



Transforming Myths: Myths in Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head*

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Myths occur in the history of all societies and communities and are a basic constituent of culture. Myths performed a vital role in being the only available model of instruction for the ancient man's moral, social, and religious life.

Writers have consciously attempted to revive myth as a literary device as an indirect way of expressing the complexity of modern life and the latent truths about human behavior. The modern writers have used myths to reveal the unconscious and subconscious levels of human mind.

Iris Murdoch, a well-established and distinguished philosopher and a well-read, prolific writer has made a significant contribution in the contemporary British novel and to fiction in general, drawing our attention to the problems and issues facing the artist in the twentieth century. Murdoch who started writing novels in the year 1954, has found the use of myths and symbols important and enigmatic. She has paid attention to myth making as a constant human activity and its reflection in literature, for she considers literature to be a reflection of the psychology and ontology of its age.

Murdoch's novels are highly symbolical and she is unable to keep myths and symbols out her fiction. She discovers a continuous process of myth-making in human beings and also finds her plots caught in mythical and ritualistic patterns.

My paper explores the various ways the myths have been used in the texture of the writer's texts through the ages to the modern times. My paper focuses on the way Myths in the twentieth century, have gained a special importance for the writers, having been influenced by comparative mythology, archeology, anthropology and psychology. Writers have consciously attempted to revive myth as a literary device, as an indirect way of expressing the complexity of modern life and the latent truths about human behavior.

The use of myths in the novel seems to work at several levels. They are evoked by certain characters, and suggest psychological and emotional undercurrents. The interplay of these myths provides a rich texture to the novel and the recurrent images of severed head, sculpted, dreamed analyzed, work symbolically and give insight into the deeper meaning of the novel.

Myth is defined in The Encyclopedia Britannica as a "collective term for one kind of symbolic communication and specifically indicates one basic form of religious symbolism, as distinguished from symbolic behavior (cult, ritual) and symbolic places or objects (such as temples and icons) ("Myth"). The original Greek term for myth is "mythos" which signifies any story or plot, whether true or false. M.H.Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* explains that:

In its central modern significance, a myth is one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain, in terms of the intentions and actions of supernatural beings, why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, and to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which men conduct their lives (102).

Myths occur in the history of all societies and communities and are a basic constituent of culture. Every culture or tradition has developed a stock of myths in addition to other early forms of literature such as legends and fairy tales. Myths, however, are to be distinguished from legends, folk tales and fairy tales. Abrams in *Glossary* points out that, "[I]f the protagonist is a man rather than a

supernatural being, the story is usually not myth but legend; if the story concerns supernatural beings but is not part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folk tale or fairy tale "(102).

In ancient periods, myths represented certain sacred truths in the form of religious narratives. Myths performed a vital role in being the only available model of instruction for the ancient man's moral, social, and religious life and in justifying and preserving social, ethnic, pragmatic, aesthetic and religious customs and institutions. In times of great tension, primitive men, according to E.O.James, sought help of supernatural agencies. Furthermore, as he states, "around crucial events such as the creation of the world, the loss of immortality, the destiny of man, the sequence of the seasons, and the struggle between good and evil, a sacred narrative has taken shape to bring them into direct relation with the existing physical, cultural, social conditions and organizations". These narratives were accompanied by sacred rites, which re-enact, as James states, "the seasonal drama or creation itself" (*Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East* 279-81).

In later periods, myths begin to function differently. Mythical and legendary stories have served as allegory, allusion and metaphor, sometimes as intrinsic expression and at other times as elaborate and pretentious decoration. In the twentieth century, writers, influenced by comparative mythology, archeology, anthropology and psychology, have approached myths differently from their predecessors. There has been a conscious recognition and exploitation of the ritual elements in myths and also a general awareness of the psychological implications of mythical tales. Furthermore, literary writers have consciously attempted to revive myth as a literary device. In ancient societies there was an essential relationship between myth and ritual practice. Myth clarified the prescribed action of rites, and rites enacted mythical narrative in stylized dramatic form. Lillian Feder in her book *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* points out that, "ritual is an expression through prescribed acts of the wish or need to exert power either forbidden or unattainable in ordinary life". She further states that the action prescribed by ritual is "always symbolic, for the conquest, though ostensibly directed outward toward the gods, or death, or nature, is actually directed inward toward the participant's own wishes and fears" (15).

