

## **The idea of freedom in Iris Murdoch's novel "Under the Net"**

**Abstract:** Dame Jean Iris Murdoch was one of the best and remarkable British novelist, philosopher and playwright of the twentieth century. She propounds her theory of human personality. She believes that freedom and goodness play an important role in the making of human personality. In her very first novel Murdoch represents that freedom is only an idea and in later novels we see the continuation of this theme. Murdoch shows the readers how her characters suffer, their alienation, isolation from society and at the same time proposes the ways of overcoming these difficulties. In her novels, she clearly shows us that it is impossible to be free without realizing and gaining of certain qualities. Murdoch wants the reader to understand that being free is very difficult to interpret and that this universal concept is interconnected with love, truth, art. Murdoch's protagonist is seeking his personal freedom throughout the novel, this process is very challenging and full of a lot of obstacles, but he manages to survive and finds the way to the sun. Murdoch drastically shows the readers that without finding freedom and establishing oneself in the society it is unimaginable to create a work of art, in this case, a novel. Having known the bitterness and unfairness of life Murdoch's aim is her characters to achieve not only physical freedom but also mental, psychological and emotional independence. The aim of this paper is to highlight the key element-freedom in Iris Murdoch's first novel "Under the Net" and to show us once again that Murdoch stands for human freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of choice, freedom of speech but at the same time she is aware how difficult and harsh it is to achieve all of these.

**Keywords:** Freedom, isolation, seeking oneself, society, Iris Murdoch.

### **Introduction**

Freedom- this is the concept which is defined differently by every human. Iris Murdoch is one of the most renowned and distinguished writer in the second half of the twentieth century. Her works are full of different actual topics, among them freedom is worth noting. In Murdoch's works, this concept is never represented and discussed separately. It is always interconnected with love, moral, art. In this article, the idea of freedom is discussed on the example of Murdoch's first novel "Under the Net". It should also be noted, that at the very beginning of her career, we see the first person narration and this is not random. By using this technique the protagonist himself turns to the reader, talks to us about any issues and consequently, both the narrator and the reader are equally involved in the long process of seeking human freedom. Murdoch shows us a long, difficult way which her protagonists are on to change radically and finding their "selves" in the society where people only want to hide somewhere and not to fight for their desires and ambitions. In almost every novel of Murdoch we see her characters' actions, desire to obtain love, freedom. This article highlights the key ways how it is possible to achieve physical as well as mental freedom. Murdoch's protagonists manage this by means of love, truth, art. In the novels we see artists and this is deliberate as for the writer art is one of the best way to utter the truth. Art gives them an opportunity to see the light, goodness but this is difficult as it is achieved only by obtaining complete freedom, which in its own way does not exist without art and love. As we see, these concepts are interconnected. In the article, the evolution of the main protagonist is shown. For the writer, it is important her characters to become free, independent and not to be like people who are trapped under the net and unable to find the ways of getting out of it. Murdoch's aim is her characters to be able to think independently and freely. As soon as they start thinking we, the readers see the process of their awakening and how they return the reality. The aim of the article is to show the readers what freedom means for Murdoch's characters and how they achieve it.

## Text

“Under The Net” is Iris Murdoch’s first novel, which was published in 1954, and this novel provoked a great interest in society. Her novels are full of different and complicated issues and of course her first novel is not an exception. The writer writes about the themes which are often discussed in every time, art, love, freedom, isolation, alienation, seeking oneself.

The main protagonist of the novel is thirty years old Jake Donaghue, who tells his story himself. Murdoch likes the first person narration and the reason for this is that it has a lot of advantages: you, the narrator, yourself talk to the reader, talk about any issues, use the variety of words... explains Iris Murdoch at a conference held in the University of Caen. As Murdoch explains when it is the first person narration it is difficult to create other characters who keep up with the narration, this form is not suitable for her, and she wants to create novels full of different ideas and characters, where the main protagonist would be beyond the extra characters. “The advantages of writing in the first person are obvious. In a way they are enormous because you can then ramble around endlessly, you can address your reader, and you can produce a tremendous amount of verbiage which has got a sense in relation to the speaker... on the other hand, the danger of this is that it’s harder than to create other characters who can stand up to the narrator, because they are being seen through his eyes. And I think my ideal novel-I mean the novel I would like to write and haven’t yet written-wouldn’t be written in the first person, because I’d rather write a novel which is more scattered, with many different centers. I’ve often thought that the best way to write a novel would be to invent the story, and then to remove the hero and heroine and write about the peripheral people-because one wants to extend one’s sympathy and divide one’s interests”<sup>1</sup>. In her later novels Murdoch managed this quite well and the good example of this is “Nuns and Soldiers”.

