



## Mysticism and Moral Conflict in Iris Murdoch's *The Bell*: A Study of Human Nature and the Quest for the Good

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### *Abstract*

*This article discusses the nature of mysticism in Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* in relation to ethics and the difficulties of human nature. Murdoch's fascination with mysticism plays a key role in her exploration of themes such as love, morality and the search for the Good. Drawing from a close reading of the novel, this study explores the ethical concerns at the center of Michael Meade's moral trials in negotiating the tension between baser eros more corporeal, manipulative forms of love and a more idealized agape that is more abstract, pure forms of love. Murdoch's this-worldly mysticism challenges traditional religious frameworks, offering a nuanced perspective on spiritual growth and the human condition. By contrasting the characters of Michael Meade and James Tayper Pace, the study highlights the broader struggle between tradition and neurosis, as well as the pitfalls of self-deception in the pursuit of moral and spiritual ideals. The findings reveal that Murdoch's mysticism is not an escape from reality but a means of confronting it, emphasizing the importance of impartiality, justice, and self-awareness in the journey toward the Good. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Murdoch's philosophical and literary legacy, underscoring the enduring relevance of her work in contemporary discussions of morality and spirituality.*

**Keywords:** *Eros and Agape, Spiritual Growth, Good and Evil, Existentialism, Self-Deception, Tradition and Neurosis, Impartiality and Justice*

Iris Murdoch, renowned as both a philosopher and novelist, occupies a unique position in 20th-century literature for her ability to intertwine complex philosophical ideas with compelling narrative fiction. Her works often explore themes of morality, human nature, and the search for the



Good, reflecting her deep engagement with existentialism, Platonism, and mysticism. Murdoch's philosophical writings, particularly *The Sovereignty of Good*, emphasize the importance of moral vision and the transcendence of the Good, concepts that permeate her literary creations. Among her novels, *The Bell* stands out as a profound exploration of mysticism and its intersection with moral philosophy, offering a nuanced portrayal of the human struggle to reconcile desire, spirituality, and ethical living.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of mysticism in "*The Bell*" and its connection to Murdoch's moral philosophy. Set in a secluded Anglican lay community, the novel examines the lives of individuals striving for spiritual growth while grappling with their own moral failings and desires. Through the character of Michael Meade, a former schoolmaster with a troubled past, Murdoch delves into the tension between eros (human desire) and agape (selfless love), highlighting the challenges of achieving true moral and spiritual clarity. The novel also contrasts the moral views of Michael and James Tayper Pace, representing the broader conflict between tradition and neurosis, and ultimately questions the feasibility of traditional religious frameworks in addressing the complexities of human nature.

Murdoch's use of mysticism in *The Bell* is not an escape from reality but a means of confronting it, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, impartiality, and justice in the pursuit of the Good. By examining the moral conflicts and spiritual journeys of the characters, the study seeks to illuminate Murdoch's unique contribution to the discourse on morality, mysticism, and the human condition. The central research question guiding this study is: How does Iris Murdoch use mysticism in *The Bell* to explore the complexities of human nature and the quest for the Good?

Iris Murdoch's dual identity as a philosopher and novelist has generated extensive scholarly interest, particularly in her exploration of moral philosophy and mysticism. Her philosophical works, such as *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), lay the groundwork for understanding her literary themes, emphasizing the transcendence of the Good and the importance of moral vision. Scholars like Maria Antonaccio and Peter J. Conradi have extensively analyzed Murdoch's philosophical ideas, noting her critique of existentialism and her alignment with Platonic thought, particularly in her emphasis on the Good as an absolute moral standard. Antonaccio, in *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*, highlights Murdoch's belief in the necessity of moral attention and the role of art and literature in cultivating ethical awareness.

Murdoch's engagement with mysticism has also been a subject of critical inquiry. Scholars such as Elizabeth Dipple and Bran Nicol have explored how Murdoch's novels use mystical themes to interrogate human nature and morality. Dipple, in *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit*, argues that Murdoch's mysticism is deeply rooted in her philosophical commitment to the reality of the Good, while Nicol, in *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, examines how her characters'



spiritual struggles reflect broader existential and ethical dilemmas. However, much of this scholarship tends to focus on Murdoch's philosophical novels in general, with less attention given to the specific role of mysticism in *The Bell*.

