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“Seething Underneath”: Objectification in Iris Murdoch’s Early Fiction

By Emily Tait¹

Abstract

This essay is about the objectification of women in the early novels of Iris Murdoch, particularly *A Severed Head* (1961), *Under the Net* (1954) and *The Italian Girl* (1964), and how this is subverted by complex characterisation. In focusing on novels predominantly with male narrators and a first person male gaze, I will draw on Sartre’s analysis of “the look” in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) as well as feminist film theory to firstly consider evidence of immobilization and then re-examine criticism of Murdoch’s female characters as “puppets”. I will contend that Murdoch does not objectify her female characters but instead draws attention to their active passivity and resistance to petrification. Throughout I am concerned with the immobilizing gaze and with the comparisons that can be drawn between woman and Medusa, a figure embodying the core themes of the gaze and object-hood. To this end I examine how the gaze can be re-appropriated by female characters and utilized as a tool of female empowerment rather than objectification.

Key Words: Murdoch, Objectification, Medusa

In his scathing essay on Iris Murdoch’s methods of characterisation, Marvin Felheim observes of her characters, “we are told about them; we observe them in action; but we never really get inside them. They function as puppets” (189). He sees the philosophical backbone of her novels as unsupported by the unconvincing flesh of her characters. This reductive view persists in more recent criticism of Murdoch’s women in particular, including feminist criticism such as Sabina Lovibond decrying her characters’ “half-baked or abject femininity” (5). Rather than adopting this dismissive attitude towards female characters, I will show how they resist objectification through a more active passivity and resistance to petrification. Even within this sweeping criticism, Felheim inadvertently opens up interesting avenues of study regarding women, immobility and the nature of objecthood through his use of the word “puppets”. Felheim has Murdoch as puppet-master, while Murdoch in fact characterises her male narrators as trying to make puppets of female characters. In *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), Murdoch’s Booker Prize winning novel, Charles Arrowby, the protagonist, describes his childhood sweetheart, Hartley, as “a shell, a husk, a dead woman, a dead thing. Yet this was the thing I had so dearly wished to inhabit, to reanimate, to cherish” (461). Here it is Arrowby, not Murdoch, blindly attempting to “animate” a character while denying her body its subjectivity: it is a “husk”, a dead “thing”. In being observed by the first person male narrator, the female body is described on his terms, seen through an objectifying, immobilizing male lens. Some critics have failed to push past the male narrators’ view of these women, and take the narrative point of view too much on its own terms. Instead, I will draw on Sartre’s analysis of “the look” in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) as well as feminist film theory to firstly consider

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evidence of immobilization then go on to show how this apparent “puppetry” of female characters is undermined through a representation of their empowered, Medusa-like gaze. While critic Gillian Alban has approached the gaze of Medusa in *A Severed Head* (1961), I will expand this into a greater understanding of the objectification and gender relationships in her early novels; how the Medusian gaze interacts with the male gaze inviting the reader to look with a more scathing eye at the narrator.

The Sea, The Sea is not the only instance of apparent chauvinistic control. Three of Murdoch’s early novels, *A Severed Head* (1961), *Under the Net* (1954) and *The Italian Girl* (1964), are read through a male “I”, with female characters seen and ostensibly objectified. In considering how being looked at immobilizes oneself, a useful approach is cued by Murdoch herself. As a prolific scholar of Jean-Paul Sartre, writing two critical studies of his work (*Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953) and *Sartre: Romantic Realist* (1980)), Murdoch’s understanding of his theory of “the look” provides a valuable philosophical language with which to consider the gaze in her novels, when we consider the narrator as “Other”. In his extensive existential study, *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre sums up the relation of the Other to one’s subjectivity and how a look can make one feel like an object:

The Other by rising up confers on the for-itself a being-in-itself-in-the-midst-of-the-world as a thing among things. This petrification in in-itself by the Other’s look is the profound meaning of the myth of Medusa. (555)

