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THE PHILOSOPHY OF EXISTENTIALISM IN THE NOVEL "THE BELL" BY BRITISH WRITER IRIS MURDOCH

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ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the analysis of the novel "The Bell" by XX century's British writer Iris Murdoch from the existentialistic point of view. The Bell" perhaps the finest of the novels, traces the disintegrating relationships between a set of characters who seek in a Benedictine lay community "a retreat from human frailty". They represent "a kind of sick people, whose desire for God makes them unsatisfactory citizens of an ordinary life, but whose strength or temperament fails them to surrender the world completely". *The Bell* is Iris Murdoch's fourth novel, first published in 1958. The plot of it focuses on the religious lay community that lives at Imber Court.

Keywords: existentialism, free well, absurdity, freedom of choice

INTRODUCTION

The Bell will be read as a moral study which gathers together the different moral proposals that various characters uphold and live in accordance with. The novel is told by the third person narration. There is an interesting question "Why did Iris Murdoch entitle her book *"The Bell"*?" Bell is a sacred object in Christianity that calls people for praying. In the novel, the religious lay community brings a new bell instead of the plummeted one into the lake for their abbey and all events of the plot is around this object. The author chooses a bell as a poetic detail, that's why the bell is given as the title of the book. The main idea in the novel is that the indifference of the world towards humanity may lead person to suffering from alienation. From the extracts below we reveal how Murdoch can express her philosophical ideas in *The Bell.*

LITERATURE REVIEW

In *The Bell* Iris Murdoch uses the several concepts of existentialism in order to illustrate:

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1. Sentient beings, especially humans, have free well.
2. Humans are responsible for the consequences of their decision.
3. Extremely few, if any, decisions are void of negative consequences.
4. Even when part of a group, each person acts and decides as an individual.
5. The world is indifferent towards humanity [5]

We can see the first feature of the philosophical trend under the portrait of protagonist Dora:

Dora felt the need to show him (Paul) that she could still act independently. She was not his slave. Yes, she would go: and the idea, now it existed more fully for her, was delightful [1]

Dora is a character who never wants to be the under the influence of other people, even her husband. She dares to do everything when or what she wants. Anyone or anything can't be the obstacle in the way of her being free well.

And the second concept is depicted with the help of hero Toby. Even though being just eighteen, he makes a decision of going to and serving for the Imber Court (lay community) independently. Even there happens some unpleasant situations with Michael Meade (homosexual love affairs), Toby is never regretful about his decision and he can be responsible for the results of his decision. And this is clearly seen in the letter that is sent to Michael by Toby after he has leaved the community:

What mainly emerged, however, from the letter, and set Michael's mind at rest, was that for Toby the whole business was closed indeed. There was no sign of tormented guilt, no anxious brooding, and no speculation about Michael's state of mind. The full significance of the happenings at Imber had happily escaped Toby, and he had no retrospective curiosity about them now [1]

The character Paul livens the next third peculiarity up by the means of his attitude to Dora (his wife). Paul may be very jealous and dour or scathing, but he doesn't have any evil or negative aim, he just wants to be happy with his wife and dreams of being at least a child.

Paul wanted children, or at least a child, in the decisive and possessive way in which he wanted all the objects which he drew into his life. The sense of family was strong in him and he preserved an ancestral nostalgia for the dignity and ceremonial of kinship. He yearned for a son, a little Paul whom he could instruct and encourage, and finally converse with as an equal and even consult as a rival intelligence [1]

Almost in all characters of Iris Murdoch's *"The Bell"* we can see the acting and making their own decisions as an individual and the universe's indifference towards humanity. For instance, Catherine and Nick (twins) they both decide and choose their

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destiny themselves, Catherine's decision is being a nun and the Nick's being a great electrician, but the world doesn't satisfy and be intensely careless for them, at the end of the novel Nick shoots himself and Catherine suffers from schizophrenia and they can't manage to live as they wanted. It is Nick, the rogue who could not fit into the society and who finds himself at Imber Court in the failed hope of starting a new life, who ends up committing suicide. His sister Catherine, who plans to join the enclosed community of nuns, but who, for the time being, decides to join the lay community as a place of transition, ends up losing her mind, tries to drown herself in the lake, and later find herself in a psychiatric ward in London as above mentioned.