Jake is an unsuccessful artist, but a talented one. He earns a living by translating works of the French writer Jean Pierre Breteuil. It should be said that he does not like this writer but his novels are a good source of earning money, as he is very popular in society. There is the question if he doesn’t like this writer, then what prevents him from creating his own book? The answer to this question might be diverse: laziness, isolation, fear-that society won’t receive his novel, lack of courage. He describes himself in the novel: “My name is Jake Donaghue...I am something over thirty and talented, but lazy. I live by literary hack-work, and a little original writing, as little as possible. One can live by writing these days, if one does it pretty well all the time, and is prepared to write anything which the market asks for”. (UTN: 21). On the very first pages of the novel we read that he has got “shattered nerves” and the cause of this is that he hates being alone. “I can’t bear being alone for long”. (UTN: 21). He is afraid of loneliness, he thinks that with someone he is secured and there is no danger, but this is instinctive behaviour from protecting his own inner self, whereas he should obtain inner freedom by staying alone.

There is one man, Peter O’Finney, simply Finn, his remote relative, who is always with Jake, does not matter whatever happens with Jake. A lot of people think of Finn as Jake’s servant, but this is not true. “Finn isn’t exactly my servant”. (UTN: 7). I think Jake feels protected with Finn, Finn always finds out way out from hardships, he is a clever person, but Jake does not appreciate and understand this, he is not interested in Finn’s family, his origin, his life. Finn is simply a faithful man for him. For Jake Finn is the element of this universe. “I count Finn as an inhabitant of my universe”. (UTN: 9). Jake has a false impression about Finn and somehow thinks, that he suffers from lacking of his own self and that’s why Finn wants to be near him and not vice versa. “Finn misses his inner life, and that is why he follows me about, as I have a complex one and highly differentiated”. (UTN: 9). For Jake the main problem is judging situation, whilst Finn has always been able to judge every petty problem thoroughly and find out the solution to any problems. He writes: “Aspects have always been my trouble”... Finn has “aptness to make objective statements”. (UTN: 9) In this short paragraph the writer already gives us hints about the problems of Jake. The faith of his own inner world, while he does not have this, disrespect towards Finn, lacking of seeing the reality, the fact that he sees Finn as his own things and not as an individual, independent person and sometimes he even forgets his presence and he himself proves this with his own words: “We sit together for hours, sometimes without uttering a word. I am thinking perhaps about God, freedom and immorality. What Finn would be thinking about I don’t know”. (UTN: 21). While Jake doesn’t talk to Finn, Finn talks to Dave, Jake’s old friend. Finn talks to Dave about religion and that Ireland is the only country, that really has

---

<sup>1</sup>Recontres avec Iris Murdoch, 1978. Iris Murdoch made this statement at a conference held in the University of Caen.

a religion and that one day he would return to his country. "Finn is always saying he will go back to Ireland to be in a country which really has religion, but he never goes". (UTN: 22). But, at the end of the novel we see that Ireland is very important for Finn and he returns to his country. Finn has his own universe and is not depended on Jake, as the main protagonist of the novel thinks. By departing Finn, Jake analyses his reality and is ashamed that he has never been interested in Finn's life and always behaved as he wished. "I felt ashamed, ashamed of being parted from Finn, of having known so little about Finn, of having conceived things as I pleased and not as they were". (UTN: 247).

Jake's and Finn's relationship is important as we clearly see Jake's main problem, that he has lost the cognition of reality, is counted on others, does not have inner freedom, whilst he thinks absolutely differently and believes that he has everything this. If, at the beginning of their relationship Jake is isolated from reality, at the end of the novel, when Finn leaves him alone, he is obsessed with regret and sorrow. Here, we see Jake's awakening and gradually begins conceiving reality. Kiernan Ryan writes about Jake: "...A restless, feckless, penniless young man on a quest to find out what he thinks, who he loves, and where his life is heading". (Iris Murdoch, UTN.Introduction by Kiernan Ryan). Who help him on this quest? People who are around him.

