

To what extent is this true and how important is this conflict to the novel as a ...

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



Throughout Iris Murdoch's novel, 'The Bell' we are constantly being presented with conflicts, many of which relate to the discord between sex and religion which have been opposed to each other since the dawn of creation when Adam and Eve succumbed to temptation in the Garden of Eden. This conflict has particularly dark tendencies and acts as a destructive force for several characters, namely Catherine, Michael and Nick. Despite this being the primary theme of the novel we are also presented with a number of conflicts of a different nature.

The main conflict of the novel is that existing between sex and religion, as embodied by Catherine and Michael. Michael is constantly confronted by the issue of his sexuality and how it affects his religion. He is always striving to live a good life and he believes that entering into the priesthood would allow him to achieve this. However he is prevented from fulfilling this wish by his homosexuality which goes completely against the Church's teaching. Michael believes that to live a good life, " One should have a conception of one's capacities ... study carefully how best to use such strength as one has".

In initiating relationships with firstly Nick and then subsequently with Toby, Michael is clearly failing to do this. He is aware of his sexual tendencies and knows that they are viewed as improper but fails to take measures to prevent them from overpowering him. Michael admits to this failing in Chapter 16, " Michael was aware now ... that it had been a great mistake to see Toby ... the clasp of hands, had had an intensity, and indeed delightfulness, which he had not foreseen - or had not cared to foresee. "

Michael seems to take pleasure in the feeling of guilt which these forbidden relationships cause in him.

When he is confronted by James Tayper Pace, following Toby's confession of what had taken place between them, he is quite willing to take all the blame for the whole situation, " The real blame belongs to me. By sending Toby away you've made him feel like a criminal. " It is as though Michael wants James to blame him. He feeds off guilt; the constant cycle of guilt, redemption and then further guilt. Nick's arrival at Imber Court acts as a further reminder of his sins and at the conclusion of the novel when Nick has killed himself, Michael is left with a permanent reminder of his actions as he becomes responsible for Catherine.

Despite all the guilt, Michael feels that his love of God and his love of Nick " come from the same source". The moments in which he claims to feel closest to God are ironically found with Nick and Toby. Of Michael's feelings over his initial contact with Toby the narrator comments that, " He had felt his heart heel over in tenderness for the boy, and had been sure that such a spring of feeling could not be wholly evil. " However, Michael is unable to reconcile his homosexuality with his religion and is tormented by it constantly. Nick's death destroys his faith in God and causes him to question whether he had ever really believed at all.

He is ridden with guilt over his failure to give Nick the redemption he was looking for. He made desperate cries for help but Michael was too concerned with trying to lead a 'good life' to notice. The one good thing he could have

done was to be true to Nick, however he fails to realise this until it is too late. Although he does eventually return to the Mass he simply "existed beside it". There is no longer any future for him in religion; he must concentrate on looking after Catherine. As the Abbess said, "the way is always forward, never back".

Michael is facing in the right direction but it is up to him to start walking. Catherine, like Michael, cannot reconcile her sexuality with her religion. As a postulant nun she is preparing to sacrifice her whole life to serve God. Iris Murdoch believed that one of life's great tasks was to engage in a process called unselfing. By joining the convent Catherine is attempting this process. Therefore, her feelings for Michael are totally improper for someone in her position; consequently she is ridden with guilt, which leads to her attempt to take her own life. The entire community is oblivious to her feelings for Michael.

She is viewed as being something the other members should aspire to, "our little saint" as Mrs Mark observes. Dora is particularly in awe of her, both for her beauty and apparent sexual purity. She also feels slightly threatened by her as she represents what she can never have or be. It is as a result of Dora's interest in Catherine that we first get a suggestion that she is not as holy as everyone believes. Dora questions her motives for wishing to enter the abbey and Catherine's reply is, "There are things one doesn't choose ... I don't mean they are forced on one. But one doesn't choose them."

These are often the best things". This hints that she is not whole-hearted in her wish for a religious life: it appears that it is what was always expected of her, rather than being of her own design. Dora is the only character who notices this; the rest are all deceived until the dramatic incidents at the end. However nobody suspects that she may have feelings towards Michael. The only incident where we are given an inkling of any attraction is when Nick is working on the van and Catherine is sitting beside him with her skirt up around her waist; Michael arrives and she doesn't readjust it.

Michael feels uncomfortable in this situation but gets the impression that she must " positively dislike him" as she looks up at him without smiling.

Catherine ultimately fails to suppress her love for Michael and when the new bell falls into the lake she views this as a sign that God has condemned her, driving her to attempt to take her own life. Like Michael she cannot be truly good as she cannot reconcile her faith with her sexuality. There are also religious conflicts within the community as a whole. Firstly there is the conflict between the abbey and the lay community.

The abbey is cut off both physically and in terms of the role it plays in everyday life. The abbey is separated from Imber Court by a large lake. The only way to reach the abbey is by a rowing boat which can be pulled across from either end. Then there is a high wall which goes all the way around the abbey. The only way in is through a door in the wall, which surprisingly is always kept unlocked. Toby discovers this when he climbs over the wall into the abbey as part of his sexual awakening. This incident follows the embrace

with Michael and is Toby's attempt to convince himself that he is not homosexual.

There is very little contact made between the abbey and the court. We only see rare glimpses of the nuns and Michael is the only person who is allowed to visit the Abbess. Most communications are made through Mother Clare, her intermediary. These boundaries are all representative of the widening gap between lay and spiritual life, and the fading role of religion in everyday existence during the 1950's when Murdoch was writing. People were abandoning the church in favour of other beliefs more relevant to the world they were living in.