Ancient Greek and Roman myths as they occur in literature vary in motif or plot, but all of them are concerned with the universal preoccupations of man in the early stages of civilization: the creation of the world and of the man himself; the birth of gods and heroes and their contests, victories and defeats, death and resurrection. Moreover, structurally they have certain common features: a ritual, ceremonial or compulsive act, expressing emotional experience in stylized form, an identification of personal anxiety or helplessness with a social problem, and an expression of a struggle to control and command both the external environment and the inner self.

In attempting to define myth, literary critics usually make no distinction between pre-literary myth and myth as is interpreted, allegorized or actually transformed in ancient literature. On the other hand, most anthropologists and scholars of the history of religion consider evidence of ritual origin a criterion for identifying "true" myth and regard all the other ancient tales as literary myth, legend, saga or folk tale. Bronislaw Malinowski, a U.S. anthropologist, insisted that myth can be understood only as it functions in primitive society, and was influential in disregarding as myth the literary developments of mythical narrative. To him these are "merely" stories, "without the context of a living faith" ("Myth in Primitive Psychology" 78-79)

The world of myth is a continuous source of the knowledge needed for crucial problems in man's existence: war and peace, life and death, truth and falsehood, good and bad. Efforts are made to fathom the inner meaning of myths because of the authoritative, indeed revelatory function they have for human existence. Lillian Feder, in her definition of myth, states that myth is "a narrative structure of two basic areas of unconscious experience which are, of course, related. First, it expresses instinctual drives and the repressed wishes, fears, and conflicts that they motivate. These appear in the themes of myth. Second, myth also conveys the remnants within the individual consciousness of the early stage of phylogenetic development in which myths were created. This characteristic is evident mainly in its plots". She further elucidates that the characters of myth may be "gods, men, or monstrous creatures with the qualities of both, but even in myths dealing exclusively with immortals, the narrative material, the portrayal and conflict and sorrow, and the resolution or revelation are all reflection of human concerns" (*Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* 10-11)

As societies develop technologically, mythical thinking and myth itself do not disappear; they emerge in more subtle forms, one of which is literature. In Greek tragedies, the existing myths

provided the basic story in which the characters and places being familiar to the audience did not have to be elaborately identified. The attention of the audience was immediately focused on the novelties of detail; the particular interpretations which the artist was putting on his subject. The continued popularity of myths, in modern literature, indicates that in his desire for order, for belief in some standard symbol beyond his individual reaction, man has turned back to traditional symbols, which evoke an emotional, if not a spiritual, sense of permanence, recurrence, and stability.

Feder points out “[M]yth is not art though it is used in all the arts – literature, painting and sculpture”. It promises more, its methods and functions are different. Myth is a form of expression, which reveals “a process of thought and feeling – man’s awareness of and response to the universe, his fellow men, and his separate being”(28). Myth is a projection in concrete and dramatic form of fears and desires undiscoverable and inexpressible in any other way.

Myth is and has always been an integral element of literature; the interest of writers in myth and mythology has been remarkable and constant since Homer’s time. Moreover myth has become one of the most prominent terms in contemporary literary analysis. During the 1950’s, a large group of writers, the myth critics, including Robert Graves, Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler and now the most influential Northrop Frye began to view the genre and individual plot patterns of all, or almost all literature, including what on surface are highly sophisticated and realistic works, as recurrences of certain archetypes and essential mythic formulas. “Archetypal criticism”, which Frye recommends, approaches all literature as mythical. He points out that “[I]n literary criticism mythos means ultimately myths, a structural organizing principle of literary form” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 341).

In his essay on “Myth, Fiction and Displacement”, Frye elucidates the relation between mythology and literature. He remarks that myth provides “the main outlines and the circumference of a verbal universe which is later occupied by literature as well”. He points out that “Literature is more flexible than myth, and fills up this universe more completely: a poet or novelist may work in areas of human life apparently remote from the shadowy gods and gigantic story outlines of mythology. But in all cultures mythology merges insensibly into, and with, literature.” He states that the difference between literature and mythology is “more chronological than structural” and that “mythology as a total structure, defining as it does a society’s religious beliefs, historical traditions, cosmological speculations – in short, the whole range of its verbal expressiveness – is the matrix of literature, and major poetry keeps returning to it”(362-363).

Richard Chase, another important myth critic, remarks in *Quest for Myth* that, “[M]yth is literature”, but in his essay “Myth Revisited”, published a year later, modifies his definition to some extent and says that, “If myth is literature, it is also a certain kind of literature, namely, that kind in which the characters and events are instinct with a superhuman or quasi- transcendent force, or brilliance, and have about them an aura of unusual and portentous significance”(888).