Murdoch’s female characters can similarly be made objects when exposed to the male narrative gaze and described on its terms, immobilized as petrified statues. Many critics stop here, frustrated at Murdoch’s apparently restrictive characterisation, but this does Murdoch a disservice. In angrily concluding “we never see inside them”, Felheim does not recognise that this is crucial: her female characters are somewhat untamed and they evade a supposedly penetrating male gaze through the surprise, and even horror, they incite in the narrator. They are not his puppets. Murdoch uses and rejects the purported female display function in male discourse that Hélène Cixous also pushes against in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975). Cixous celebrates the boundless and impassioned female “within” beneath an apparently rigid and imposed exterior: “their ‘ill-mannered’ bodies immured, well preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. But are they ever seething underneath!” (877). Murdoch’s female characters are not “husks”, they too possess a “within”, one as slippery and evasive as Cixous’ that does not conform to the superficial male narrative voice, emerging instead through free indirect narrative and an intrinsic female perspective. While the narrator attempts to quash the female body into a “frigidified” form, Murdoch enables her to “seethe underneath” the grasp of male narrative. Beginning with an explanation of gendered objectification, I will move on to consider the role of the narrative gaze within the text and how Murdoch establishes female characters that escape superficial objectification and look back.

What is it to feel as an object, as a thing? Objects can be anything from door-knobs to paintings to trees but to *feel* as an object, one must be cognisant. In a novel, the grammatical object is denied subject-hood through the dominant perspective of the narrator. In “Art and Objecthood” (2009), Michael Fried looks at the way the object fits into the subject’s world: “The object, not the beholder, must remain the centre or focus of the situation, but the situation itself *belongs* to the beholder” (312). In belonging to the beholder as grammatical objects, the female characters of Murdoch’s early fiction cannot be extricated from their relationship with the subject. Furthermore,

this grammatical immobility becomes metaphorical through blazon. Since the Petrarchan idealism of the fourteenth-century, male poets have paralyzed a beloved with catalogued body parts and dazzling, silencing metaphors. In male-narrated novels, like the films analysed by Laura Mulvey, “the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (19). Although not obviously visual, narration can be voyeuristic description with scopophilic intensity. “Object” is even used to describe women in *A Severed Head* as Martin introduces his wife as a “rich gilded object” (16) and dismisses his love-interest, Honor, with the phrase “I don’t care what this object thinks of me” (56). However, in moments like these it is the misogynistic narrator who is under the novel’s scrutiny and the reader critically observes the observer. Similarly, Sartre’s explanation of being-as-object analyses the mind-set of the subject, the objectifier: “The objectification of the Other, as we shall see, is a defense on the part of my being which, precisely by conferring on the Other a being-for-me, frees me from my being-for the Other” (359). Thus objectification is paradoxically an expression of the subject feeling objectified. The male desire to immobilise and subject the woman to an impassive form reflects *his* fear and desire. Murdoch is acutely aware of this in her presentation of Martin. Like Sartre, who is *aware* of his status as “thing”, Honor being able to “*think*” subverts her status as an incognisant object. In attempting to objectify Honor into something tangible Martin belies his own insecurity; his fear of her seething dynamism.

