

Dora's Growth in *The Bell*

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(Accepted April 25, 2001)

Key words : Iris Murdoch, Dora, *The Bell*, Imber Court, independence

Abstract

The Bell is one of Iris Murdoch's early novels but it already contains her main themes which are developed in a deeper sense in her later novels. Dora, who came from the lower middle class and had an inferiority complex, married a much older rich and refined art historian hoping to become a member of higher society. But her husband was a tyrant and she became a victim of an unhappy married life. The process of her awakening to the need of independence and self-respect is connected with Catherine, Toby and Michael. Paintings in the National Gallery and a legendary bell found in the lake by Toby played important roles in Dora's growth. They touched and shook and changed her into a mature woman who could cope with her problems. Dora's future liberation is hinted at by references to a butterfly and birds. A beautiful secluded religious community called Imber Court, which she had at first hated, offered her a place for serious thinking about her future.

Iris Murdoch is well known as a prolific writer. She wrote 26 novels as well as philosophical works and dramas. *The Bell*, published in 1958, is her fourth novel and one of her early works. John Bayley, her husband, tells us in his book, *Iris—A Memoir of Iris Murdoch* (1998), that she got the idea of a great old bell sunken in the water — the bell which plays a crucial role in the novel — from a Greek or Roman amphora “half buried in the ooze” which he found when they enjoyed swimming in a river in France on their honeymoon. Bayley described their happy married life which only a mature couple who are independent of each other would be able to enjoy as follows: “So married life began. And the joys of solitude. No contradiction was involved. The one went perfectly with the other. To feel oneself held and cherished and accompanied, and yet to be alone. To be closely and physically entwined, and yet feel solitude's friendly presence, as warm and undesolating as contiguity itself.” (Bayley 88-89) Dora, the protagonist of *The Bell*, whose married life is just the opposite to that which Iris and her husband enjoyed, was the victim of an unhappy married life. Would it be possible for her to survive and become an independent mature woman with self-respect?

I. Dora's Marital Problems and her Agony

The story begins with an introduction of Dora's marital problems. Dora, who came of a lower middle class family and had an inferiority complex, was happy to marry Paul, a much older rich and refined art historian with an established reputation. He had everything that she lacked. She hoped to “get inside

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the society and learn how to behave”(Murdoch, *The Bell* 8) and become “the cultivated woman”(*The Bell* 8) by marrying him. But her vitality for which he had married her soon began to irritate him. His violence and power, “a sort of virile authority”(*The Bell* 11) which once attracted her began to frighten her. The very reasons for which they had been attracted to each other began to annoy them. Except for a short period just after her marriage, she felt no joy in her married life. Paul had a strong sense of family and demanded that she bear him a son and wanted to put her in the traditional role of a mother : “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.”(*The Bell* 10) He never regarded his wife as an equal nor as an intelligent woman. He only compelled her to his will. She as a child-wife was incapable of explaining her real feeling to him nor of fighting back. The only thing she could do to show him her unhappiness was to run away from him. Even when she was away from him and enjoying her life with Noel, a young reporter whom Paul disliked, she could never get away from Paul’s threat because he tried to keep her in his power by sending money and letters. Soon she learned that escape from him did not solve any of her problems and that there was no place she could escape to. This made her decide to go back to him. This realization was her first step toward facing her problems. A little prospect for her growth is seen here.

When she made up her mind to go back to her husband, he was working on old manuscripts while staying as a guest in a remote religious community called Imber Court. Murdoch in her novels often sends her characters to a secluded place. It is her way to lead her characters to some new realization. On the train to Pendelcote where Imber Court was located Dora was already seized by a fear of falling back into Paul’s power and of being judged and condemned as wicked by members of the community. Dora’s feeling here shows her lack of confidence in herself and her guilty feeling about her life with Noel.