Classical myths had been a very rich element in Renaissance poetry from Spenser to Milton. Myths were also used profusely, in the nineteenth century, with the advent of the romantic religion of nature and imagination. Poets, even long after having ceased to believe in myths, persisted in using myths of Jupiter, Venus, Prometheus, Adam and Eve for their plots, episodes or allusions. In the Romantic period in England, poets like Coleridge, Shelley and Keats used myths for different purposes. For Coleridge myths became a vehicle of expressing the deep levels of mind, which he could not have expressed in direct terms. In his fragmentary poem “Kubla Khan”, Coleridge uses the mythical and sacred river “Alph” to indirectly express the unconscious wishes and desires and levels of mind which are difficult to comprehend and thus are referred to as “caverns measureless to man”, which is a symbolic way of presenting the deep- seated feelings.

Shelley and Keats used myths, especially the nature myths to bring out the relation between man and nature, and also to express their own philosophical ideas. Shelley in his elegy on Keats – “Adonais”, uses the myth of Adonis- a vegetation god- and the rites connected with it: the mourning of women followed by rejoicing at Adonis’s rebirth, to give expression to his neo – platonic philosophy of the immortality of all living things. For Keats, Greek myths provide either his main themes, or numerous allusions as in his “Endymion” and “Hyperion”. In “Endymion” he uses the Greek fable of Diana’s love for Endymion, a mortal shepherd, to bring home the symbolic significance of the myth that ideal beauty can be achieved only through love and sympathy for the beauty immanent in human life.

In the twentieth century myths have become all the more integral to the artistic mode of expression and in all literature- poetry, drama and fiction there is a predominant use of myths. Myths in the twentieth century, have gained a special importance for the writers, having been influenced by comparative mythology, archeology, anthropology and psychology. Writers have consciously attempted to revive myth as a literary device, as an indirect way of expressing the complexity of modern life and the latent truths about human behavior. The modern writers have used myths to reveal the unconscious and subconscious levels of human mind that could not have been expressed in the simpler realistic mode of the Victorian era.

The strongest influence on the modern writer's approach to myth has been of Sigmund Freud. Freud's analysis of myths which appears in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), has given a profound insight into the use and interpretation of myths, as an expression of deep human emotions which do not find easy, conscious expression. The wide acceptance that myths as an expression of unconscious drives and wishes originates in Freud's interpretation and use of myths as a guide to the human psyche, his discovery of the connection between myth and dream, and his effort "to transform metaphysics to meta-language" (*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* 259). In the exploits of the gods and heroes of ancient Greek and Latin literature, Freud saw expressions of instinctual drives and unconscious conflicts. Myth provided him with a clue to the psychic history of the human species.

Freud employed the mythical material dramatized by Sophocles in his play *Oedipus Rex* to substantiate the evidence he had collected from dreams and neurotic symptoms of the existence of what he named the Oedipus complex: a complex which reflects childhood incestuous desires for one parent and consequent hatred of the other. Freud's choice of the name is itself a striking indication that for him the myth so perfectly and economical mode of expression, a type of analytic formula. It is the "particular nature of the material "of the play, says Freud (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 262) in other words the myth to which all ages respond; our dreams indicate that the story of Oedipus is an enactment of unconscious and unfilled childhood wishes. Freud also referred to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to point out the manifestation of Oedipus complex in the character of Hamlet who reenacts the unconscious feelings of guilt and the unfulfilled childhood passion for his mother.

Freud's contribution to myth lies in his own use of traditional myth to express and elucidate his discoveries about human psyche, his understanding of the relation between myth and dreams, his conception of unconscious feelings and instincts as mythical in their universality and continuity, and finally and most broadly, in his exploration of the unconscious mind and the nature and function of dream. In all these ways, Freud opened new pathways for scientific studies of myth and poetic adaptations of it.

Carl Jung's conception and interpretation of myth appears in his *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933), *Psychological Types* (1921) and in *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (1949), which has also opened up new approaches to myth for literary writers. Myth is an essential element in Jung's conception of the "collective unconscious", the contents of which are not personal but general, resulting from inherited brain structure". These are the mythological associations – those motives and images that can "spring anew in every age and clime, without historical tradition or migration" (*Psychological Types* 616). He regards myth, religion, and unconscious psychological forces as essentially inseparable, since he believes that religion both releases and channels unconscious experience, which is expressed in mythical archetypes. The extensive use of myth in all arts in this century can in large part be attributed to the new possibilities opened to it by the approaches of Freudian and Jungian psychology. Different as these two interpretations are, both view myth as a revelation of unconscious feelings and as a basic vehicle of emotional and aesthetic expression.

