1</sup> “A plurality of independent unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is, in fact, the chief characteristics of Dostoevsky's novels”. (Bakhtin, 1973:7).

weedy rather hang-dog young fellow who had come to Gertrude with apologetic hints about needing money. He seemed bigger, stronger” (Murdoch, 1981:182). For Tim, Gertrude is “an Arthurian girl, a heroic girl out of a romantic picture” (Murdoch, 1981:185).

Tim is confused as he thinks that they are haunted, he is sure of their love not to carry on in London and this will be disappeared after returning home. „This couldn't have happened at Ebury Street...It's just something to do with here, with this place, this landscape. We're under a spell. But when we go away it will fade” (Murdoch, 1981:193) Gertrude realizes that after Guy's death she deserves to love and to be loved. „She had seen herself wanting to suffer, then very gradually wanting not to suffer, wanting to recover, wanting to want to live”(Murdoch, 1981:178). Their assumptions and doubts are true, as this summer haunting is short; after returning to London they get married, but their marriage is threatened by receiving letters from Daisy, Tim ex-girlfriend, where Tim is said to be a hunter of fortune. Who is Daisy? Like Tim, she is not successful in art. She writes novels, but unsuccessfully. In this novel, Daisy is one of the characters who have indifferent views towards life. Depression and failure are dominated in her life. She is always drunk, does not look after the house where she lives, there is a complete mess in her life. Daisy is a rebellious woman. She loves chaos, but beyond this, there is secluded her real feminine nature. One day, when Tim sees different Daisy, he was bewildered „Daisy was dressed in a shirt and a housecoat. She had, before Tim's unheralded arrival, made up her face, accentuating her dark brows and reddening her drooping mouth and making blue rings and black lines around her eyes. She looked, though grotesque, rather pretty. She had combed her short shiny dark hair, there was not much grey in it. Her eyes sparkled. She was glad to see Tim" (Murdoch, 1981:221). Murdoch wants her readers to show that every person has two contradictory desires and it will show up, which will be promoted. Tim and Daisy's dialogues are important, as they both are artists, not successful ones because of their inability to gain freedom. In one of their conversation, Daisy points out that „Writing's harder than painting. Painters can just look. They don't need minds. A writer has to have a mind” (Murdoch, 1981:223). Daisy is in love with Tim, for her, living without Tim, is unimaginable, so it is not surprising that what might have happened to her when she found out their marriage. Life is full of unexpected things. This has happened to them, once their priceless love has changed into hatred; at the beginning of the novel, we read: “As you say we're poor old us and we'd better love each other... we are a priceless pair” (Murdoch, 1981:137). When Gertrude asks Tim to leave her, he decides to go to Daisy's place and explains everything. On the way back, we see light in his eyes, he is finally changed. „The white light seemed to be with him again but it was different now...he could see the trees, the huge quiet planes” (Murdoch, 1981:395).

If Tim managed to find his self, Daisy will be enabled too, she departs to America. Ann and Daisy are more or less the same characters than Gertrude. She had to overcome lots of difficulties before finding her lost inner self, but the final result is more important. The main things are having an eagerness and desire. This already guarantees your winning.

Finally, everything returns to the usual place. Everyone finds their corner. The novel's ending is hopeful, as Murdoch's other novels. Tim and Gertrude continue living together, have their own business. Tim realizes that these changes are connected to France, their baptism in a mystical channel. Tim knows what his mission is in life; once a person told him: „You painters must feel as

if you are creating the world” (Murdoch, 1981:131). Tim understands the meaning of the saying at the end of the novel, but the key thing is that he is ready to live as an artist and do the job which gives you satisfaction and pleasure.

The novel “Nuns and Soldiers” utters the main idea of the writer. We may easily come to the conclusion that Murdoch is a pioneer writer, as she always talks about a problem, shows us different ways of solving this problem, and her novels always end full of optimism. We should not forget the fact that her characters have endured the hardships and difficulties of the war and the problems mentioned and discussed in the novel do exist in society even today. By gaining love and freedom, they should find what they have lost, they should understand the purpose of art and should define it correctly. This novel has shown us, that everything is possible and achievable, and we all should become familiarized with our selves and lead our lives thoughtfully.

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