



EXISTENTIALISM AND ITS UNIQUE FEATURES IN IRIS MURDOCH'S  
UNDER THE NET

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**Abstract.** *This article explores the unique features of existentialism in Iris Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net* (1954). While Murdoch was influenced by existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, her fiction reveals both absorption of and resistance to their ideas. Using close textual analysis under an existentialist philosophical framework, the study identifies how Murdoch treats themes of freedom, alienation, authenticity, and moral responsibility. Findings suggest that Murdoch redefines existentialism by shifting emphasis from radical autonomy to moral attention and the pursuit of the Good, thereby distinguishing her work from the more nihilistic perspectives of Sartre and Camus.*

### **Introduction**

Existentialism emerged in the twentieth century as a response to crises of faith, identity, and meaning in a modernizing world (Flynn, 2006). Thinkers such as Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus emphasized freedom, authenticity, and the confrontation with absurdity. Literature became a central medium for expressing these concerns, with novels such as Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus's *The Stranger* exemplifying existentialist philosophy in narrative form.

Iris Murdoch, a philosopher-novelist, was strongly influenced by existentialism early in her career (Conradi, 2001). Her first novel, *Under the Net* (1954), engages deeply with existentialist themes while simultaneously challenging them. Through the character of Jake Donaghue, Murdoch dramatizes the tensions of freedom, alienation, and responsibility. Yet unlike Sartre and Camus, Murdoch introduces a moral dimension grounded in love, attention, and the Platonic Good (Murdoch, 1970).

This study examines *Under the Net* through an existentialist lens to highlight Murdoch's unique transformation of existential philosophy into a moral vision.

### **Methods**

This research adopts a **qualitative, textual analysis** approach, focusing on Murdoch's *Under the Net*. The method involves:

1. **Philosophical framework:** applying existentialist concepts such as "bad faith" (Sartre, 1943/1992), absurdity (Camus, 1942/1991), and authenticity (Beauvoir, 1949/2010).
2. **Close reading:** analyzing key episodes in the novel (Jake's freedom and irresponsibility, his miscommunications, and his relationship with Hugo Belfunder).





3. **Comparative perspective:** contrasting Murdoch's treatment of existentialist ideas with Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir, while incorporating Murdoch's later philosophy (*The Sovereignty of Good*).

This approach allows for identifying how existentialist philosophy is absorbed, reinterpreted, and transformed in Murdoch's fiction.

### **Results**

Analysis of *Under the Net* reveals three major findings:

1. **Freedom as irresponsibility:** Jake Donaghue embodies Sartrean freedom but falls into "bad faith," avoiding responsibility. Murdoch critiques freedom detached from moral orientation.

2. **Alienation and language:** Jake experiences alienation through miscommunication and detachment, echoing Camus's absurdism, yet Murdoch presents alienation as surmountable through love and attention.

3. **Toward the Good:** Unlike existentialist pessimism, Murdoch introduces a transcendent moral dimension. Hugo Belfounder symbolizes integrity and truth, offering Jake (and readers) an alternative vision of authentic existence.

### **Discussion**

The findings highlight Murdoch's originality in engaging with existentialism. While her novel reflects existentialist concerns—freedom, alienation, authenticity—it diverges significantly from Sartre and Camus. Sartre's focus on radical autonomy risks glorifying egoism (Sartre, 1943/1992), while Camus's absurdism suggests limited avenues for meaning (Camus, 1942/1991). In contrast, Murdoch insists on the moral necessity of attention to others (Murdoch, 1970).

Jake's failures demonstrate the limitations of existential individualism. His freedom, disconnected from responsibility, leads to chaos. His alienation, rooted in linguistic and emotional detachment, reflects the existential condition but is not permanent. Murdoch uses Hugo Belfounder to model authenticity grounded in humility and respect for reality beyond the self. This anticipates her later philosophical writings, where she defines morality as "an attention to reality" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 66).

Thus, Murdoch reshapes existentialism into a philosophy of moral vision. Her existentialism is unique in affirming transcendence, not in religious dogma, but in the Platonic sense of striving toward the Good.

### **Conclusion**

*Under the Net* demonstrates Murdoch's deep engagement with existentialism while also marking her departure from its central assumptions. Through Jake Donaghue's misadventures, Murdoch dramatizes the pitfalls of existential freedom, the reality of alienation, and the challenge of authenticity. Yet her novel also offers an alternative: moral attention, love, and the pursuit of the Good.





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Murdoch's unique existentialism therefore lies in its moral orientation. By grounding freedom in responsibility and alienation in love, she transforms existentialist philosophy into a vision of human existence that is comic, humane, and ethically demanding.

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