Along with Freud and Carl Jung's observations of myth, J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1911) also influenced writers in their use of myth. Frazer gave the idea that myths keep perpetuating through different ages, transformed in new forms. Among his important contributions to the study of myth is the evidence of the relationship of myth to ritual practice and social need. Frazer discovered behind ancient and primitive rites, assumptions and patterns of thought and feeling that persist in some form throughout man's social history. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* suggested the possibility of transforming ancient and primitive rites into a poetic language that could express contemporary feelings and attitudes.

This discussion about the new emphasis on the role and uses of myths in literature is also reflected in the literature written during the early twentieth century. A number of writers asserted that an integrative mythology, whether inherited or invented, is essential to literature. T.S Eliot in "The Wasteland"(1922), James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922), D.H.Lawrence in *The Plumed Serpent* (1928), Eugene O' Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), and many other writers have deliberately woven their materials on the pattern of ancient myths. W.B. Yeats undertook to construct his own systematic mythology, which he expounded in *A Vision* (1926) and embodied in a number of great lyric poems. For T.S Eliot the use of myths in modern literature is of great significance as he considers the "mythical method", a way of "controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("Ulysses, Order, and Myth" 426). T.S.Eliot views myth as antithetical to narrative, for he considers it in its most essential form a way of exerting control, establishing order and giving shape to what is shapeless and chaotic.

Iris Murdoch is one of the "most brilliant and one of the most compellingly intelligent of our present-day English novelists" (Bradbury 231). She is both a well-established and distinguished philosopher and a well-read, prolific writer. She has made a significant contribution in the contemporary British novel and to fiction in general, drawing our attention to the problems and issues facing the artist in the twentieth century.

Murdoch, who started writing novels in the year 1954, has found the use of myths and symbols important and enigmatic. She has paid attention to myth making as a constant human activity and its reflection in literature, for she considers literature to be a reflection of the psychology and ontology of its age. For myths are made by man about himself or about his relation with the world, they are reflected in literature too. She finds human engagement with the world to be an unceasing conflict between reality and appearance. In this struggle to comprehend reality, myth making intervenes in a significant way. She has discussed the role of myths in literature in different aspects of this issue. In many of her interviews and philosophical essays, she has discouraged the use of myths and symbols in literature. In her view, myths and symbols prevent the portrayal of character as a "free and separate" individual "related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn" ("Against Dryness"18).

Murdoch wishes to be a realist and a novelist in the English realist tradition as exemplified by Jane Austen, George Eliot and E.M.Forster, who were more interested in the precise details of life, and the relation of these to the complexities of thought. She commends these novelists for presenting a balance between the created opacity of persons and of the complex living reality of society as a dense otherness. In Murdoch's view, myths prevent this pursuit to understand the reality of the self as well as the "realization that something other than oneself is real"("The Sublime and the Good"51).

She considers the modern writer's "attempt to console us by myths or by stories" as a major drawback, and believes that the modern writers "truth is sincerity and his imagination is fantasy. Fantasy operates either with shapeless day- dreams (the journalistic story) or with small myths, toys, and crystals. Each in his own way produces a sort of "dream necessity". Neither grapples with reality: hence "fantasy" not "imagination). She is critical of the "crystalline" or "journalistic modern literature where "form...is an aspect of our desire for consolation" and which can make the work of art "a small myth which is a self-contained and indeed self-satisfied individual" ("Against Dryness" 18-20). According to Murdoch myths intervene in this moral and psychological task to know the reality of person.

However, Murdoch's views regarding the use of myths and symbols in literature are strikingly counter to her practice as a novelist. Critics have found in Murdoch's novels a constant fascination with myths as a mode of constructing characters as well as enabling a psychological insight into human relationships. Murdoch's novels are highly symbolical and she is unable to keep myths and symbols out her fiction. She discovers a continuous process of myth- making in human beings and also finds her plots caught in mythical and ritualistic patterns. In this context her own remark about the relation of life and myths in a review of Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, shows her interest in myths: "Canetti has shown ... in ways which seem to me entirely fresh, the interaction of the "mythical" with the ordinary stuff of human life. The mythical is not something "extra"; we live in myth and symbol all the time"(337-338).

