

Hannah, The False God in Iris Murdoch's Religious Garden

Fang Wu

College of Humanities, Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, 110136, China

Abstract. Alice Murdoch's novel *The Unicorn* was written in 1963, and it is a book advocating "goodness" with the purpose of guiding people out of the dilemma of anxiety and alienation. Experiencing anxiety and falling into alienation is one's helpless compromise to the predicament of survival, but this is not the pessimistic philosophy, but the exploration of the truth of the world and life through the path to goodness. By analyzing Hannah, the main character of *The Unicorn* who is a messenger of the "Good" or just a false "God", this article explores Murdoch's viewpoints of the "Good" and the "God" on the forming and developing progression of her religious points of view.

Keywords: *The Unicorn*, religion, goodness.

1. Introduction about Iris Murdoch and *The Unicorn*

As an eminent British female novelist and playwright, Iris Murdoch enjoys a high reputation world widely. Her thoughts in religion are evident in her novels which have as a central concern the ethics and moral alternatives of the English middle class. A frequent theme is that love is rare and possible only when an individual recognizes the existence of someone other than himself. Iris Murdoch's novel are often intricately plotted and treat complex and fantastic situations rather than melodramatically. Sometimes to heighten the nightmare, the author relies upon haunting settings and emotionally charged atmospheres, such as Victorian mansions, gothic castles, weird landscapes and interiors. Her famous book *The Unicorn* (1963) won enthusiastic review and was considered an evident book that symbolize the state of mind of the English middle class at that time. Typical of Murdoch in its irresolution, the novel has contributed to her reputation as one of the greatest contemporary symbolic writers, for *The Unicorn* can be read as an allegory of combined sexual and spiritual devotion.

In her seventh novel, Iris Murdoch borrows from the gothic tradition in literature to create a world of mystery and enchantment, and her plot relies heavily on surprise, suspense, and fragmented revelations of past actions and their present consequences. Revealed in bits, the antecedent action of the novel is essential to its plot. *The Unicorn* is about the self – imposed exile and imprisonment of a group of people at Gaze castle who weave themselves into a web of enchantment designed by Hannah – Smith and Gerald Scottow.

Nine years before the novel's opening, Hannah Crean-Smith, mistress of Gaze Castle and wife of her first cousin Peter, began an affair with her neighbor, Philip "Pip" Lejour. Two years later, they were discovered by Peter, and after an ensuing argument, during which Hannah tried to kill Peter by pushing him over a cliff and thereby crippling him, he imprisoned her in the house and went to New York to pursue a homosexual relationship. Left as jailer was Gerald Scottow, Peter's lifelong friend and former lover. After two more years, Hannah tried to escape twice but both failed. The novel begins with Marian Taylor's arrival at Gaze. And, she soon learns that she is to be companion to Hannah, who has now been imprisoned for seven years. Enchanted, as all are, by the fey and mysterious Hannah, Marian slowly begins to learn the sad history of Gaze and its inhabitants, and she falls more and more deeply under the spell of the place. Another outsider, Effingham Cooper, arrives at Riders, and together the two forms the narrative consciousness of the novel. Effingham, in love with Hannah for four years and a frequent houseguest at Riders, quickly forms an alliance with Marian in pity for Hannah's plight; together they plan to kidnap her and take her away from Gaze. The plan fails because of the intercession of Pip's sister, Alice, and Peter's imminent return is announced.

By this point, the facts of the story have all been revealed, if not all the motives and complexities. During the wait for Peter, many emotional and sexual tensions surface, and after apparently having dominated Hannah sexually, Gerald is shot and killed by Hannah. Shortly afterward, Hannah goes

out and drowns herself. On his arrival, Peter is drowned by Denis Nolan, Hannah's bookkeeper, in a staged accident, and Pip commits suicide. Before their dispersal, the remaining characters learn that Hannah has left her estate to Max Lejour, the scholarly father of Pip and Alice, whom she had never met but with whom she felt a spiritual kinship.

2. Hannah, the False God Iris Murdoch's Religious Garden

2.1. The Religious Attitudes of the Characters in The Unicorn

To Murdoch, a knowledge of Good, with a capital "G," is inherent in all people. In contemporary technological society, the notion of a personal god is outmoded, as it was for such thinkers as Kant as early as the eighteenth century. Murdoch cited Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism as religions that function well and have a functional morality without belief in a personal god who presides over heaven and hell and who keeps people from sinning. In other words, Murdoch observed that religion in a scientific age, which has its roots in the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, is, for better or worse, rapidly becoming demythologized. The danger she saw in such demythologizing is that humans, their behavior no longer molded by their belief in a personal god that can wreak vengeance on them if they stray from the principles of basic morality, may deviate noticeably from the concept of the self as moral. Murdoch, however, was not pessimistic because she believed that a sense of what is good and moral lurks within all people and that, in the long run, they will strive for Good. Every chapter and every character in the book is infused with their own religious theory of innate ideas. In this book, so many characters have their own religious view and values which make them subjectively and blindly followed and worshiped Hannah, "the false God" which makes us aware of how strongly they were eager for "God", or exactly eager for "Good", to get their own innately peace.