Murdoch ostensibly immobilises her female characters as statues and mannequins. “Alabaster” appears regularly: Madge’s foundation renders her “smooth and inexpressive as alabaster” (*Under the Net* 10); Isabel is a “plump little midinette” (*The Italian Girl* 81) and in her final scene appears as if “a warm radiance shone through like light through alabaster” (p. 161). The syntactic similarity to Shakespearean idolatry, as Othello perversely looks down on the sleeping Desdemona, “smooth as monumental alabaster” (V.II.5), elicits morbid parallels as Murdoch’s women are also deadened. Even Georgie in *A Severed Head*, who is remarkable for her resistance to Martin’s possession, is described as having “beautiful Acropolis feet” (11) – implying that they are Grecian and statuesque – and her complexion is said to have a “finish of ivory” (9). We encounter “real” statues in *Under the Net* when Jake visits the Parisian Fontaine des Médicis and he blazons a statue, referring to “it” as a “her” (185) and admiring that “there she lies, braced and yet relaxed, superbly naked” (186). Paradoxically within ten pages it is the fleshly, human Anna who is “perfectly motionless” (190) on the other side of the river and, like the statue, gives Jake a shiver of excitement when he catches a “flash of her long leg up to the thigh” (193). Statues are complex objects as they verge between inanimate and human, verisimilitude being one of the most admired features of a sculpture. The notion of the female body as statue recurs in Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* which explores the restrictive nature of beauty that society imposes upon the female body, rendering her an object for herself and others. Combining this with Cixous’ “seething underneath”, Wolf’s theory of women as iron maiden goes some way to evoking the effect of the male gaze. The Iron Maiden is a medieval German torture device, a body shaped casket decorated and painted in the form of a lovely woman, leaving the victim to starve, potentially writhing, within an immobile exterior (17). The apparently inert mannequin of the female body in scenes like that of *Under the Net* is in fact more of an Iron Maiden: a casket of language to suppress inner vitality. The imposition of conventional blazon and immobility onto passionate women by male narrators enacts in literature an immobilizing male gaze.

But how do we “see” the woman beneath the immaculate alabaster exterior? The narrative structure of *The Italian Girl* and *A Severed Head* means we only “hear” them in direct speech. *The Bell*, however, uses a third person omniscient narrator, allowing Dora’s voice to slip in through

free indirect narrative. Dora observes that her husband, Paul, treats Children they encounter – and implicitly her – in “the decisive and possessive way in which he wanted all the objects which he drew into his life” (10) and her interactions with him are overshadowed by a sense of “paralysis” (10). But we do not see this. We see her actively deciding to return to him; dithering over the train seating; reminiscing over her college life; she is certainly not a silent, passive creature. Dora’s words are lucid, her clear-cut statements make her sympathetic to the reader despite her adulterous wanderings. As she sits on the train, Dora reflects that she “thought of herself” (7). She cannot be an object; she recognises her cognisance. Furthermore Dora is sensitive to how she is perceived: “She began to suspect that Paul thought her the tiniest bit vulgar” (9) after he buys her staid, expensive outfits. The performativity of her role as wife means she views her body as a “thing” for him to be concerned with: “she did not even know how to dress herself anymore” (9). When not viewed by men she is more in command of her own form, admiring in the mirror “the vitality of the sunburnt throat and the way the flat tongues of hair licked down on to the neck. She threw her head back and looked into the bold eyes” (45). Seen through a woman’s eyes – a woman’s look in the mirror is not mediated through a male gaze – the female body is dynamic (“vitality”, “sunburnt”, “bold”, “licked”) and returns her own stare.

Following this self-appraisal, Paul’s desire excites rather than intimidates her. She affirms her own subjecthood: “she existed; she, Dora, and no one should destroy her” (45). This empowerment results in her fulfilling her desire for Toby, who perversely sees her as merely filling out “that blank form of femininity” (215). While she becomes a vivacious, corporeal being, the reader is exposed to a male perspective which sees her only as an appealing thing, devoid of any substance. Murdoch thus emphasises the naivety of objectifying male desire while celebrating Dora’s empowerment. The female centred narrative subtly undermines the male standpoint throughout Murdoch’s work and has been branded by Deborah Johnson as a “complex, specifically female perspective” (27). Even when writing as a man, Murdoch cannot resist liberating her women from the chauvinism of their narrators. In the opening chapter of *A Severed Head*, the refusal of the objects in Georgie’s house to conform to Martin’s ordering reflects his having “failed to possess her” (8). Similarly Antonia evades Martin through her affair, Honor evades him for much of the novel and Georgie escapes his possessive desire. Any objectification is a frustrated attempt to make them still, an unsuccessful desire to make the women controllable as they slip away.