The community as a whole is separated from the rest of the world as there is a boundary wall enclosing both the abbey and the court. As Michael comes to realise, the community was an impossible dream; it is an attempt to isolate themselves from the realities of life. We also see religious and sexual conflicts between individual characters. Take for instance the contrasting speeches given by Michael and James Tayper Pace, in chapters 9 and 16 respectively, on how to live a 'good life'. James teaches that the good life is, "to live without any image of oneself". He has absolute faith in God and believes that he will guide him through life.

James is a very sure person, confident in his own beliefs and very dismissive of anyone who disagrees with him. "I have little time for the man who finds his life too complicated for the ordinary rules to fit". This viewpoint is very much the orthodox view of religion that had held prominence unchallenged

for centuries until the time period in which Murdoch wrote the novel, when people started challenging this blinkered outlook. Michael by contrast takes a much more open stance. He believes this it is important to, " have some conception of one's capacities" so as to know " how best to use such strengths as one has".

Rather than having blind faith in God alone he suggests that you should explore yourself, test the boundaries of your capabilities. Ironically Michael fails to be aware of his own shortcomings in his dealings with Nick and Toby. To most modern audiences this attitude would seem much the better of the two. Nevertheless, in presenting these two different viewpoints Murdoch acts as a moral philosopher but allows us to contemplate and draw our own conclusions. She does not appear to be endorsing one in particular, possibly suggesting that the way forward is a compromise between the two.

There is also a conflict of character between Mrs Mark and Dora. Mrs Mark strictly enforces the religious ideals of the community. For example when Dora asks her what she and her husband did before entering the community she is told, " We never discuss our past lives here ... when people ask each other questions about their lives, their motives are rarely pure". In fact Dora is asking purely out of interest, she does not attempt to judge others. By conversing with Mrs Mark she was simply trying to show human warmth but this is killed by Mrs Mark's restrictive nature, which is reflected in the community as a whole.

Murdoch uses symbolism to show conflicts with this novel and the most obvious use of it is the two bells. The old bell depicts scenes from the life of Christ, illustrated by rural, peasant images. It is inscribed with the words, "Vox ego amoris sum" (I am the voice of love). The bell is symbolic of a traditional way of life that had existed for centuries, with religious and secular life co-existing in harmony. In contrast the new bell is covered with "arabesque swirls": these are meaningless, therefore reflecting the declining importance of religion in peoples' lives.

Spiritual fulfilment was becoming more abstract during the 1950's, an example being Dora's revelation in the National Gallery when she is standing in front of Gainsborough's painting of his two daughters and experiences something "real" but at the same time "perfect". In the past people would have turned to religion to provide such feelings and called them revelations. The story of the bell flying into the lake and the nun who drowned herself because she was having a relationship with a man are representative of the ongoing conflict between sex and religion.

When the old bell is rung again it heralds the revealing of the long known truth that this conflict will never die, as Catherine declares her love for Michael and Toby confesses to James Tupper Pace over his encounters with Michael. The tarnishing and growths encrusted on the bell from years of being underwater illustrate the loss of purity in contemporary religion, also the tarnishing of Michael and, through his actions, Nick. The lake is another important symbol which contains different meanings.



As well as providing a physical gap between the court and the abbey it is symbolic of the divide between spiritual and temporal life. When at the end of the novel Dora cuts the painter on the rowing boat it shows that there is no future for these two lifestyles to exist side by side. The lake is particularly significant when analysing the character of Toby. When he is contemplating his relationships with Dora and Michael he walks "carefully" around the lake. He is young and inexperienced in the ways of the world, not yet ready to make important decisions such as his sexuality.

The murky waters of the lake represent the mysteries of life; Toby has tested the water out but is not going to throw himself in until he is certain. His ability to swim is also symbolic of the fact that he can cope with situations that face him; likewise, the aquatic nun who comes to the rescue of Catherine and Dora. She has learnt to live a purely religious life. Dora cannot swim at the beginning of the novel, she is drowning in Paul's restrictive power, however by the end she has learnt to live without him and take control of her own life.

By contrast, Catherine is never able to come to terms with her feelings for Michael, resulting in her near death experience by drowning. There are other significant examples of symbolism. When Michael is in the chapel and describes the singing of the nuns as "hideous purity" this symbolises the struggle between sex and religion which is taking place inside him. It is because of this conflict that he finds their singing repulsive, as they have what he wants but knows he will never get; a truly religious life.

Catherine is in a similar position, therefore it is perhaps significant that they both have the same dream about the drowning nun. There is ironic symbolism in the name of Dora's lover, Noel Spens. Noel is a very Christian name but he speaks out strongly against religion. He believes that it misguides people and places unfair restrictions on their lives. Dora's changing musical tastes are also significant. At the beginning when they hold an evening of Bach's music, Dora dislikes this as she finds it too structured and formal.

She much prefers listening to Noel's jazz music, with its jungle rhythms and exuberant style. However by the end of the novel we are told that she has taken an interest in listening to Mozart. This is representative of the change from chaos to order in her life in general. She learns to take control of her life and not let Paul repress her. Initially she describes marriage as being "enclosed in the aims of another". She is scared of Paul's physical power and will follow his orders to the letter. She is like the butterfly trapped on the train.

Toby saves her from his restrictiveness by allowing her to rediscover her youth. He releases her. At the same time Dora saves Toby from being trapped in a relationship with Michael by allowing him to realise that he is not homosexual. There are many conflicts within this novel, the majority of which relate in some way to that existing between sex and religion. It is its destructive nature which makes this conflict so dark and I would argue that it is a conflict that can never truly be resolved. We do see different kinds of

conflict as I have discussed but these do not play such a central role in the novel.