How, then, can humans move from this subjectivity as they seek the Good? This question is crucial to Murdoch's proposals regarding human behavior. For her, the quintessential move toward Goodness comes through love. And this kind of faithful religious love enables people to move from one subjectivity to another, to combine two subjectivities and then, as their love becomes more encompassing, to understand and unite with other subjectivities. Seven years ago, Hannah was imprisoned in the name of adultery and murder, but the original action was she longed for her love, which in a sense means good. And plus her seven years sufferings, which made so many outside audiences focus on their own subjectivity and believe in that their action were saving God from sufferings.

Without accepting a personal god, Murdoch demonstrated how humans can achieve high levels of morality through their own discovery of the attractiveness of Good as they broaden the bases of their own subjectivities. For Murdoch, she believes, that humans are by nature essentially moral beings, that they have an innate capacity to know good from evil, that although radically imperfect and incapable of perfection, "we can and do love Good and are drawn towards it." "Good" here is not a thing, and it is not God, but rather it is what Murdoch would like to put in place of God. According to Murdoch, the old idea of God as a supernatural being in charge of a heaven and hell is no longer credible in a scientific age. The demythologization of the Christian religion is proceeding whether one likes it or not; the danger is that along with the withdrawal of belief in the supernatural, people are also losing the concept of the self as a moral and spiritual being, losing all sense of transcendence. What is needed is a new understanding of religion and morality and of the bridge between them. So she believes that religion can exist, in fact does exist, more fully without the idea of a personal God; "God is not visible or tangible." According to Murdoch, many religious people believe that "the old literal personal elsewhere God" is an anachronism in an increasingly scientific and skeptical age. Yet humankind must not lose the conception of the transcendent Good; it matters profoundly that people "talk or think about 'the Good' or 'virtue' as something unitary, rather than just instancing cases of admirable conduct. This 'Good' is not the old God in disguise, but rather what the old God symbolized." Demythologized religion would not mean a coldly intellectual world stripped of icons,

myth, and religious color. Rather, Murdoch sees a world “full of images of God and hierarchies pointing to God this is what (if we put Good for God) the world is full of!” The two outsiders, Marian and Effingham, are the dual protagonists of the novel, both of them are nonreligious person but both are in their process of pursuing the goodness. Both are excluded not only from the domestic lives of the two primary groups but also from themselves. Neither has actually “lived” before, both are fleeing pedestrian love affairs, and both seek in Hannah the elements missing from their own lives. Both have so idealized Hannah in their own fantasies that they fail to see the reality of the situation around them; And in this book, the actions that the outsiders took great pains to save Hannah was also a progress to pursue the goodness in their innately mind, whether they referred to their subjectivity or not.

Murdoch is also exploring the connection between sexual servitude and religious devotion in a Freudian vein here. Her gothic framework allows her to examine a domestic situation in terms of traditional class structure, but one which is also founded on perceptions of what is “good” and “pure” and is actually based in a hierarchy of erotic dominance and symbiosis. The class structure is false, for sexual and spiritual needs bind these characters in their personal and domestic relationships. Each suffers subjectively in an individual prison of desire and longing.

2.2. Hannah, the False God

Readers of Iris Murdoch’s *The Unicorn* naturally assume that the titular symbol refers to Hannah Crean-Smith, the ethereal and enigmatic mistress of Gaze Castle. Hannah is the unicorn of the title, a rare and mysterious creature who enchants all around her but who is inaccessible to everyone. Both whore and goddess, murderess and saint, she is either a wretched prisoner or a willing recluse. Unknowable and unreachable, she enchants all around her, and in the love that each character feels for her is encompassed the full range of human affection. Since her reality is impossible to know, she becomes the reflection of each character’s fantasy about her. Like the unicorn, she is a test of the purity and innocence of the others in her own guilt and suffering.

Nearly every character, particularly Effingham Cooper, attaches a symbolic significance to Hannah’s suffering and seclusion, thereby making her, in her words, “unreal” and “an object of contemplation”. In medieval lore, the unicorn was an emblem of purity and of the suffering Christ. Robert Scholes connects Hannah to the Christ-unicorn symbol by stating that her surname is an anagram of “Christ-name” or “Christ-mean” and that her first name is a palindrome which reflects an intentional ambiguity on Murdoch’s part about the nature of modern allegory.