It is through this autonomous subjectivity that Murdoch establishes female characters far more complicated than their “frigidified” representation through the narrative eye Cixous’ description of the female body as “seething underneath” suggests “the state of being boiling hot; ebullition, intense inward agitation” (OED). To suppress a state of upset, women present a passive front, a ripple-free surface. This oxymoronic active passivity is easy to interpret as merely passive and can only be recognised when the female voice acknowledges it. Returning to *The Bell* and Dora, she expresses her cognisance and distaste at Paul’s possessiveness when he reaches to hold her hand as they walk into Compline together: “her hand limp, resenting the hold, overcome with dejection” (32). Treating the female body as immobile complies with a man’s objectifying gaze but overlooks the woman’s decision to be inert. Declining to be subjected to subjecthood is a sort of empowerment as Steven Connor analyses through the example of sex dolls, which are the most extreme model of women made utterly passive. He observes that the passivity of the female doll actually objectifies male desire as something to “fill the gaps” (“Guys and Dolls”). Just as the passive doll mocks the man, Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* (1974) is a performance art piece in which she stood for six hours allowing the audience to do anything to her. According to the Tate

website it ended with her “holding a loaded gun against her head, tears in her eyes, blouse pulled open to expose her breasts” (Tate). Here her body is both the subject and object of her art and in seizing control of her objective status she makes the public, who act and do, the subject of criticism. A similar exploitation of passivity is Madge’s use of cosmetics to smooth over her expressions in the opening chapter of *Under the Net* (10). She distances herself from the narrator Jake’s erotic fantasy and later in the scene reveals she is engaged to Sammy Starfield. Her icy exterior is not imposed by Jake’s objectification but allows her to change, away from the gaze of the narrator. Taken to a further extreme, when Honor and Anna are attacked by their respective narrators, neither initially expresses resistance or approval. In the cellar, Honor kicks but does not call out, bizarrely “her entire face [...] had become black” (*A Severed Head* 111) but she stares at him throughout. Her passivity ensures we see his crime fully, he becomes the object of the reader’s disgust. Though Anna’s scene does not veer so closely into sexual violence, she does not initially display her own affections when Jake kisses her, rather he says she “lay stiffly in my arms like a great doll” (*Under the Net* 39). In not reciprocating, though it emerges she does love him, and for much of the scene hiding behind her hands, Jake is forced to act and kiss her. In being as a doll, not his puppet, her desires are hidden from the reader while the narrator’s wild passions are laid out explicitly. In not humouring or responding to forceful male attention, Anna and Honor deny the narrators the masochistic pleasure of objectifying a woman who has already immobilized herself.

However, the female characters do not only reject the objectification of the male gaze through active passivity: Murdoch establishes a female gaze, observing and defining the female characters and the narrator. The title *A Severed Head* harks to Honor’s objectification of herself: she brands herself “a severed head such as primitive tribes and old alchemists used to use” (182). Not only does this self-definition draw attention to Honor’s autonomy but “A Severed Head” could also be an allusion to another empowered object, referring again to Sartre. Medusa, “famous trophy, the head of the snake-headed gorgon” (Ovid *Metamorphosis* IV.616) is the figurehead of a significant amount of Western criticism regarding women and objectivity: previously beautiful, she is transformed into the petrifying, snake-haired monster of classical iconography as Minerva’s punishment for breaking her vow of chastity. Classical sources are undetermined in branding it rape. The body made object is encapsulated in the image of her disembodied head wielded by Perseus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Raymond Queneau in his long poem *Oak and Dog* derides Medusa as grotesque in the couplet: “Severed head, woman gone wrong/ Medusa who sticks out her tongue” (56) but modern feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous (1975) and Annis Pratt (1994) have written extensively about the empowerment of Medusa’s head, that is, her penetrating, petrifying gaze and beautiful horror. She exists as both subject and object. Honor seems to encapsulate many of these qualities. She is described, nameless, as “his Medusa” in the blurb of the 1976 Penguin edition and within the text Martin believes her image might become “at any moment altogether a Medusa” (156). However, merely including her name does not make this mythical gorgon a vital component of the fabric of the text. Where she slithers into Murdoch’s novels less overtly but more powerfully is through the tropes of gaze and immobility. Immobility, though evidently present in the allegorical language of statues, also appears in the characters of *A Severed Head* becoming emotionally “paralysed” (144) or “scared stiff” (156). Not only is Medusa an object, a head wielded by Perseus, but her gaze petrifies those around her. She is an object that itself objectifies; a Sartrean objectifier. Murdoch’s critical study *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* addresses his gaze theory as the “unassimilable Medusa’s gaze [that] turns one’s *pour-soi* into an

en-soi" (11). Being subjected to someone else's gaze transforms one from being a subject "for oneself", to an object existing "in oneself", part of someone else's world.

