



THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EPISTOLARY MOTIF IN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF IRIS MURDOCH'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

*This article explores the evolution and functional significance of the epistolary genre in western literature, with a specific focus on the novels of Iris Murdoch. By analyzing works such as *Under the Net*, *The Flight from the Enchanter*, and *The Unicorn*, the study demonstrates how letters serve as a psychological investigation of the human soul. The research highlights how the epistolary motif aids in revealing the existential struggles, subjectivity, and inner transformations of characters, bridging the gap between their private microcosms and external reality.*

РОЛЬ И ЗНАЧЕНИЕ ЭПИСТОЛЯРНОГО МОТИВА В ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ: ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ НА МАТЕРИАЛЕ РОМАНОВ АЙРИС МЁРДОК

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ABSTRACT

*В данной статье исследуются эволюция и функциональная значимость эпистолярного жанра в западной литературе с особым акцентом на романы Айрис Мёрдок. На примере таких произведений, как *Под сетью*, *Бегство от волшебника* и *Единорог*, в исследовании демонстрируется, как письма служат инструментом психологического анализа человеческой души. Работа подчеркивает, как эпистолярный мотив способствует раскрытию экзистенциальной борьбы, субъективности и внутренней трансформации персонажей, устраняя разрыв между их частным микрокосмом и внешней реальностью.*

ADABIYOTDA EPISTOLYAR MOTIVNING ROLI VA AHAMIYATI: AYRIS MYORDOK ROMANLARI MISOLIDA TADQIQOT

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ABSTRACT

Ushbu maqolada g'arb adabiyotida epistolary janrning rivojlanishi va funksional ahamiyati Ayris Merdok romanlari misolida tadqiq etiladi. To'r ostida, Sehgardan chekinib va Yakkashox kabi asarlarni tahlil qilish orqali, maktublar inson ruhiyatini o'rganishda psixologik vosita bo'lib xizmat qilishi ko'rsatib berilgan. Tadqiqotda epistolary motiv qahramonlarning ekzistensial kurashlari, subyektivligi va ichki evrilishlarini ochib berishga, ularning shaxsiy mikrolami hamda tashqi reallik o'rtasidagi bog'liqlikni ta'minlashga qanday yordam berishi yoritilgan.

Introduction

The epistolary genre is a literary form where the narrative is constructed through documents such as letters, diary entries, or journals. This genre is uniquely positioned to allow readers to experience a character's inner world and personal perspective "first-hand". Key characteristics include subjectivity, psychological analysis, and the illusion of documentation, which creates an intimate and authentic atmosphere. Historically, the genre evolved from the philosophical treatises of Antiquity to the "Golden Age" of the 18th century, reaching its emotional peak during Romanticism with Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. In contemporary novel-writing, the significance of the epistolary motif has increasingly shifted toward auxiliary functions. Letter motifs appear frequently in Iris Murdoch's novels and they carry immense significance in certain instances, serving

as a vital key to comprehending the core essence and profound meaning of her works.

Main part

In this research, we aim to investigate the motif of the letter, derived from the epistolary narrative form used in the novels of Iris Murdoch, as an auxiliary tool for portraying the inner world of characters. M. Bakhtin posits that the letter represents the highest form of 'internal dialogism', where the protagonist's 'inner self' is unveiled through a sincere exchange with an 'other'.¹ J. Altman complements this by defining the letter as a structural instrument that bridges the tension between presence and absence, as well as time and distance.² When combined, these theories suggest that the epistolary motif does not merely facilitate communication but acts as a 'psychological mirror', allowing for a subjective, multi-voiced narrative where

¹ Бахтин М. М. Проблемы поэтики Достоевского. – М.: Советский писатель, 1972. – с. 275.

² Altman J. G. Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form. – Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982. – p. 13.



the character's emotional turmoil is mediated through the unique temporal space of the written word.

While the epistolary novel reached its height in the 19th century, modern novelists like Iris Murdoch use the motif to serve auxiliary yet profound functions. In Murdoch's works, letters are tools for self-revelation and the synthesis of philosophical truths.