It should be noted that the novel has an epigraph from John Dryden's "The Secular Masque", and the last lines from this epigraph "This well an old age is out, and time to begin a new", are especially interesting and worth discussing. (John Dryden "The Secular Masque" 1962:6). This epigraph is interesting as the author talks about the change of time, it's quite good to use the word "change" as the author is evolving, changing and developing within the week. We see his metamorphosis he realizes everything and comes back into the reality.

As for the title of the novel, it could be discussed in different angles as in the social, as well as in the philosophical one. According to Fraser society is seen as a net, which has large and coarse meshes, which wants us, people to be trapped in it. "Society is seen as precisely the net which is always coming down to catch us, but which has large or coarse meshes that we can easily escape through, if only later to be caught on other, finer meshes". (G.S.Fraser: "Iris Murdoch and the Solidity of the Normal". P.83). I think, these are the meshes of freedom which obstacles the protagonist and he should manage to set free from them.

In the novel, the net has a philosophical significance, which is conveyed through the words of Hugo. Jake describes the relationship with Hugo with the following words: "With Hugo I felt like a man who, having vaguely thought that all flowers are the same, goes for a walk with a botanist. Only this simile doesn't fit Hugo either, for a botanist not only notices details, he classifies. Hugo only noticed details. He never classified. It was as if his vision were sharpened to the point where even classification was impossible, for each thing was seen as absolutely unique. I had the feeling that I was meeting for the first time an almost completely truthful man". (UTN: 61). Hugo is a very precious person for Jake, his book "Silencer" is based on their conversations. In the book, Annandine-Hugo and Tamarus-Jake utter the main ideas, which are represented by Jake. During their conversations they convey the main idea of the novel, that establishing anything and given it its name is a waste of time, and we should act according to situation itself which is unutterably difficult. The harder we try, the more easily we get into the net. "All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we try as it were to crawl under the net". (UTN: 81).

The net has double meaning in the novel. One of them is the relationship net, from where someone tries to escape, in our case, this person is Jake, who is depended on others and tries to flee from them and gain the free will and the second one is the net of words, concepts, by means of them we try to describe the truth. Jake is in constant battle and it is obvious that he is tired of it and wants everything to be his own. We can say that Jake's life is "Endless fight for freedom".(The Black Prince 1973: 11). If he isn't the winner in this battle, he won't be either free or capable of creating a work of art.

Hugo is the person who wants everyone to have his own way in life. At the end of their conversation he talks to Jake: "Everyone must go his own way, Jake, said Hugo". (UTN:221). Hugo believes that Jake can create a good novel, as every man has his duty to do. "Every man must have a trade. Yours is writing. Mine will be making and mending watches".(UTN:229). I believe that Jake has a great desire to work by his profession, but something obstacles him, he is in an unclear situation. We, the readers have the impression that he has difficulty to find right words, then making the sentences by these words, and the sentences into meaningful concepts. In the dialogue "The Silencer" Jake says: "Any concept can be misused. Any sentence can state a falsehood. But words themselves

don't tell lies". (UTN: 80). But the main thing is the word, the word which carries the meaning, why it is so difficult to tell the truth, why it is so difficult the writer to be free, maybe because the words have lost their main purpose to convey the idea. Wittgenstein writes: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world". (Murdoch: Sartre Romantic Rationalist 1989: 68). Jake has the same problem, he has his own world and can't manage to write, he should be free, should call everything its name and only after this he will be able to carry on his writing. "The function of a writer is to call a spade a spade. If words are sick, it is up to us to cure them". (Murdoch: Sartre Romantic Rationalist 1989: 64). At the end of the novel we see that Jake manages to call everything its name and understands his function in this life, that he should write and not translate.