While *The Bell* has been widely studied for its exploration of religious and moral themes, there remains a gap in the literature regarding its unique treatment of mysticism. Existing studies, such as those by Deborah Johnson and David J. Gordon, often emphasize the novel's critique of institutional religion and its portrayal of human frailty. Johnson, in *Iris Murdoch*, discusses the tension between tradition and individual morality in *The Bell*, while Gordon, in *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*, examines the characters' attempts to transcend their egos. However, these analyses do not fully address how Murdoch's this-worldly mysticism operates within the novel, particularly through the character of Michael Meade and his struggle between eros and agape.

This study seeks to fill this gap by offering a focused analysis of mysticism in *The Bell* and its connection to Murdoch's moral philosophy. By examining the spiritual and moral journeys of Michael Meade and James Tayper Pace, the study aims to illuminate how Murdoch uses mysticism to explore the complexities of human nature and the quest for the Good. Key works by Murdoch, such as *The Sovereignty of Good* and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), will be referenced to contextualize the novel's philosophical underpinnings, alongside critical studies by Antonaccio, Conradi, and others.

Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* offers a profound critique of institutional religion through the lens of post secularism, a theoretical framework that challenges the secularization thesis and explores the persistence of spiritual themes in modern literature. The Imber Court community, a secluded Anglican lay group, represents traditional Christianity and its aspirations for spiritual purity. However, Murdoch deconstructs this framework by exposing its limitations and failures. The community's rigid moral codes and spiritual ideals are repeatedly undermined by the characters' human flaws, such as Michael Meade's self-deception and Dora Greenfield's rebellion. Through this critique, Murdoch highlights the inadequacy of institutional religion in addressing the complexities of human nature and morality. Post secularism allows us to analyze how Murdoch redefines spirituality outside traditional religious structures, emphasizing a this-worldly mysticism that aligns with her philosophical vision of the Good.

Murdoch's engagement with post secularism is further evident in her portrayal of secularized spirituality, which transcends traditional religious frameworks. Michael Meade's spiritual journey exemplifies this secularized approach, as his quest for the Good is not tied to conventional religious practices but is instead a deeply personal and philosophical endeavor. His struggles with desire, guilt, and moral failure reflect Murdoch's belief in the importance of moral attention and the transcendence of the Good. Post secularism provides a lens to examine how Murdoch blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, creating a hybrid spiritual



framework that integrates philosophical ideas with everyday human experiences. This framework challenges the binary opposition between religion and modernity, offering a nuanced exploration of spirituality in a secular age.

While post secularism provides a philosophical lens to analyze *The Bell*, affect theory offers an emotional lens to explore how the characters' feelings and embodied experiences shape their moral and spiritual journeys. Affect theory, which focuses on the role of emotions and embodied experiences in shaping human behavior, is particularly relevant to Murdoch's exploration of human nature. Michael Meade's emotional conflicts, such as his eros for Nick and Toby, drive his moral failings and his aspirations for agape. By analyzing these affective experiences, we can better understand the tension between Michael's embodied desires and his spiritual ideals. Affect theory allows us to examine how Murdoch uses emotions to depict the complexities of human nature, highlighting the challenges of achieving moral clarity and spiritual growth.

The embodied nature of spirituality in *The Bell* is another key area where affect theory enriches our understanding of the novel. Michael's physical desire for Toby and his attempts to sublimate it into a higher spiritual love reflect the tension between the body and the spirit. This tension is central to Murdoch's exploration of morality, as it underscores the difficulty of reconciling human desires with spiritual aspirations. Affect theory helps us analyze how Murdoch uses embodied experiences to explore the challenges of spiritual growth, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness and moral attention. Through this lens, we can see how the characters' affective experiences shape their understanding of the Good and their moral decisions.

The Imber Court community is not just a religious or spiritual space but also an affective one, where emotions like guilt, love, and jealousy shape the characters' interactions. Affect theory allows us to analyze how these emotional dynamics influence the community's moral and spiritual atmosphere. For example, Dora Greenfield's rebellion against the community's oppressive norms can be understood as an effective response to its emotional and moral constraints. Her journey from oppression to liberation reflects the transformative power of emotional experiences in shaping moral growth. By examining the affective dimensions of the community, we can better understand how Murdoch uses emotions to critique institutional religion and explore alternative forms of spirituality.

