

EQUIVOCAL PERCEPTION OF THE ALLUSIONS USED IN THE NOVEL "A SEVERED HEAD" BY IRIS MURDOCH

Iris Murdoch is regarded by many readers as a highly professional intellectual and thus difficult-to-read writer, famous for her philosophical novels. It is natural taking into account the fact of her being a Cambridge graduate professional philosopher, the author of scientific works, a philosophy lecturer at Oxford University.

Iris Merdock deals with everyday ethical and moral issues, sometimes in the light of myth. Her characters face difficult moral choices in their search for love and freedom and are often involved in complex networks of love affairs. Some critics complain that these characters are mere puppets used to act out philosophical ideas, others praise her novels for the wit and psychological insight.

"A Severed Head", a satirical, almost farical novel about marriage, jealousy, adultery and incest amongst a group of civilized and educated people is noteworthy among Murdoch's works.

It exploits Jungian theories of archetypes. Set in and around London, it depicts a power struggle between grown-up middle-class people who are lucky to be free of real problems. Perceiving the novel is hindered by numerous mythological and cultural (including philosophical and psychological Freudian) allusions. It seems to some readers that they do not have enough erudition, knowledge of philosophical problems and mythology to understand laws and internal logic of the characters' behavior. But the better he knows the cultural material the more successfully he is mislead by an obviously false trace.

Mythological allusions in the novel are numerous, but their functions are not unequivocal.

The main hero Martin Lynch-Gibbon compares the wife Antonia with Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, love and fertility, according to general educational notions of the Greek myths. The attempts to leave the limits of a gallant stamp « my goddess » will reveal the irony turning into sarcasm.

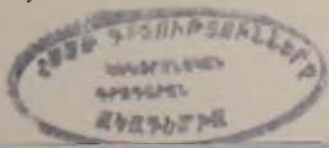
Antonia has the so-called "eternal" beauty; she is older than her husband and according to him always looked older than she was. It is hardly worth supposing that Martin, who had a young mistress Georgie, likened his wife to the Aphrodite ironically, it is not peculiar to the psychological type of the character and is not kept up by the plot. It is fair to liken Antonia to the Aphrodite because of her lovefulness but the bitter irony of "cuckold" in this case is blended with Martin's image only partially. And it is impossible to assimilate barren Antonia to the goddess of fertility without sarcasm.

Martin informs us rather in detail about his weaknesses and lacks, but he is not endowed with frank and cynical hypocrisy. Accordingly, comparison with Aphrodite can be read as a "platitude". On the other hand to believe that Murdoch left such a stilted trick by an oversight is hardly fair. Aphrodite undoubtedly appears not by chance. It is a double game element: first of all Iris Murdoch plays with herself, she amuses herself, and then she offers the reader to play admittedly another game. Murdoch's amusement in this case is not for a wide audience, it is an intimate game.

All the listed characteristics of Antonia (older than the husband, amorous and childless) are delegated from the author. But unlike Antonia Iris Murdoch was not endowed with slightest attributes of beauty about what she undoubtedly knew, and perceived her husband's delights about her own appeal «with understanding». Her spouse John Bailey in his memoirs, published in the year of her death, tells us with warm feelings and soft irony about unsuccessful attempts of his wife, whom the nature had endowed internal beauty, to use traditional means of the help to female charm. Traces of author's self-irony and a game with herself can be found almost in all the novels by Iris Murdoch.

Concerning Aphrodite's theme alongside with a self-ironic game another game with the reader is developed. Martin, continuing the theme compares his rival Palmer with Ares, Aphrodite's lover. Palmer considers this comparison unsuccessful and declares to Martin that he can not aspire to the role of Hephaestus. The game has began, and if it is not enough for the curious reader that Aphrodite, Hephaestus, and Ares are only a love triangle he will recollect or find out in the dictionary, that Ares is the God of War, and that of unfair and blood-thirsty, contrary to Athena Palladium, he is the most hated and immoral of the gods. The reader burdened by such knowledge will come to expect from Palmer dirty tricks and to suspect Martin of insincerity to the reader. Martin has compared his rival with Ares, so he suspects his treacherous essence and plays the hypocrite telling us about the gentle feelings towards him. Thus the haste with which Palmer refuses the "honor" to be Ares becomes clear.

The further researches of the readers in the field of Greek mythology also allow them to enjoy "self-far-sightedness" for some time. Lame and the ugliest of the gods, Hephaestus has chained lovers to a matrimonial bed, having ensnared them with invisible strings and displayed to the laughing gods. Palmer's stepsister appears at the right moment and like Poseidon tries to convince Martin-Hephaestus of the necessity to release the lovers, who are together only due to Martin's efforts. But very soon all this mythological structure will be destroyed, displaying its artificiality. The reader returns to the initial situation: Martin is declined to elevated style, and Palmer proves him guilty of inaccuracy and irrelevance of the used simile. Simply Murdoch allowed the reader to enjoy his own erudition temporarily.



The same game rules occur with a myth about Gorgon. In case the reader does not believe, that Martin again uses elevated style to show his unfriendly impression from Honor Klein, but decides, that it is a signal to independent development of the plot he will again get in the game zone where the author will accompany him ironically for some time, putting into sphere of the game separate instructions and attributes (the title of the novel, the sword, the cut off hair etc.) to support the mythological line.

But the full sense and purpose of mythological games opens only at the end of the novel. Honor recollects the myth of Kandavl who, being proud of his wife's beauty, decided to show her to his friend and hid him in her bedroom. His wife, having realized herself in such a situation, decided to prefer the latter to her husband. Martin decided himself to be Kandavl's friend and Honor - his perfidious spouse. Honor, listening to the surmise, doesn't reject it but only smiles mysteriously. In this situation Martin is likely to be mistaken, as according to the plot Martin-Kandavl looks more convincingly. Looking at smiling Honor he recollects their recent conversation when she tried to convince him of perniciousness of mythologizing people, that Martin vainly turns her into a severed head - a savage symbol of worship. Martin admits that he lived in the world of dreams and delusions, but hopes for the happy awakening. In one of her articles Murdoch complains, that « real people are too dependent on a myth», and, probably, therefore she offers the reader to acknowledge the perniciousness of such dependence just experiencing it and not only watching Martin.

Iris Murdoch's novel can be compared with a kind, wise, slightly ironic fairy tale for adults. But excessive sophistication is capable of depriving the reader of the pleasure from fascinating travel in the fantastic country.

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