Jake needs every character. He can't live alone. At the beginning of the novel we see that Magdalen tells him about her marriage, he is surprised and puts the blame on himself as he thinks he should have taken care of her better but it is late now. This is his problem, since he never notices anything and has his inner world; Sometimes the reader thinks that he needs these people but he doesn't let anyone to come up to him. This person is isolated, alienated and he himself realises this, but not fully. From Magdalen he goes to Dave, whom he asks for shelter. Dave is one of the best character in the novel, very sane and realistic person. He advises Jake to find a job, and indicates to the white walls of the hospital which are seen from his windows. "If I would be you", said Dave, "I would take a proper job". He pointed to the white wall of the hospital which loomed very closely outside the window". (UTN: 26). We can say that Dave is sorry for Jake as he believes that he is able to be a good writer, but he wasted his time. Dave puts the blame on society because of Jake's laziness and idleness. He considers that only society can awaken him, they should give him the motive to write, to gain freedom and independence. Probably, the fact that Dave refuses him to help is not random, and it is definite. If everyone behaves like this, then in the end he might be able to return the reality and will try to look after himself. Dave says that Jake is fool as he knows his ability and talent and tries to help him: "Society should take you by the neck and shake you and make you do a sensible job. Then in the evenings you would have the possibility to write a good book". (UTN: 28). In their conversation Jake ironically says that "Freedom is only an idea". (UTN: 27). Their conversation is significant as far as Dave requires from him to act, that it's already time for her to start living independently and do something important for society. Each character of the novel wants Jake to return the real life and they all want Jake to believe in himself.

Lefty Todd is the leader of the Socialist Party. Jake's and Lefty's first meeting is accidental in a small restaurant while searching Hugo. They have a small conversation and Lefty tells him that he has heard a lot about him and he knows that he is a talented but lazy man, and he is left-wing supporter but doesn't take part in politics. "You are a talented man who is too lazy to work, and that you hold left-wing opinions but take no part in politics". (UTN: 9). Lefty offers him to write plays about socialism, this fact is very good as Lefty tries Jake to get up to writing and by this suggestion we see that he trusts Jake. In the novel there are described several demonstrations and riots where Jake is involved too, but manages and escapes. The main function of their relationship is Jake to see the truth, understand the essence of freedom and to become an independent person. Besides these characters there are female ones in the novel who contribute a lot in Jake's development and awakening.

Ann Quentin is Jake's old friend, who he loves. She used to be a singer, but in the novel we see her as an actress. At one moment the reader may think that she doesn't like the theatre, as we all know that acting in plays is artificial. Jake knows Ann quite well and knows that Theatre can't be hers, as everything is artificial, in the theatre everyone plays; Ann is a very noble girl, pure, beautiful one and doesn't want to believe that Ann has become the part of this evil and unrealistic world. Together with Ann the writer talks about Ann's sister, Saddy, who unlike Ann is a very artificial woman and a liar one too.

Each character of the novel has a direct connection to the main protagonist. This is not surprising, as in our case we are interested in Jake, who should understand the concept of freedom, should be free from the meshes of freedom, should understand the meaning of the words and create his own book. One week maybe is not enough for all of these, but if we consider the things and events which he meets on his way of quest is enough for his change. At the end of the novel everything is in its place as it should have been. It's true, that Jake loses everyone, but he manages and finds his self, understands the phenomena of freedom. If he talks about Jean Pierre Breteuil as an ungifted writer in the beginning, in the end, he confirms his talent and considers him as his opponent. Jake realizes that freedom and independence is very important in life. He understood that it's time for him to have his

own place in this society, where he will manage to create a real work of art, in Jake's case, a novel. Malcolm Bradbury says: "A process of renewal has taken place within him". (Malcolm Bradbury 1962: 23).

The ending is very interesting as there are a lot of similarities with the novel of Jean Paul Sartre's "Nausea". Generally, in Murdoch's novels there is a big influence of Sartre and the writer has written a lot of articles about Sartre.

In Sartre's novel "Nausea", the main character Roquentin, who gave up working on a book about Rollebon is sitting in a café and is listening to the Negro's singing; he is listening to the melody and understands that time has come to create something, perhaps a novel, on which other people will think. Jake, as well as Sartre's main protagonist realizes that he should create something that will be accepted by society, on which people who are trapped under the net will start thinking about and will manage to escape from the meshes of this net. Like Roquentin Jake is sitting in Mrs. Tinckham's café, is listening to the radio, where he hears Ann's voice. Perhaps this was the last thing, which made his complete awakening.