By combining post secularism and affect theory, we can develop a comprehensive understanding of *The Bell* that addresses both its philosophical and emotional dimensions. Post secularism provides a framework to analyze Murdoch's critique of institutional religion and her embrace of secularized spirituality, while affect theory offers a lens to explore how the characters' emotional experiences shape their moral and spiritual journeys. Together, these theories allow us to examine how Murdoch creates a hybrid spiritual framework that integrates philosophical ideas



with embodied experiences. This framework not only enriches our understanding of *The Bell* but also contributes to broader discussions about the intersection of literature, philosophy, and spirituality in contemporary scholarship.

Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* employs mysticism as a lens to explore the complexities of human nature and morality, particularly through the characters' spiritual struggles and moral dilemmas. Murdoch's mysticism is not an escape from reality but a means of confronting it, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, impartiality, and justice in the pursuit of the Good. As Murdoch writes in *The Sovereignty of Good*, "Mystics [...] have attempted by extremities of language to portray the nakedness and aloneness of Good" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 74). This idea is reflected in *The Bell*, where the characters' mystical experiences are deeply intertwined with their moral and emotional lives.

Michael Meade's spiritual crisis is central to the novel's exploration of mysticism. His struggle between eros (his desire for Nick and Toby) and agape (his aspiration for selfless love) highlights the tension between human desires and spiritual ideals. Michael's failure to reconcile these forces reflects Murdoch's belief in the difficulty of achieving moral clarity. As he reflects, "I am too flawed a vessel to fulfil the necessary service of love" (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 215). This admission underscores the novel's exploration of human frailty and the challenges of spiritual growth.

Murdoch contrasts traditional Christianity, represented by the Imber Court community, with her this-worldly mysticism, which emphasizes moral attention and the transcendence of the Good. The Imber community aspires to conventional Christianity, but its rigid moral codes and spiritual ideals are repeatedly undermined by the characters' human flaws. For instance, James Tayper Pace, the community's spiritual leader, embodies the limitations of institutional religion. His moral absolutism and lack of empathy contrast sharply with Murdoch's vision of a more compassionate and nuanced spirituality.

Murdoch's this-worldly mysticism, on the other hand, is embodied in Michael Meade's quest for the Good. Unlike the Imber community's adherence to traditional religious practices, Michael's spirituality is deeply personal and secularized. As he reflects, "I have had a spiritual crisis and emerged victorious, confident in a Love that transcends the distortions of my egoistic and unenlightened guilt" (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 142). This statement reflects Murdoch's belief in the importance of moral attention and the transcendence of the Good, which she elaborates in *The Sovereignty of Good*: "The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 71).

Post secularism provides a useful framework for analyzing the contrast between traditional Christianity and Murdoch's this-worldly mysticism. The Imber Court community, with its blend of religious and secular elements, reflects the post secular blurring of boundaries between the



sacred and the secular. As John McClure argues in *Partial Faiths*, post secular literature often explores “the persistence of spiritual themes in a secular age” (McClure, 2007, p. 12). This is evident in *The Bell*, where the characters’ spiritual struggles occur in a space that is neither fully sacred nor fully secular.

Dora Greenfield’s rebellion against the Imber community’s oppressive norms can be understood as a postsecular critique of institutional religion. Her journey from oppression to liberation reflects Murdoch’s belief in the importance of individual moral growth outside traditional religious frameworks. As Dora reflects, “I am not a religious person, but I know what it is to be good” (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 98). This statement encapsulates Murdoch’s secularized spirituality, which emphasizes moral attention and the pursuit of the Good over adherence to religious dogma.

Affect theory enriches our understanding of mysticism in *The Bell* by highlighting the role of emotions and embodied experiences in shaping the characters’ moral and spiritual journeys. Michael Meade’s emotional conflicts, such as his desire for Toby and his guilt over his past relationship with Nick, drive his spiritual crisis. As Sara Ahmed argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, “Emotions are not simply contained within the individual but are shaped by social and cultural contexts” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 9). This idea is reflected in Michael’s struggle to reconcile his personal desires with the moral expectations of the Imber community. Similarly, Dora Greenfield’s emotional experiences shape her moral growth. Her feelings of oppression and liberation reflect the transformative power of affective experiences in shaping moral and spiritual understanding. As she reflects, “I felt as if I had been released from a prison” (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 102). This statement underscores the novel’s exploration of how emotions influence moral decision-making and spiritual growth.