Nick had shot himself. He had emptied the shot-gun into his head. To make quite sure he had evidently put the barrel into his mouth. There was no doubt that he had finished the job. Michael averted followed him out whining [1]

Carried back to the Court, Catherine had remained throughout the day in a completely distracted condition. The doctor had been called. After administering sedatives he had shaken his head, spoken of schizophrenia, and mentioned a clinic in London. Late in the evening, after much debate and indecision, arrangements were made for Catherine to go as soon as possible [1]

The all characters in Iris Murdoch's "*The Bell"* show the interest of defining their own meaning in life: how were they created, who created the world, who controls the human and nature? They try to discover the secrets of the universe.

James Tayper Pace was answered that they had all of them withdrawn from the world to live a life which was, by ordinary standards, not a "natural" one in any case. They had to determine their own conception of the "natural". They were not a profit-making concern, so why should efficiency be their first aim? It was the quality of the work which mattered, not its results [1]

When a protagonist Michael Meade encounters with twins Nick and Catherine when they are sitting together in the Imber Court, he is very amazed by the same appearances but their different characters. By the philosophical attitude of Michael, the writer wanted to show there are not the same personalities even they have the same appearance.

It was indeed strange that God could have made two creatures so patently from the same substance and yet in making them so alike made them so different [1]

In the novel Iris Murdoch paid attention not only to Human beings but also the way of living of wildlife as a creature and part of the nature and they are compared with the mankind.

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"Why can't the animals all be good to each other and live at peace?" said Dora, twirling the parasol.
"Why can't human beings?" said Michael to Toby, who was walking beside him.
Some birds will even enter an unbaited trap out of sheer curiosity."
"Again, like human beings," said Michael [1]

As an existentialistic philosopher Iris Murdoch uses in her novel *"The Bell"* the dogma of not believing in the God while depicting the characters Noel Spenser and Dora Greenfield. When writing this view she takes into the consideration the following idea of existentialist Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky: "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted".

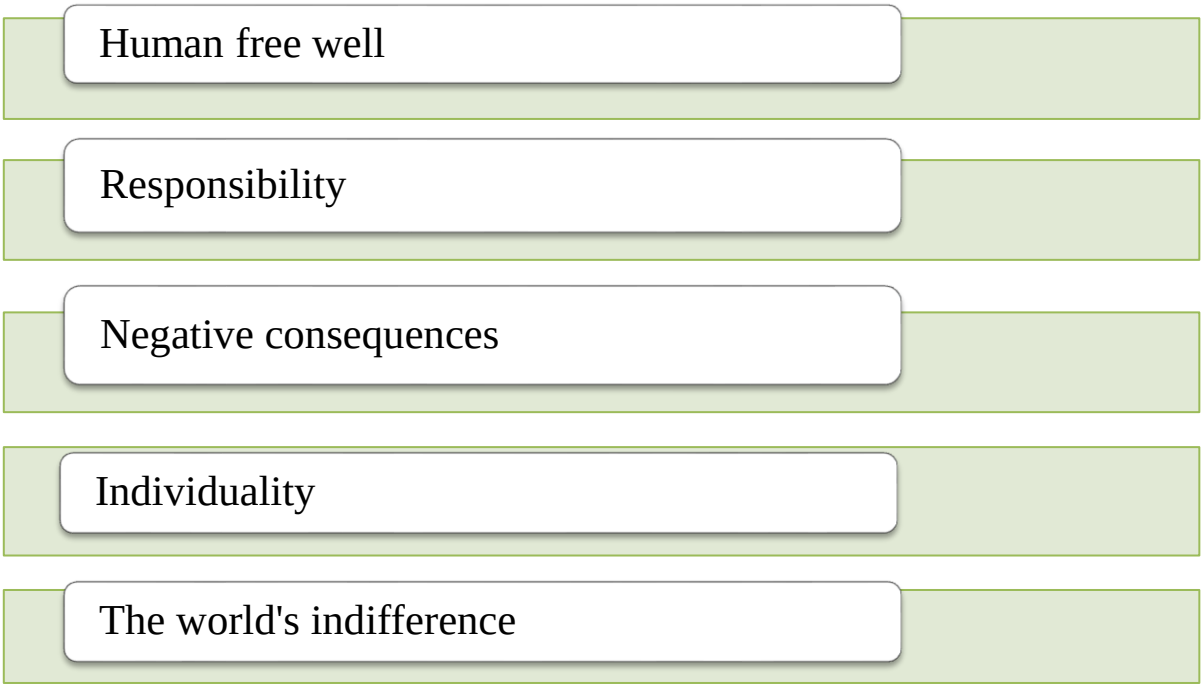
No good comes in the end of untrue beliefs. There is no God and there is no judgment, except the judgment that each one of us makes for himself; and what that is a private matter. Sometimes of course one has to interfere with people to stop them doing things one dislikes.
Noel called after the taxi, "Don't forget! No God!" [1]