At the beginning of the novel, Jake Donaghue says that he hates contingency and wants everything in life to have a sufficient reason. "I hate contingency. I want everything in my life to have a sufficient reason". (UTN: 24). At the end of the novel, we see radically different Jake. When Jake and Mrs. Tinckham are talking about kittens, she proposes her idea about kittens' origins, Jake answers that this is just another wonder of this world. "... It's just a matter of... I stopped. I had no idea what it was a matter of. I laughed and Mrs. Tinckham laughed. I don't know why it is, I said. It's just one of the wonders of the world". (UTN: 253).

## Conclusion

Iris Murdoch managed and described the person, who was able to change his life for better only within one week. This is metamorphosis which was so necessary for his success. Murdoch's hero is free in the end, which enables him to create a real work of art. In Murdoch's novel "the Black Prince", we read: "Without freedom there is no art and no truth". (The Black Prince 1973: 11). This free hero will create a novel. According to this novel, it's undeniable that the author herself admires art and especially literature. She writes: 'For both the collective and the individual salvation of human race, art is doubtless more important than philosophy and literature most important of all'. (The Sovereignty of Good: 1970). Murdoch agrees with Tolstoy and she considers art as the best way for communication among people. The writer asks the reader to accept the world with its own positive as well as negative sides. She wants us the readers to fight, never give up, not to be afraid of obstacles. Her novels are full of optimism and she, the author herself shows us the ways how to deal with these problems. The main protagonist of the novel had to handle with a lot of difficulties but in the end, he found the most significant thing-he found his own inner lost world.

This novel shows us that a human is able to deal with any kind of difficulty if he is free. Murdoch's novels are optimistic and she wants her readers to be active, determined, ready for any challenges. Her characters lead a long and difficult way to find their freedom. The key thing is that her readers understand that without freedom their lives are aimless. Her novels end hopefully, for example in this novel we read: "It's just one of the wonders of the world". (UTN: 253). Jake understood that life is full of wonders and fighting is really worth it. In "The Sandcastle" we read: "Everything was all right now. It was all right. It was all right". (The Sandcastle: 318); the family of Mors find peace in the end and they all start a new life. "Anne stood in the street, feeling lightened of her burdens". ("Nuns and Soldiers": 512). Anne is happy, feels light and is ready for beginning free life. The most important and significant fact in Iris Murdoch's novels is that her characters realize how foolish and aimless the life is without freedom. In "Under the Net" we read: "Freedom is only an idea". (UTN: 27). Her Booker prize winning book "The Sea, The Sea" is entirely devoted to this idea: "Sea is an image of an inaccessible freedom". (The Sea, The Sea: 263).

Iris Murdoch is a talented writer. On the example of her characters she shows us the bitter and difficult reality of this life. She very skilfully writes about art, freedom and it is hard not to pay attention to all of these. On the whole, we can conclude that everything might happen in this life, but you should never give up, faith, hope, love, freedom should not be lost. Almost every her novel is dedicated to these ideas and we feel hope, hope that everything will be well and tomorrow will bring us a better life, and the last word is always left for us, the readers.

## References

- Bove 1993: Bove Cheryl. K. Understanding Iris Murdoch. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina press, 1993.
- Byatt 1994: Byatt A.S. Degrees of freedom. The Early novels of Iris Murdoch. London: Vintage Publishing, 1994.
- Bradbury 1962: Bradbury M. Iris Murdoch's Under the Net. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1962.tb02195.x>
- Murdoch 1973: Murdoch Iris. The Black Prince. London: Penguin books, 1973.
- Murdoch 1977: Murdoch Iris. The Fire and The Sun. London: Chatto&Windus, 1977.
- Murdoch 1980: Murdoch Iris. Nuns and Soldiers. London: Penguin books, 1980.
- Murdoch 1987: Murdoch Iris. Sartre, Romantic Rationalist. New York, NY: Viking Penguin Inc, 1987
- Murdoch 2003: Murdoch Iris. The Sandcastle. London: Vintage books, 2003.
- Murdoch 1978: Murdoch Iris. The Sea, The Sea. London: Penguin books, 1978.
- Murdoch 2001: Murdoch Iris. The Sovereignty of Good. London: Taylor& Francis Ltd 2001.
- Murdoch 1982: Murdoch Iris. Under The Net. London: Penguin books, 1982.
- Murdoch 2002: Murdoch Iris. Under the Net. London: Vintage publishing, 2002.
- Murdoch 1992: Murdoch Iris. Metaphysics as a Guide to morals. New York. NY: Penguin books, 1992.