II. Dora at Imber Court

Dora’s feeling, “she had done at least one thing to please him. She had come back,”(*The Bell* 24) shows her good nature in being anxious to please others. But Paul’s coldness at the station discouraged her. It made Toby, who had come to Imber Court for an experience of religious life before studying at Oxford University, wonder why Paul did not look happy to see his wife. On her first night at Imber, looking out of the window and seeing Toby, “the very image of freedom,”(*The Bell* 44) on the shore of the lake, innocent and carefree, Dora painfully thought that she had come back into her husband’s power even though it was she who had decided to come back to him. Toby’s innocence and freedom is also depicted in the scene where he was playing naked in the pool in the sunshine. Dora’s ambivalent feeling towards her husband is seen in the following passages: “she felt both afraid and glad to see him”(*The Bell* 24) at the station and “she looked at him with a mixture of excitement and disgust,”(*The Bell* 44) on her first night at Imber. In contrast to Dora, Paul had confidence in his righteousness and blamed her all the time. His attitude was consistent but stiff without any prospect of change or growth. Dora’s feeling, “no one should destroy her”(*The Bell* 45) when she looked into a mirror and saw her own image before going to her husband who was waiting for her with burning desire in the bed, shows her strength to survive.

A series of incidents shows Dora’s inability in practical matters and unfitness to Imber. To protect a butterfly she had left her suitcase on the train with her husband’s precious notebook inside. Although the next day she went to the station and picked up the forgotten suitcase, she left it again at the pub where she had stopped to enjoy a brief relaxation from the stifling religious atmosphere of the Imber community. Her unfitness and thoughtlessness are seen in her wearing clothing unsuitable for kneeling down in the chapel and shoes too uncomfortable to walk around in, causing people at Imber much trouble to find them when they were lost. Dora resented the rules at Imber such as covering one’s head at the service and having

meals in silence or Mrs. Mark's remark that women should stick to traditional tasks. She also resented the prohibition against decorating the room with flowers and having curiosity about others. These rules seemed stupid and were unacceptable to her. She had no intention to respect them nor to respect the piety of the community although her husband asked her to do so.

Imber was a lay community attached to the near-by Abbey. The Abbess wanted to make Imber a "buffer state" (*The Bell* 81) between the Abbey and the world for those who "can live neither in the world nor out of it" (*The Bell* 81). When we consider the Abbess's intention to set up Imber as a refuge for "sick people" or for "these unhappy souls" (*The Bell* 81), Dora's above-mentioned repulsion at the rules of the community seems reasonable and healthy matching the words which refer to her physical health, "the vitality of the sunburnt throat" (*The Bell* 45). But Dora who was a captive in the power of her husband and did not know how to be freed could also be considered a sick person in a different sense.

III. Dora and Catherine

Catherine was called "our saint" and was paid special respect to because she was supposed to surrender the world and become a nun at the Abbey, which means that she was considered to be spiritually higher than other members of the community. Just as Imber itself represents the tension between secular world and sacred world as suggested by the Abbess's definition of Imber, there was always tension around Catherine who was torn between profane and sacred love, that is torn between her secret love for Michael and a desire to dedicate herself to the spiritual life. Catherine's agony was unknown to the other members of Imber except for Dora and Catherine's twin brother, Nick. Other members of the community mistook this tension for piety and respected her even more. Nick's words to Michael, one of the leaders at Imber, when Michael told him that Catherine was very happy, "When I am told that a person is happy, I know that he is not. Of really happy people this is never said," (*The Bell* 55) show that Nick sensed his sister's unhappiness. Dora who enjoyed worldly things such as drinking, smoking and an occasional affair could not believe there was a woman who wished to confine herself inside the Abbey wall for the rest of her life.

In the beginning of the story, Dora was introduced as a frivolous woman with socially disapproved behaviour such as throwing an empty cigarette packet out of the train window. Her frivolity is also seen in her displeasure at seeing Catherine's beauty and in her feeling of rivalry towards Catherine and also in her relief at finding that Catherine was not so beautiful as Dora had expected. Dora's superficial attention seemed to be focused only on Catherine's beauty but Dora unconsciously sensed something disturbing about Catherine. Dora was the only person in the community who bravely expressed her disagreement with Catherine's decision to be a nun as follows:

You can't really want to go in there! . . . To shut yourself up like that, when you're so young and so beautiful. . . . it makes me quite miserable to think of you in there!