Murdoch's recognition of the metaphorical potential of Medusa as immobilizer in her philosophical work follows through to her fiction. The first reference to Medusa in *A Severed Head* is Antonia's bust on the table between her husband and brother-in-law. Like Perseus and Medusa, in this scene the male to female power dynamic is unsettling. The unresponsive, inert Antonia is described flippantly by Alexander as "illicit and incomplete [...] Freud on Medusa. The head can represent the female genitals, feared not desired" (44). Here Murdoch expands into Freud's theory of Medusa as the embodiment of the male castration complex: decapitation represents castration, the phallic hair of snakes and gaping mouth is inevitably sexual (*Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* 202). Beneath the two men the statue is passive and, being bronze, Antonia is given no opportunity to actively reject their sexual objectification. This is the crux of the issue regarding Medusa as a feminist symbol because she is essentially a male weapon, used by Perseus to immobilize Atlas and unlawfully claim the virtuous Andromeda. Existing solely in her head Medusa has no power, much like Antonia on the table. However, when she opens her eyes and looks, when she is not reduced to one mere block of flesh, she can resist and even invert the objectification of men. Her gaze is empowered and adopted by several dark women throughout Murdoch's writing.

The self-confessed "severed head" of *A Severed Head*, Honor, simultaneously refuses to be itemized in a Petrarchan sort of blazon, and instead is presented as a grotesque body in parts; "feared not desired" (44). As she sits beside Martin in the car, her body, instead of statue-like or oppressively feminine, is presented as a "headless sack" (57) and emerging in the fog she is "haggard", "formidable", "dour" and "frowning" (55). The language is not aesthetically descriptive. She resists the objectification thrust upon Georgie and Antonia and her body exists most strikingly in her gaze. It is her gaze, rather than her eyes, which is described when Martin looks at her: "She turned towards me and glared" (55). In describing the gaze, one would presume the only thing to explicitly "see" is the eyes. When reduced to shape and colour, eyes become glassy, doll-like even: Madge's eyes are "almond-shaped" (*Under the Net* 10), Georgie's a "clear greyish-blue" (*A Severed Head* 9). Honor's eyes are never described in such objective terms, instead "There was something animal-like and repellent in that glistening stare" (55). Her eyes become a front for a creature within – an Iron Maiden-like casket – "I saw the old snake in her looking coldly out through her eyes" (180). Embracing both snake and gaze, Honor becomes a powerful, petrifying Medusa, not a passive male weapon. Annis Pratt establishes, "Women are not always repelled by Medusa, but sometimes empower ourselves by identifying with her" (4). Honor is fearsome: Martin cannot deny her masculine authority as an "insolent and powerful captain" (58). Upon realising she has been involved in an incestuous affair he notes, "I had not for a second conceived of her possessing a lover" (138). Palmer does not possess her, she possesses him in a similar way to Martin's earlier greedy attestation that "I needed both of them, [Antonia and Georgie] and in having both I possessed the world" (20). With Honor, he does not so much possess her but is possessed, not just in ownership but in a more spiritual sense, by his desire for her. His love for her is "monstrous" (125), utterly enchanted by the "tawny-breasted witch" (138). She resists Martin's beautification and instead subsumes him, as feared and desired as a Medusa.