By combining postsecularism and affect theory, we can see how Murdoch uses mysticism in *The Bell* to explore the complexities of human nature and morality. Post secularism provides a framework to analyze the contrast between traditional Christianity and Murdoch’s this-worldly mysticism, while affect theory offers a lens to explore how the characters’ emotional experiences shape their spiritual journeys. Together, these theories allow us to examine how Murdoch creates a hybrid spiritual framework that integrates philosophical ideas with embodied experiences. This framework not only enriches our understanding of *\*The Bell\** but also contributes to broader discussions about the intersection of literature, philosophy, and spirituality in contemporary scholarship.

At the heart of *\*The Bell\** lies Michael Meade’s profound moral conflict, a struggle between his base eros (his physical desires for Nick and Toby) and his aspiration for agape (selfless, spiritual love). This tension between human desire and spiritual ideals is central to Murdoch’s exploration of morality and mysticism. As Michael reflects on his past relationship with Nick, he





acknowledges the destructive power of his unchecked desires: "I had imagined myself as the boy's spiritual protector, envisioning my passion transformed into a noble and altruistic bond marked by self-effacement, which I perceived as the ultimate manifestation of love, while in truth, I was driven by a carnal desire to possess him" (Murdoch, \*The Bell\*, p. 132). This admission highlights the gap between Michael's idealized vision of love and the reality of his selfish desires.

Michael's struggle is further complicated by his reawakened feelings for Toby, a young man who joins the Imber community. Despite his efforts to sublimate his desires into a higher spiritual love, Michael ultimately succumbs to his physical impulses. As he confesses, "I am too flawed a vessel to fulfil the necessary service of love" (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 215). This moment of self-awareness underscores the difficulty of reconciling human desires with spiritual aspirations, a theme that resonates throughout Murdoch's work. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch writes, "Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 65). Michael's failure to achieve this realization reflects the challenges of moral growth and the persistence of human frailty.

Murdoch portrays the tension between human desire and spiritual ideals as a central moral dilemma in *The Bell*. Michael's inability to transcend his base eros highlights the limitations of human nature and the difficulty of achieving true agape. As he reflects on his feelings for Toby, he acknowledges the complexity of his emotions: "I tried to justify my affection for Toby as a source of compassion and benevolence that could be harnessed for positive purposes, but I ultimately succumbed to the need to kiss him" (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 210). This moment of weakness illustrates the struggle between Michael's spiritual aspirations and his physical desires, a struggle that Murdoch presents as both deeply personal and universally human.

The contrast between Michael and James Tayper Pace further emphasizes this tension. While Michael grapples with his desires, James represents a more rigid, ascetic approach to spirituality. However, James's moral absolutism and lack of empathy reveal the limitations of his approach. As Murdoch writes, "The saint and the artist are both attempting to transcend the self, but they do so in different ways" (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 178). This distinction highlights the novel's broader exploration of the tension between tradition and neurosis, as well as the challenges of achieving moral clarity in a flawed and imperfect world.

Post secularism provides a useful framework for analyzing the tension between eros and agape in *The Bell*. The Imber community's ascetic ideals, embodied by James Tayper Pace, reflect a traditional religious approach to spirituality that Murdoch critiques. As John McClure argues in *Partial Faiths*, postsecular literature often challenges "the rigid binaries of sacred and secular, offering a more fluid and nuanced understanding of spirituality" (McClure, 2007, p. 15). This is evident in *The Bell*, where Murdoch contrasts the community's asceticism with Michael's more personal and secularized spiritual journey.



Michael's struggle with his desires can be seen as a critique of the Imber community's rigid moral codes. As he reflects, "I have had a spiritual crisis and emerged victorious, confident in Love that transcends the distortions of my egoistic and unenlightened guilt" (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 142). This statement reflects Murdoch's belief in the importance of moral attention and the transcendence of the Good, which she elaborates in *The Sovereignty of Good*\*: "The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 71). By rejecting the community's ascetic ideals, Michael embodies Murdoch's vision of a more compassionate and nuanced spirituality.