(*The Bell* 138)

Dora's frankness made Catherine face Dora for the first time. Catherine's answer to Dora, "There are things one doesn't choose, . . . I don't mean they're forced on one. But one doesn't choose them. These are often the best things," (*The Bell* 138) led Dora to a triumphant conviction that Catherine did not want to go into the Abbey. The only chance when Dora and Catherine might have talked face to face and Catherine was about to confide her true feeling to Dora was destroyed by Paul who thought everything Dora did was stupid. Besides he gave her a blow by declaring that he did not respect her at all:

"I can't think what you and Catherine could find to say to each other," said Paul.

“You seem to have rather different interests!”

“Why shouldn’t I talk to Catherine?” said Dora. “Do you think I’m not worthy to, or something?”

“I didn’t say so,” said Paul, “but you evidently feel something of the sort! If you want my view, I think Catherine is everything that a woman should be—lovely, gentle, modest, and chaste.”

“You don’t respect me,” said Dora, her voice trembling.

“Of course I don’t respect you,” said Paul. “Have I any reason to? I’m in love with you, unfortunately, that’s all.”

“Well, it’s unfortunate for me too,” said Dora, starting to cry.

(*The Bell* 138-139)

Paul degraded Dora by highly praising Catherine for her virtues as an ideal woman. It was enough to discourage Dora’s effort to be reunited with him. His contempt was unbearable to her.

She had changed very much since she had come to Imber. She was totally different from what she had been the first night when her image in the mirror looked very healthy and showed her resolution not to be destroyed. Paul’s tyrannical attitude and the blaming glances of people in the community affected her. As a result she could no longer even focus her eyes upon the image in the mirror. After the blow Paul had just given her, she suddenly had an impulse to run away from him again and went back to London. Her second flight from her husband was her desperate counterattack to punish him and “to show him that she could still act independently” (*The Bell* 183) and to remind him that she was not his slave. But this act of Dora’s was brought to naught by a telephone call from Paul when she was having a good time with easygoing Noel. Wherever she went, Paul could easily find her and force her to remember that he had a power over her. Once she heard his angry voice, she could not find any fun in being with Noel.

IV. Dora in the National Gallery

Once she had heard her husband’s voice, Noel’s place could no longer be her refuge. Her refuge was the National Gallery, a very familiar place. Pictures had a soothing effect on her. Dora who had always been moved by pictures was moved much more deeply than usual because of her psychological state at the time:

. . . her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect. . . the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good. . . .

(*The Bell* 190-191)

In front of a picture by Gainsborough Dora “felt a sudden desire to go down on her knees before it, embracing it, shedding tears.” (*The Bell* 191) Goodness in Dora responded to something superior and good which emanated from the pictures. Dora’s exaltation was such that: “She felt that she had had a revelation.” (*The Bell* 190) The power of the good paintings overwhelmed Dora and she was encouraged and filled with love. Dora’s strange sensation in the National Gallery resembles Mildred’s exalted sensation in the British Museum in Murdoch’s last novel:

. . . Mildred with tears in her eyes, turning away. What chaos, what suffering, such passion, such love, such infinity, she felt faint, she might fall to the ground.

(Murdoch, *Jackson’s Dilemma* 208)

Bayley writes of the importance of art in Murdoch's novels as follows:

. . . I've often thought that what some of your readers find spiritual and uplifting in your novels is, unknown to them, a silent fellowship with great art of other kinds. You are the only novelist I know who can make the whole world of art come into your novels without being laborious about it, or making it seem fancy. (Bayley 87)

As Bayley points out, art played an important role in Dora's growth. Paintings, especially Gainsborough's picture of his two daughters, encouraged her to face reality. In contrast to Dora, James, one of the leaders of Imber, condemned art as something against diligence. This shows his narrow-mindedness and lack of goodness. Throughout the story he judged people around him including Dora. After she experienced such a strange sensation while looking at the paintings, she was changed into a woman who no longer turned her back on her present problems and she decided to go back to Imber. The recovery of her appetite for food which she had lost when she heard her husband's angry voice over the phone shows not only her recovery from the shock of the telephone call but also the recovery of her physical health which had been damaged as was shown in her inability to focus her eyes upon the image in the mirror. She went back to Imber as a more mature woman than before.