Under the Net. In this novel, letters facilitate the protagonist Jake's existential awakening leading him to spiritual growth. A letter from his friend Finn reveals Finn's own independent personality and world, breaking the boundaries of Jake's egocentric laws. *"This letter upset me extremely and I exclaimed to Mrs Tinckham, 'Finn's gone back to Ireland!'"*³ Furthermore, a letter from Sadie completely shifts Jake's negative perception of her, proving her intelligence and sincerity. *"There is only one thing which will make a woman keep, and that is intelligence. Sadie had it. Hugo was right."*⁴ A creative artist is often adept at weaving falsehoods based on their own principles. Nevertheless, Murdoch distinguishes between two distinct types of creative individuals: *"The artist is a great informant, at least a gossip, at best a sage, and much loved in both roles. ...though he may artfully confuse us, on the whole he instructs us. Art is far and away the most educational thing we have, far more so than its rivals, philosophy and theology and science."*⁵

Whether a creative artist is a weaver of tall tales or a wise saint, they provide equal pleasure to the reader; yet, it is precisely this quality that makes such 'tales' inherently dangerous. Despite this, Murdoch remains confident in art's capacity to serve the cause of goodness. She conveys this conviction in her novels by refining the 'imagination' of characters that embody the artist personality.

In literature, letters are frequently employed to illuminate romantic relationships that challenge or contravene societal moral norms.⁶ In modern fiction with philosophical coating, the primary existential protagonists often defy the boundaries of conventional morality, remaining detached from the principles of domestic life and family. Instead, they perceive the concept of love merely as a form of solace, free from worldly anxieties. In the novel *Under the Net*, Jake's love for Anna is similarly driven by egoism, prioritizing only his own desires. Consequently, he proves incapable of comprehending Anna's true feelings and the inner emotional turmoil of her soul. *"...but I could think of nothing to say to her except I love you, which I wrote several times over, very badly. Then I added, you are beautiful, and sealed the letter."*⁷ Anna's true feelings are revealed through her countless letters addressed to Hugo, which are subsequently examined by Jake. *"All these letters were from Anna.*

³ Murdoch I. *Under the Net.* – London: Vintage, 2000. – p. 278.

⁴ Murdoch I. *Under the Net.* – London: Vintage, 2000. – p. 282.

⁵ Murdoch, I. *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists // Existentialists and Mystics:*

Writings on Philosophy and Literature / ed. by P. Conradi. – London: Penguin Books, 1999. – p. 361.

⁶ Škopljanač, L. *Letters in Virginia Woolf's novels [Text] / L. Škopljanač // Knjizevna Smotra.* – 2008. – Vol. 40. – P. 11–22

⁷ Murdoch I. *Under the Net.* – London: Vintage, 2000. – p. 114.



"Beautiful letters," Hugo had called them. Guilt and triumph and despair battled in me as I clutched them."⁸ In Murdoch's novels, such correspondence serves as a stylistic device to illuminate the microcosms of the characters.

The Flight from the Enchanter. In this work, the author shows that letters can have tragic consequences. A letter from Mischa Fox to Rosa leads to Nina's death by detaching Rosa from the problems of reality.

Additionally, the character Nicholas uses a commanding tone in his letters to his sister Annette, revealing his manipulative nature and his preoccupation with his own world, specifically his involvement with the Communist Party, rather than his sister's well-being. "The letter from Nicholas, which had been received with such joy and perused with such disappointment, read as follows: *Ecoute, ma soeur (Listen, sister). ... I have decided to join the Communist Party. This is not a quick or random decision but the inevitable outcome of my whole life. I expect it won't surprise you. ... About the book list, not all these books are quite O.K. — but a modern education must include an understanding of Liberalism. It is necessary, dearest Sis, to have been a Liberal! I've put asterisks beside the books which are really all right ... Look decent when you come for heaven's sake. I want you to make a good impression. ... P.S. I'm just going mad about chess. Try to learn before we meet. Get yourself a good textbook.*"⁹ Annette's long-standing admiration for Nicholas's

engagement with existentialist thought and the ideals of liberty at the Sorbonne resulted in a blind idealization of her brother. Consequently, she remained oblivious to his personal shortcomings, viewed through the lens of her own devotion.