However, the legend of the romantic story is not presented in its originality. In the story once a time Marian and Dennis watched the river with non-stop jumping salmon, Dennis said: “It is looking for God!” In fact, everyone of them are full of strong desire and hope in the search for God, and Hannah became the “Unicorn” and “God” in their eyes. And everyone was looking for the meaning of their sufferings and at the same time unloaded their own evil to burn. Therefore, to all the people around Hannah, she is not “unicorn”, not “good”, not “God” nor “the devil.” She was shaped by the main characters around her in accordance with their own psychological needs. She was not a dream who linked to the facts tightly. Max removed the romantic aura surrounding her at last which made everyone face the truth. “Game is over.” “Curse, was get rid of the magic.” Hannah later admitted to Marian that he was just a “violent dream,” a “false God”, living on a group of audience admirers. Therefore, if Hannah wants to maintain “good” image in the audience’s eyes, it is necessary for her to distortion, to loss herself firstly. In other words, it is the novel repeatedly referred to the words or phrase “give up”, “surrender”, “peace” or “death.” However all this have meaning only in under the conditions Peter was absence and Hannah was imprisoned in the house. The emergence of Peter will break the aura “purity” and “innocence” around Hannah like the beautiful unicorn. So it was so significant about that invented false telegraph which made Hannah lose her composure and surrender to Gerald Scottow at last. So it is naturally for her to kill Gerald Scottow, which was natural outbreak of violence for a woman in the seven years, such a long period. But the violence destroyed the image “false God” of her, the real suffering has only just begun, the freedom for her was death. Hannah perpetuated Ate by allowing herself to be viewed as a symbol by the audience at Gaze. Before her

suicide, she tried to discredit that belief by claiming to be a “false God” who did not really suffer. It is not surprising to discover at novel’s end that Hannah bequeaths Gaze to Max, the only character who did not transform her into a flesh-and-blood allegory.

In this book, Hannah was blindly followed and worshiped by some audiences around her which makes us aware of how strongly people are eager to “God”; eager to “good.” But Hannah was not the true God that they looked for; she was only a false God. Consequently, the correspondences between Hannah and the unicorn never seem to be adequately developed. Paradoxically, Hannah derives power from being a victim; her suffering, stemming from the guilt of her attempted murder of Peter, subjugates everyone at Gaze. Each person who bears Hannah’s guilt becomes both her tormentor and her protector in the strange Company transferral of power and suffering. Each character becomes a reflection of his or her subjective interpretation of Hannah’s position—and all are wrong in their assessments. This highly contained group shares no reality, for each is locked in subjective versions of what is real; in the tragic conclusion of the novel, Murdoch hints that perhaps only Marian will be able to profit from the experience and rejoin larger society as a complete individual.

In this way, *The Unicorn* can be seen an exploration of the ideas of Iris Murdoch, who insists on that suffering leads to excessive self-involvement and violence. In Hannah, Murdoch shows the reader that suffering can also disguise itself as purification but that the end is the same. In the novel, Max suggests that suffering is always transferred from one victim to another until it reaches a truly good person who refuses to pass it on. Murdoch has clearly constructed such a chain of interdependent tragedies in this novel, and the person perceived by all in their individual ways to be that good person, Hannah, is a false unicorn. If such a character exists, Marian may be the one, and Denis Nolan may be fit the role of the traditionally male unicorn perfectly but Murdoch is characteristically vague in this suggestion. Murdoch subtly links Denis’s stature and appearance to the unicorn’s: he is “shortish”, “almost dwarfish”, and “like a wild thing that hides”. The elongated fishing net that he frequently carries to the salmon pool may be Murdoch’s analog to the unicorn’s horn. He assumes Christlike suffering for the sin of another and banishes himself from Riders Castle. After his sexual interlude with Marian, Denis’s self-hatred allows him to engineer the death of Peter Crean Smith. Unlike Hannah, Denis suffered so that others do not. Previously, he had admired Hannah’s suffering so much that he wanted to become her. However, true expiation demands solitude, not the “worshippers” that Hannah has had. Denis breaks the cycle of Ate by leaving Gaze, bearing the guilt of his faithlessness to Hannah and his responsibility for Peter’s death. Another audience Marian went back to the fact finally and if we say that God exists in the form of calm and tranquility in the people’s heart, Marian who would do the best in this point, because she could dance peacefully in her former boyfriend’s wedding. Perhaps the inner harmony and tranquility in the pursuit of God is the main point, though Marian was a nonreligious person, she made it inadvertently.

3. Conclusion

The reason why the great works of art is great is that not only concerned and respected by contemporary people, but also lies in its ability to transcend the times. As one of the most evident novelist after WWII, Iris Murdoch applies many religious thoughts in her famous book *The Unicorn*. The protagonist of the novel, Hannah is only a poor manifestation who manifests not purely “good”. Her world is a hell of suffering, rather than herself as a true individual. She was considered as the pure unicorn and blindly followed and worshiped by some audiences around her which makes us aware of how strongly people are eager to “God”; eager to “good”. And the key point of the fact is that the “unicorn” and the “God” are empty. So the unicorn does not appear at last and the false God does not take love and goodness either. Hannah does not perfectly and truly serve as the role. But the characters’ concept of pursuing goodness implies their worship of God and of religious piety.

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