V. The Significance of the Bell to Dora

Along with the revelation at the National Gallery, the "resurrection" of a legendary old bell was very important to Dora's growth. When she heard that Toby had found an old bell in the lake, she got the idea of substituting the old bell for the new bell that the Abbey had ordered and make a miracle. Dora's purpose was to shake the people at Imber. It was her way to fight against those who had judged and organized her. But things did not work as Dora planned. Stephen Wall says, "Its[the bell's] meaning is shifting." (Wall 265) It had a historical significance to Paul. To Catherine who had heard about the legend of the bell in which a nun who had a secret lover was frightened at the fall of the bell and drowned herself, the fall of a new bell into the lake meant blame for her secret love toward Michael. Its meaning also shifts for the same person, Dora. At first the bell was only a means to Dora to assert herself at Imber. To pull up the huge bell from the lake seemed to her an impossible undertaking but she felt she had to do it because she felt as if it was "a sort of rite of power and liberation" (*The Bell* 211). It was necessary for her to accomplish the impossible to gain power and freedom. Later in the barn the bell "seemed more and more like a living presence" (*The Bell* 265) to her and she could feel "the strange warmth in it" (*The Bell* 265). The bell gave her a similar sensation to that which she had at the National Gallery: "She was struck again by the marvel of its resurrection and she felt reverence for it, almost love." (*The Bell* 266) Soon the roles of Dora and the bell were reversed. Dora who intended to use the bell as a means to get revenge on the community became the one who was mastered by it: "She had thought to be its master and make it her plaything, but now it was mastering her and would have its will." (*The Bell* 267) Along with love for the bell she felt love for the community which she had hated before. She wanted to protect not only the bell but also the community of Imber itself from being exposed to the malice of the press. She could not stand having untrue stories about the bell being spread by Noel, a nosy newspaperman. Dora's act of hurling herself against the bell and making its existence known to the community can be understood as an act of love. It was a suitable act toward the bell on which the words "I am the voice of love" (*The Bell* 221) were inscribed. As Wall points out, it was "a compulsion of temperament" (Wall 268) – an impulsive act well-suited to Dora who lived in the moment. But it was the only way left to her to protect the bell and Imber from the greedy press. Catherine who could get only one meaning from the bell had to destroy

herself while Dora's thinking was flexible so that the significance of the bell shifted in her as she grew.

VI. Catherine's Rescue from Drowning

Another act of love by Dora was to try to save Catherine from drowning at the risk of her own life. The unexpected fall of the new bell which was a part of Nick's revenge on his ex-homosexual partner Michael drove Nick's twin sister Catherine mad as she took the fall of the bell as blame for her secret love for Michael. Dora, who could not swim, tried to save Catherine. Amid the fear of death and despair, Dora was saved by a nun. Paul who had been interested in the bell only as an art historian had been absorbed in examining it and had been indifferent to his wife. His coldness to her was in contrast to other people's kindness to Dora after she had risked her life for Catherine. His tyrannic attitude towards her became worse than before:

"I can't understand you," said Paul. "I'm beginning to wonder whether you aren't mentally ill. Perhaps you'd better see a psychiatrist in London."

"I won't see a psychiatrist," said Dora.

"You will if I decide you will," said Paul.

(*The Bell* 284)

His insulting words, "I advise you to do some serious thinking, if you're capable of it," (*The Bell* 285) deeply hurt her. In *The Green Knight*, Murdoch developed Dora's drowning experience into the drowning episode of Moy and Bellamy. Resurrected from death by drowning, Dora agreed to see Mother Clare, the nun who saved Dora and Catherine, and get advice from her, which Dora had refused to do before. Here again her flexibility is shown.