Affect theory enriches our understanding of Michael's moral conflict by highlighting the role of emotions and embodied experiences in shaping his spiritual journey. Michael's feelings of desire, guilt, and love are not just abstract concepts but deeply embodied experiences that drive his actions. As Sara Ahmed argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, "Emotions are not simply contained within the individual but are shaped by social and cultural contexts" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 9). This idea is reflected in Michael's struggle to reconcile his personal desires with the moral expectations of the Imber community.

Michael's physical desire for Toby and his attempts to sublimate it into a higher spiritual love reflect the tension between the body and the spirit. As he reflects, "I tried to justify my affection for Toby as a source of compassion and benevolence that could be harnessed for positive purposes, but I ultimately succumbed to the need to kiss him" (Murdoch, "*The Bell*", p. 210). This moment of weakness illustrates the challenges of achieving moral clarity in the face of overwhelming emotions, a theme that resonates throughout Murdoch's work.

By combining post secularism and affect theory, we can see how Murdoch uses Michael's struggle between eros and agape to explore the complexities of moral growth. Post secularism provides a framework to analyze the tension between traditional religious ideals and Murdoch's this-worldly mysticism, while affect theory offers a lens to explore how Michael's emotional experiences shape his spiritual journey. Together, these theories allow us to examine how Murdoch creates a nuanced portrayal of human nature, emphasizing the challenges of achieving moral clarity in a flawed and imperfect world.

Murdoch's concept of the Good and how the characters' moral failures reflect the challenges of achieving spiritual growth. This section integrates post secularism and affect theory, along with quotes from the primary text (*The Bell*) and secondary sources. In *The Bell*, Iris Murdoch explores her philosophical concept of the Good, a central theme in her work that emphasizes moral attention, selflessness, and the transcendence of ego. As Murdoch writes in *The Sovereignty of Good*, "The Good is the magnetic center towards which love naturally moves" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 68). This idea is reflected in *The Bell*, where the characters' struggles with morality and spirituality are framed as a quest for the Good. However, achieving the Good is not





a straightforward process; it requires constant self-awareness, humility, and the ability to see beyond one's own desires and illusions.

For Michael Meade, the protagonist, the quest for the Good is fraught with challenges. His moral failures, particularly his self-deception and inability to transcend his base desires, highlight the difficulty of achieving spiritual growth. As he reflects, "I am too flawed a vessel to fulfil the necessary service of love" (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 215). This admission underscores the novel's exploration of human frailty and the persistent gap between aspiration and reality. Murdoch's concept of the Good is not an abstract ideal but a practical goal that requires continuous effort and moral attention.

The characters' moral failures in *The Bell* serve as a lens through which Murdoch explores the challenges of achieving the Good. Michael's self-deception, in particular, is a central theme in the novel. Despite his aspirations for spiritual growth, Michael repeatedly falls short due to his inability to confront his own flaws. For example, his relationship with Nick Fawley is marked by self-deception, as he imagines himself as the boy's spiritual protector while being driven by carnal desire. As Murdoch writes, "I had imagined myself as the boy's spiritual protector, envisioning my passion transformed into a noble and altruistic bond marked by self-effacement, which I perceived as the ultimate manifestation of love, while in truth, I was driven by a carnal desire to possess him" (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 132). This gap between Michael's idealized vision of love and the reality of his desires reflects the challenges of achieving the Good.

Similarly, Michael's reawakened feelings for Toby reveal his ongoing struggle with self-deception. Despite his efforts to sublimate his desires into a higher spiritual love, Michael ultimately succumbs to his physical impulses. As he confesses, "I tried to justify my affection for Toby as a source of compassion and benevolence that could be harnessed for positive purposes, but I ultimately succumbed to the need to kiss him" (Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 210). This moment of weakness illustrates the difficulty of transcending human desires and achieving the selflessness required for the Good.

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By combining post secularism and affect theory, we can see how Murdoch uses the quest for the Good to explore the complexities of moral growth. Post secularism provides a framework to analyze the tension between traditional religious ideals and Murdoch's this-worldly mysticism, while affect theory offers a lens to explore how the characters' emotional experiences shape their spiritual journeys. Together, these theories allow us to examine how Murdoch creates a nuanced portrayal of human, emphasizing the challenges of achieving moral clarity in a flawed and imperfect world.

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