In the novel *"The Bell"* can also be shown the world's absurdity, at any point in time, anything can happen to anyone, and a tragic event could plummet someone into direct confrontation with the Absurd. Many of the literary works of existentialists contain descriptions of people who encounter the absurdity of the world. The hero of Iris Murdoch Michael Meade is one of these people. After the Nick's suicide he is very dejected and despairing and he is for a long time unable to pray.

RESULTS

One more element of the philosophy of existentialism in the novel *"The Bell"* is mentioned by Iris Murdoch herself. She argues that God cannot be a character in the novel, for unless He relinquishes his role, the tale is never tragic enough. However, what this "relinquishing" involves is not the removal of God in the drama of existence. Classical tragedy portrays heroes and heroines in the grip of iron fate which is the will of the gods. In Murdoch's genre, we find a reversal—that even the gods fall doom to the will of human beings. The relinquishing of role that Murdoch necessitates in the tragic is not the removal, but the replacement, of God. The results of our article can be seen in the following table in which we illustrated the elements of existentialism in the novel "The Bell" by Iris Murdoch:

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Michael and Dora embody this pivotal finale realizing that for them to live the good life, they must see, must attentively be aware of, who they are and what their places are in the changing scheme of things. It is interesting to note that between the two, in their grasp of the truth, there remains the ubiquitous undertone of the irreducibility of the subject. Dora decided not to return (yet) to Paul, and instead must first seek being “an independent grown-up person". For Michael, the case was more intricate. He realized his own lack of unselfing. He was afraid to love and abandoned the hope that a single love could bring may have staved off the tragic death of Nick. With the tragedy came the conclusion that he had never believed at all: “The pattern which he had seen in his life had existed only in his own romantic imagination”. His final profession of faith: “there is a God, but I do not believe in Him”.

DISCUSSION

While reading the novel we can find the important factor for Existentialists that is the freedom of choice on believing or not believing in God. In the novel some characters, such as Dora, Noel Spens or Sally don't believe the existence of God, but others like James Tayper Pace, Michael Meade, Mrs. Mark, Mother Clare, Catharine Fawley are very pieties. As you see, there aren't the limitations but the freedom of choice. Moreover, in Iris Murdoch's "The Bell" she exhibits the individual and its struggle through life- a focus on the subjective life that we all actually live, rather than a search for objective truths external to us.

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CONCLUSION

The novel is famous for its strong philosophy of life among contemporary readers. We defined several features of existentialism in the novel:

1. Sentient beings, especially humans, have free well.
2. Humans are responsible for the consequences of their decision.
3. Extremely few, if any, decisions are void of negative consequences.
4. Even when part of a group, each person acts and decides as an individual.
5. The world is indifferent towards humanity.

All in all, a closer look at this novel reveals the dominance of freedom of individual among other concepts of existentialism. From this point, Iris Murdoch's way of composing ideas are alike the views of a prominent French philosopher and novelist Jean Paul Sartre.

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