Flora in *The Italian Girl* is not as erotically charged as Honor but elicits a similar unhealthy preoccupation from her uncle Edmund. Her romanticised surface gives way to a passionate seething underneath; bridging the beautiful maiden and petrifying gorgon binary. Unlike Honor, she is remembered as a child with "the sweetness of a little animal" (22). Under Edmund's

idealized gaze she has a delicate “transparent, milky, unmarked face” (96), hair flimsy as a “garment” (48). As he follows Flora down to the river she is associated with chastity through her simple white dress and her lingering over nature. Edmund views her as an object of overt beautification: “too smooth, too slim, too luminous to be really made of flesh” (46). He conceives of her as the epitome of virginal appeal, like chaste Medusa in Minerva’s temple. While Medusa is sullied by the revelation of her love-making, or possibly rape by Neptune, and metamorphosed into a snake-haired monster, it is the discovery that Flora is pregnant that similarly transforms her in Edmund’s eyes. Her outburst makes it seem as if she has “whipped on a different mask” (50). But in this phrase Edmund belies the objectification he has imposed upon her: a *different* mask. However he saw her before was a false impression. Gorgon masks were employed in Ancient Roman religious ceremonies to prevent men being drawn to the chaste and mask-wearing women: here Flora has masked herself from her uncle and the reader. Indeed the hardness that can be construed as masculine possessiveness is reinterpreted by Flora as steadfastness: “Don’t soften me” (53). The innocent girl-child becomes an exemplar of female empowerment delivering the closest thing to a vitriolic feminist rant in Murdoch’s writing, celebrating her right to choose to abort her pregnancy. “You don’t know what it’s like, you men” (53); she says she rejects the “monster” (53) inside her. The body Edmund tried to claim as a “sprite from an Italian painting” (46) is reclaimed and controlled by Flora as a vessel for her own wants. To perturb the men that perturb her with inappropriate language, Murdoch makes Flora the gorgon, in appearance and furious gaze, she shocks and immobilizes even the omniscient Edmund.

During interactions between women there is less of a passive female and active male dualism and the subtlety of Murdoch’s characterisation of women becomes apparent. Despite the narrator of *The Italian Girl*, Edmund, being overtly misogynistic with lines including, “I detest coarse talk in women” (34), when Flora implies a lesbian relationship between her mother and the housemaid, Maggie, Edmund’s voice is weakened as he retreats from the impassioned fury of female characters: “as she moved, I in fact recoiled. Flora struck the table violently [...] I backed away from them” (123). They are decidedly unladylike and subvert the expectations of an archetypal English household. Not only is Flora returning from her abortion, but is attacking her nanny for apparently sleeping with her mother. In this intense scene of feminine passion, inevitably the symbol of Medusa slithers into the language. While we may have expected the exotic Maggie to be the passionate Medusa, it is Flora, her hair in a “shaggy mass” (120) and mouth “wide open and dribbling” (123), who lunges, cutting Maggie’s hair into a “black snake” (123) and leaving her to hide her eyes “as if from the gaze of Medusa” (124). Here both women take on a sort of “Gorgon spirit” (Pratt 4) in the fury of the moment. In comparing Flora’s gaze to that of a Medusa, Murdoch utilises the feminist trope of female eros, intense female passion (Bowers, “Medusa and the Female Gaze” 217) and reveals the empowered ferocity of apparently objectified women in the text. A similar dualism occurs in *A Severed Head* as Martin’s wife meets his lover. Georgie becomes “almost a marionette. She was as stiff as a piece of wood with her anxiety” (87) and defensively fixes Antonia with a Medusian “cold young stare” (88). Both petrifying and petrified, Georgie embodies Medusa and victim. Her immobility becomes an expression of her immobilizing herself and actively protecting herself from the gaze she does not want to be subjected to: Antonia’s. Without the gender power dynamic we witness the fury and power with which Murdoch has endowed her female characters.