The Unicorn. Letters in *The Unicorn* act as symbols of reality for characters isolated in the mysterious setting of Gaze. For instance, Marian initially receives letters from her friend Geoffrey with joy, but as she becomes 'entrapped' by the atmosphere of Gaze, she begins to ignore them, signaling her detachment from reality. Ultimately, a final letter from Geoffrey serves as a catalyst for her return to the real world. "*Marian pushed Geoffrey's letter into a drawer. It filled her with gloom and irritation and a frightened little homesickness. Since she had learnt from Denis Nolan the true nature of what was happening at Gaze she had not been able to write frankly to Geoffrey.*"¹⁰ The events at Gaze now captivate Marian even more, providing her with a sense of secret pleasure. The real life revealed through the letters evokes in the protagonist feelings of depression, anxiety, disillusionment, and even a haunting sense of homesickness. At the end of the novel, in the thirty-fourth chapter, after the tragedies have concluded, a letter from Geoffrey serves as another reminder of real life, leading the protagonist to finally decide to return to it. "*Yes, she would go back to all that now, to the real world. She would dance at Geoffrey's wedding.*"¹¹

⁸ Murdoch I. *Under the Net*. – London: Vintage, 2000. – p. 272.

⁹ Murdoch I. *The Flight from the Enchanter*. – New York: Viking Press, 1964. – pp. 187-198.

¹⁰ Murdoch I. *The Unicorn*. – London: Vintage, 2000. – p. 122.

¹¹ Murdoch I. *The Unicorn*. – London: Vintage, 2000. – p. 264.



The letter written by Elizabeth to Effingham emerges as a critique of Effingham's existential romanticism. Composed in an ironic tone, the letter expresses Elizabeth's own conception of freedom, positioning her as a symbol of reality within the narrative. *"I envy you your capacity for innocent romancing. At a great price bought I this freedom in four years of deep analysis, whereas you seem born not exactly free but with the next best thing, a capacity to cheer yourself along by endless little inventions."*¹² Elizabeth considers Hannah's situation to be farcical, as this fairytale-like state fails to reflect the truth. Within this passage, a philosophical distinction is drawn between Effingham's and Elizabeth's respective concepts of freedom. In the novel, the notion of freedom serves as the characters' psychological environment; while for Effingham, it is intertwined with self-love and narcissism, for Elizabeth, it resonates with the struggle for a woman to find her place in society and the acceptance of others as they are (for instance, the egoistic Effingham). Effingham receives Elizabeth's letter with bitterness and, criticizing her spirited nature, compares her to Hannah. While acknowledging Elizabeth as a clever woman, he proceeds to enumerate the perceived flaws of women of this type: *"Why were clever women always so silly? He had never met a clever woman who wasn't somehow touchy and nervy and silly. ... Non-clever women could be very silly too. Perhaps all women were silly. Not Hannah of course, but, he found*

*himself vaguely and spontaneously reflecting deep in his mind, Hannah was not exactly a woman."*¹³ Effingham accuses all real women of being foolish. While modern women are certainly not flawless, indeed, no human being is, to the existentialist Effingham, women have become detached from their ideal states, which essentially belong to a bygone feudal era. To him, only Hannah appears as an ideal: beautiful, fragile, submissive, and divine. More accurately, it is only Effingham's version of Hannah that is ideal, existing solely as a figment of his imagination. He is unable to see the reality in Hannah, choosing instead to idealize her for his own sake, a trait characteristic of existentialist male characters in Murdoch's novels.

In one of her interviews, when discussing literature, Murdoch notes that while imagination is a positive quality, fantasy, on the other hand, is detrimental. She posits that exercising imagination is a creative approach, whereas creating fantasy merely serves the functions of diversion and consolation. Furthermore, she emphasizes that literature must remain close to real life, and the author should avoid creating illusions that are false or detached from reality. Additionally, she argues that fiction should serve to overcome the formlessness of an absurd world, noting that it is no easy task for a writer to expel fantasy and present the world to the public exactly as it is.¹⁴

Conclusion

¹²Murdoch I. The Unicorn. – London: Vintage, 2000. – p. 102.

¹³Murdoch I. The Unicorn. – London: Vintage, 2000. – p. 103.

¹⁴ Мердок А. Литература и философия: разговор Айрис Мердок с Брайаном Маги / пер. и вступ. Д. Берёзко // Иностранная литература. – 2019. – № 5 – <https://www.labirint.ru/journals/murdoch/>



The epistolary genre is more than a collection of correspondence; it is an investigation of the human soul that bridges the gap between the reader and the character. In the context of existentialist prose, letters reveal the boundaries of morality and the selfish

nature of love. Whether through traditional paper letters or modern digital transformations like emails and chat logs, the epistolary motif remains a crucial stylistic device for illuminating the microcosms of literary characters.

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