When we see how Catherine's dishonest way of living led not only to her destruction but also to the destruction of the community, we realize how precious Dora's frankness and honesty are. Dora changed from a useless outsider to a helpful practical woman. She came to find a pleasure in helping others and declared that she would stay as long as she could be of any help after the decision on the dissolution of the community. In spite of Paul's contemptuous remark, Dora did do some serious thinking after she was saved from drowning. As to her marital problems, she realized that she could not live with Paul until she became an independent woman.

VII. Dora's Future

Michael once helped her when she was lost on her way back to Imber from the station. After the dissolution of the community, when she was seriously thinking about her future, his advice and help were encouraging to her. Michael gave her some practical help to find a teaching job as well as a grant to complete her studies in painting which she had given up when she married Paul, and encouraged her to find "a way of life which had dignity and independence, and in which she could win the strength needed to make her able to treat with Paul equally and stop being afraid of him" (*The Bell* 302). Franca in *The Message to the Planet* is also encouraged by Maisie to pick up painting which she had given up when she married Jack. Maisie tries to explain to Franca the significance of painting as "spiritual refreshment" (Murdoch, *The Message to the Planet* 267). Different from Catherine, Dora had the ability to be happy. This ability of hers is described as "turning towards life and happiness like a strong plant towards the sun, assimilating all that lay in her way" (*The Bell* 308). Dora's learning how to swim also shows her growth. "The depth

below affrighted her no longer," (*The Bell* 315) means she was afraid neither of the water nor of her husband nor of whatever awaited her in the future. She became capable of coping with her problems.

Dora trusted Toby because he did not judge her and she sensed goodness in him. Michael who was in an agony, blaming himself as having killed Nick by refusing his love, welcomed being left alone with Dora after the dissolution of the community because he sensed goodness in her. He really appreciated her company. He could relax and be honest when he was with her because he knew she would not judge him even if he confessed her that he was homosexual.

In the midst of the turmoil of the falling of the bell Dora learned that Noel could not be her final refuge. Elizabeth Dipple refers to "the success of the community within the convent walls" (Dipple 128) which is contrasted with the failure of Imber community. The Abbess was described as a woman of absolute wisdom and the nuns were depicted as generous and warmhearted with a sense of humour as seen in the scene of Toby's breaking the rule of not going over the wall. To Dora's surprise, the nun who saved Dora and Catherine from drowning did not look embarrassed to be seen in her underwear when it came down to a matter of life or death. Dora could think and come to a right conclusion about her future when she was left alone with Michael and her help was welcomed and appreciated. Michael and the nuns silently but warmly cared about her. There was no one left who judged her and she could freely decorate the room with flowers.

The incident in the beginning of the story where she captured and tenderly protected a red butterfly on the train and freed it symbolizes her future liberation. The possibility of her liberation is also seen in the fact that Michael thought her one of Peter's rare birds because of the bright colour of her dress. Peter, an old college friend of Michael's, was one of the nucleus of the community and was deeply knowledgeable about birds. What made her leave Noel's place and go to the National Gallery was actually not Paul's angry voice but the chirping of a bird behind his voice. As we have seen, references to Dora with a bird or a butterfly which could fly symbolize her future liberation. The bright colours of the butterfly and her dress symbolize her vitality. She was full of vitality and love but she still had faults such as the frivolity to be jealous when she imagined that if Catherine recovered, she might live with Michael at Imber, and to be relieved when she knew Imber would become a part of the Abbey.

In her 1989 interview with Shena Mackay Murdoch criticized the radical wing of women's liberation as a movement to separate women from men and said, "it[Women's Liberation] must not depend on any sort of separation." (Mackay 40) But her description of Dora in *The Bell* clearly shows that she understood the importance of women's independence from men and knew that women are often victims. Dora, awakened to these things, will never be a captive of someone else's power. She will survive whatever happens in the future. The story begins with Dora's travel by train to Imber and ends with a reference to her departure by train. The story is her pilgrimage to becoming an independent woman. Murdoch described Dora as a woman with "a powerful imagination" (*The Bell* 22). Murdoch's even more powerful imagination than Dora's enabled her to develop an amphora found in the river into a beautiful and unforgettable story that takes place in the secluded religious community of Imber.

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