Indeed, Perseus encounters two object-women in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: Medusa and Andromeda. While Medusa is a wielded head but active in her gaze, Andromeda is tied to the rock like marble, immobilizing Perseus through her beauty and leaving him “dumbly amazed and

entranced” (Ovid IV.676). Occasionally the distinction between object-loved and object-feared is obvious, such as the scene in *A Severed Head* following Georgie’s suicide attempt when parallels can be drawn between Martin, Georgie and Honor, and Perseus, Andromeda and Medusa. The recumbent Georgie becomes the passive female victim. She is like a “drowned girl” (173) and Martin traces her body, blazoning her rising chest, her ear, her feet. In this unconscious state she is extremely vulnerable, like Andromeda she is unable to move away. When Honor appears, her body is similarly unwavering but as a display of active control: “Her face was cold and stiff [...] She spoke with detachment and precision” (174). Unlike Georgie she “looked back out of her sallow Jewish mask” (175). Her face, immobile, is a front for her body seething beneath. However, it is too simple to take Medusa as active and Andromeda as passive, because Andromeda similarly transfixes the gazer. Though she does not perturb with her stare the mere sight of her leaves Perseus dazed. Earlier in the novel Honor’s body has this Andromediac effect on Martin as he walks in on her naked in bed with her brother: she is “tawny and as naked as a ship’s figurehead [...] her face stiff and expressionless as carved wood” (p. 128). She appals Martin with her phallic, erect body and lack of modesty and utilises the male fascination with the female body to “objectify” him. Laura Mulvey identifies a similar effect in cinema, when looking at a female body “freeze[s] the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 19). The body is a tool used by Andromeda and Honor. Simone de Beauvoir argues that the female body “is something other than her” (42). In showing no shame or coyness to incite curiosity, the female body displays its fearsome power in these novels: immobilizing the male narrators with Medusian disdain or Andromedean stunned desire, becoming an object to petrify them.

In focusing so closely on the male gaze and what the narrator sees, critics of Murdoch overlook the male subject being gazed back at by the Medusas he apparently objectifies. Description of Maggie, Flora and Honor by the voyeuristic narrative eye fills the page with intimate facets of the female body but in stopping the progression of the plot to just describe, the male voice is replaced by the mirroring of her features. As Jake enters the hairdressers to find Sadie in *Under the Net*, he senses many, many pairs of eyes on him in the mirror, making him feel like a “prince in a fairy tale” (50). But how is this different from his objectification of Anna to a “wise mermaid” (39) or a “spellbound princess” (191)? He is made to feel this way by the female gaze, he is a “thing amongst things” (Sartre *Being and Nothingness* 555) whether it be Nan’s “mere wife” (*The Sandcastle* 297) speech or Flora’s pro-abortion lobby, Murdoch never leaves her women as objects. The reader is invited to look with a more scathing eye at the narrator. He is the most explicitly “seen” of all the characters and literally objectified by his thoughts made solid on the page. Murdoch’s early novels are overwhelmed with characters like Martin and Edmund rendered “powerless, weightless, paralysed like a man in a dream” (*The Italian Girl* 167) by the gaze of a Medusa-like woman. Even in trying to label Honor an object, Martin fails by recognising her empowered, disorientating gaze: “They gazed at me, large and oriental, the staring eyes of a sorceress or a prostitute, an artificial woman. I felt dazed, disturbed, confused” (*A Severed Head* 60). In *The Bell*, *A Severed Head* and *The Italian Girl* women look; they defy their supposed objectivity as dolls, mannequins and statues because they can see. Beneath the iron-maiden facade of alabaster-simile, the female body inverts and returns the male gaze. Sabina Lovibond mistakenly contests that Murdoch’s early work presents a “narcissistic, resentful, half-baked or abject femininity” (5) in the way women are immaculate objects. In fact, Murdoch reifies the female form in its ability to petrify and daze the male narrator like Perseus by Andromeda or Medusa. Even Martin concedes,

What I really wanted most just then was to put Georgie in cold storage. It is unfortunate that other human beings cannot be conveniently immobilized. Do what I might, Georgie would go on thinking, would go on acting, during my absence and my silence. (119-120)

Murdoch celebrates the immobilized object that cannot be picked apart or puppeteered in the same way as the first person narrator, the subject. The women of her novels become an “Other”, not as a mark of flat characterisation, but as evidence of their complexity. Outwith the narrator’s “I”, and the reader’s eye, her female characters are seething and fascinating in our peripheral vision.

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