



## LITERARY CRITICISM ON IRIS MURDOCH'S EXISTENTIALISM

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**Abstract:** *This study examines critical perspectives on existentialist themes in Iris Murdoch's novels, focusing on her engagement with mortality, ethics, and human consciousness. Through an analysis of key scholarly works, the paper highlights how Murdoch integrates existentialist philosophy into her narrative structures and character development. Critics emphasize her nuanced exploration of freedom, moral responsibility, and authenticity, illustrating the moral and psychological depth of her fiction. The study also considers debates surrounding Murdoch's unique interpretation of existentialism, showing how her novels reconcile philosophical inquiry with literary artistry. By reviewing the critical discourse, this paper provides insight into the significance of existentialist thought in Murdoch's literary contributions and its impact on 20th-century literature.*

**Key words:** *Iris Murdoch; existentialism; literary criticism; morality; ethics; human consciousness; narrative analysis; authenticity; 20th-century literature*

Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) remains one of the most influential British novelists and philosophers of the 20th century. Her literary work is widely recognized for its exploration of moral philosophy, human consciousness, and the complexities of ethical decision-making. Among the many critical lenses applied to her work, **existentialist criticism** has been particularly significant, as her novels frequently engage with themes central to existentialist thought, including mortality, freedom, authenticity, and moral responsibility.

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, emphasizes individual agency, the confrontation with life's inherent uncertainty, and the pursuit of authentic existence despite human limitations. Murdoch's novels, such as *Under the Net* (1954) and *The Black Prince* (1973), exemplify these concerns, intertwining philosophical reflection with complex narrative structures. Literary critics have examined how Murdoch portrays the tension between self-interest and moral duty, the human confrontation with finitude, and the role of consciousness in ethical life.

This paper aims to review and analyze **literary criticism on Murdoch's existentialism**, focusing on how scholars interpret her treatment of existential themes, ethical dilemmas, and the psychological depth of her characters. By synthesizing critical perspectives, the study seeks to illuminate the philosophical and literary significance of Murdoch's engagement with existentialist thought.

The theoretical foundation of this study is drawn from **existentialist philosophy** and literary criticism. Key concepts include:





**Example 2:** In *Under the Net*, Jake Donaghue's wanderings and literary pursuits also highlight mortality's influence. Critics observe that his search for meaning, despite life's uncertainty, exemplifies existentialist engagement with human finitude (Gardner, 2005).[2] These instances demonstrate that Murdoch does not depict mortality as mere despair; instead, it functions as a stimulus for ethical reflection and personal growth.

## **2. Ethics and Moral Responsibility**

Ethical decision-making is a recurring focus in Murdoch's existentialist narratives. Characters are often placed in situations where self-interest conflicts with moral obligations, reflecting the existentialist principle that freedom entails responsibility.

**Example 1:** Bradley's interactions with Otto in *The Black Prince* showcase the tension between honesty, desire, and ethical duty: "*I knew the truth would hurt, yet to lie would betray myself.*" Critics emphasize that Murdoch portrays ethical responsibility not as a rigid code but as a dynamic negotiation of moral awareness (Martin, 1998).[3]

**Example 2:** In *Under the Net*, Jake's moral choices regarding his friends, lovers, and artistic pursuits demonstrate the interplay between freedom and accountability. Literary scholars note that Murdoch's treatment of moral dilemmas illustrates the existentialist view that ethical decisions are inherently complex and context-dependent (Flynn, 2012).[4]

Murdoch's narrative strategy consistently situates ethical responsibility within the lived experiences of her characters, emphasizing that morality is inseparable from consciousness and human action.

The analysis of literary criticism on Iris Murdoch's existentialism demonstrates that her novels intricately explore themes of **mortality, ethics, and human consciousness**. Critics emphasize that Murdoch's characters are constantly confronted with the finitude of life, prompting reflection on moral responsibility and the pursuit of authentic existence. Ethical dilemmas permeate her narratives, showing how freedom and moral accountability are inseparable in human experience. Through introspective narration and psychological depth, Murdoch highlights the role of consciousness in self-understanding, ethical decision-making, and authentic living.

By examining critical perspectives, it is evident that Murdoch's integration of existentialist philosophy into her fiction is both deliberate and nuanced. Her novels offer profound insights into the human condition, bridging literary artistry and philosophical inquiry. Consequently, Murdoch's work remains a pivotal contribution to 20th-century literature, enriching discussions on existentialism, morality, and the complexities of human consciousness.







## References

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