In several of Murdoch's novels, like *A Severed Head (SH)* (1961), *The Unicorn* (1963) and *The Time of the Angels* (1966), we observe an intricate weaving of Greek myths and symbols into the matrix of the novels. These novels involve, as Malcolm Bradbury points out, "a mythic universe in which mystery suggests the problems of a lost order or structure not available in liberal-conventional notions of reality"(Possibilities 267-268) In *The Time of the Angels*, the character of Carel reflects a Frazerian mythical god- man who being a "priest of no god"(Byatt 27) tries to become a god himself. He sets out to destroy the fantasies of religion that persist from the days when Christianity was alive. Carel's control over Pattie, his long-time mistress, and over his daughter Elizabeth is presented in mythical overtones. Carel sees himself as a god, possessing both black and white: "Lucky the man who has the sugar-plum fairy and the swan-princess"(169). Pattie becomes for Carel the "black goddess, counter-virgin, an Anti- Maria"(157), who has to be the black Madona to balance the white virgin princess, his incestuously seduced daughter, Elizabeth.

In *A Severed Head*, several myths are used which are intricately woven in the novel and are significant in depicting the complexity of character as well as to give a mythical narrative to the theme and plot the novel. In the novel, as Elizabeth Dipple points out, "Freud on Medusa is bantered about to elevate the action; the psyche myth is evoked; Martin on discovering the incest of Palmer and Honor Klein takes to reading *The Golden Bough*; Dionysus, alchemy and primitive tribes are called on; the tale of Ares, Aphrodite and Hephaistos is brought into play; Dante's Love is pressed into service; and the book ends with Herodotus's story of Gyges and candaules"(Iris Murdoch: *Work forthe Spirit* 149).

Murdoch's use of the Oedipus myth and the myth of Medusa and their psychoanalytical interpretations in *SH* has drawn the attention of critics. There are recurring references to these myths that become associated with the different characters. Martin's relationship with Anotnia, his wife, and subsequent involvements with Honor Klein, an anthropologist, and Georgia, a young lecturer, are intriguing, for some underlying psychological quest in Martin seems to be reflected in these emotional bonds. Martin's "quasi-filial" relation with Antonia, and, Palmer Anderson, his wife's lover, makes them to be parental figures for Martin (*SH* 114). He seems to suffer from severe oedipal and castration anxiety and is unable to relate to women in an open and whole-hearted manner. In Martin's character the oedipal conflicts lead to repeated failures of adult relations. He becomes a victim of regressive behavior at the most crucial period of his life. This refusal to take responsibility for his adult life relates directly to obsessive attachment to his past resulting in his failure to grow-up from childhood dependence.

However, the oedipal myth evoked to present this aspect of Martin's personality does not become a constricting feature. Once Martin's problem is identified, he is motivated by Honor to breakout from the clutches of this myth. Honor, in the image of Medusa, uses her powers to awaken Martin into a life of reality and helps him to come out of his fantasy world where he had kept re-enacting the oedipal drama with erotic substitutions. The reader witnesses the psychological development and growth of Martin who finally severs his old bonds with Antonia and Palmer, takes stock of his regressive and dependent attitude and moves towards a life of "new era" as a different person in whom the "talent for a gentler world "had now "died" (201,195). Towards the end of the novel Martin emerges as an independent and mature being, free of the oedipal fixation. The myths do not confine the characters forever.

The central and controlling myth of *The Severed Head* emerges in different forms and is used symbolically to express different situations. This myth becomes multivalent and many people are related to it. The character of Honor Klein symbolically represents the Medusa, the severed head, to bring out her power of truth- telling and her power to bring radical changes in other's lives. Honor plays a symbolically functional role of awakening Martin to a life of manhood. As a severed head she uses her violent powers to symbolically destroy and destruct the sinners -Antonia and Palmer. Again Honor's image as a Medusa does not remain permanent. Once she liberates Martin from the hold of Antonia and Palmer, the myth of Medusa is discarded and she becomes free of this image and emerges as a woman.

Honor's coming back to Martin towards the end of the novel presents her as a woman with her need for love and affection from a man. Martin now perceives Honor, not as a powerful destructive force but as a woman who can give love. Thus the myths of Oedipus and Medusa evoked in the novel are used to present certain peculiar aspects of the characters. The myths do not constrain

or confine these characters, as they finally emerge as free and independent of the images, which described them. The use of myths in the novel seems to work at several levels. They are evoked by certain characters, and suggest psychological and emotional undercurrents. The interplay of these myths provides a rich texture to the novel and the recurrent images of severed head, sculpted, dreamed analyzed, work symbolically and give insight into the deeper meaning of the novel.

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