

Alazon and Eiron in *The Black Prince*

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Abstract

In Iris Murdoch's novel The Black Prince, the characters Alazon and Eiron draw from Greek comedy archetypes, representing the boastful and self-deceiving versus the modest and clever respectively. These characters serve to explore themes of deception, self-awareness, and the interplay between appearance and reality. Through the interactions between Alazon (represented by Arnold Baffin) and Eiron (represented by Bradley Pearson), Murdoch delves into the complexities of human relationships and the dynamics of power and manipulation.

Keywords: *Alazon, Eiron, Greek comedy, deception, self-awareness*

The Black Prince is a first person narration and it is ranked along with other novels like it on top of Murdoch's achievement. According to Deborah Johnson these novels „constitute, it will be readily agreed, some of the most distinctive and thoughtful work.” Many critics consider *The Black Prince* to be one of the best of all, if not the best, for example in Bloom's opinion it is in his top four; Bove in her *Dictionary of Literary Biography* has a piece of advice for the readers „who are unfamiliar with Murdoch's work would do well to begin with *The Black Prince*...the most critically acclaimed of Murdoch's novels” (*Iris Murdoch* entry) and A.N.Wilson, writing her death in 1999 considers it as „the last entirely successful novel she wrote.”

The Black Prince is considered by many to be Murdoch's best novel, the masterpiece in which she managed to combine her thought patterns about art itself and its relationship to human behaviour and development. The process of defining art follows the development the novel and by leaving the responsibility in the hands of Bradley, she manages to guide him from ignorance to knowledge making him the image of her definition. The reader is assigned the task of the reader of seeing the Pearson persona clearly, to know what Bradley understands at any given point, thus to be able to assess the facts. Even though the interruptions and denials of unity

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in the structure or point of view in the novel seem to be diminishing its real value, they are meant to be complex and also part of the unfolding and keep the reader focused and interested when the confused and damaged Bradley falls into disgrace.

In narrating the events, Bradley Pearson uses a combined tone, generated by his personal attitude towards the events themselves, mainly ironical from beginning to end, adding a comic comprehension of the world outside himself and some touches self-irony to finally produce a novel in which the comic mode predominates despite the sometimes tragic nature of the subject matter.

On the story he creates, Murdoch builds others, each of them having only little in common with the story proper. The five postscripts Murdoch adds are written by characters who have appeared earlier in the novel, each of them having come in contact with Bradley. They now consider themselves in the position to qualify his interpretation and presentation of the events. His editor, P.Loxias, pictures him as a lousy victim whereas Rachel Baffin sees him as a buffoon. Seen from these five new perspectives, Bradley has a multitude of roles in *The Black Prince*: ironic narrator, buffoon, self-styled „possessed artist” and scapegoat. According to Wylie Sypher, Bradley could be a typical comic hero as he corresponds to the description of such a character, being able to assume manifold personae along the narration.

In Iris Murdoch's novel *The Black Prince*, the characters Alazon and Eiron are inspired by the traditional stock characters found in Greek comedy and drama. In Greek comedy, Alazon refers to the self-deceiving or boastful character, who is often portrayed as a braggart or someone who pretends to be more than they are. Alazon is typically contrasted with the character of Eiron, who on the other hand, is the character who outwits the Alazon. Eiron is often portrayed as modest or self-deprecating but is clever and quick-witted. Eiron's role is to deflate the ego of the Alazon through irony and cunning.

In her novel, Murdoch employs these archetypal characters to explore themes of deception, self-awareness, and the interplay between appearance and reality. The interactions between Alazon and Eiron in the novel likely serve to highlight the complexities of human relationships and the dynamics of power and manipulation.

Francis Conford notices the scornful irony of the hero who leaves aside the impostor's absurdities. *The Black Prince* includes some of the archetypal structures of Old and New Comedy, though Murdoch continues to invert comic structures for ironic purposes. The novel also contains a modernized version of the ancient debates between EIRON and ALAZON in the form of Bradley's arguments about art and novel writing with the



impostor artist Arnold Baffin, and Murdoch also inverts the typical structure of romantic comedy which generally presents a young man and woman who wish to marry, but are temporarily prevented usually by the senex or the „heavy father” figure. In *The Black Prince* the „young man” of typical comedy is replaced by the 58-year-old narrator, who is ten years older than the senex figure, Arnold Baffin. In the scene at Patara, Arnold plays the classic role of the senex iratus, angrily denouncing Bradley as a „filthy lustful old man” and threatening to take Julian out of the country for her own protection.

In addition to functioning as the angry father of typical romantic comedy, the popular novelist Arnold Baffin also plays the role of ALAZON – the phony artist-, an artistic impostor who in the words of his daughter, writes novels that portray „Jesus and Mary and Buddha and Shiva and the Fisher king, all chasing round dressed up as people in Chelsea” or as Bradley skilfully writes in a review of Arnold’s new novel:

Mr. Baffin is a fluent writer. He is a prolific writer. It may indeed be this facility which is his worst enemy. It is a quality which can be mistaken for imagination. And if the artist himself so mistakes it he is doomed. The writer who is facile needs, to become a writer of any merit, one quality above all; and that is courage: the courage to destroy, the courage to wait. Mr. Baffin, judging by his output, is incapable of either destroying or waiting. Only genius can afford „never to blot a line,” and Mr. Baffin is no genius. The power of imagination only condescends to lesser men if they are prepared to work, and work consists very often of simply refusing all formulations which have not achieved the density, the special state of fusion, which is the unmistakable mark of art....(Murdoch,1973:125-26)

The typical structure of the comic action usually comprises a dramatized debate between the ALAZON and the EIRON. In *The Black Prince* this consists of the conversations between Bradley and Arnold. Most of the times these discussions lead to arguments about the creative process, with the prolific novelist Baffin doing most of the talk while Bradley indulges in popular taste. Bradley is the Eiron, the real artist, does not engage too much in conversation, he just gives short, ironic answers. These answers annoy Arnold making him appear stupid and foolish that is the reason why he accuses Pearson of taking refuge in irony. Arnold, just as if he were an Alazon of ancient comedy, frequently infringes Bradley’s physical surroundings and/or consciousness. In Bradley’s eyes, Arnold is nothing more than a quack-artist who has given up real aesthetic achievement in order to gain both money and fame. Among the many allusions in Francis Marloe’s postscript there is another one relevant at this point. Francis judges Arnold as being Bradley Pearson’s alter ego and this resembles the function of the alazon in ancient comedy where he acts as the alter ego of the eiron.



Throughout the novel Bradley serves as the eiron and it is his ironic sensibility that layers the story and sets the tone. Sincere to himself and to all the others, he admits that from the moment he started the story he has been both neurotic and nervous, confessing that he has fears and obsessions that do not let him at ease. He considers that art is the one which liberates him when it comes to becoming attached to others. He does not only believe it but he also says it frankly: „What saved me from C. was art. My artist’s soul rejected this massive invasion”. His barrier when somebody gets too close to him is language because by using certain mocking words he intends to keep himself away from reality or any contact with it. An art form made of words is his shield that can protect him from emotional pain, a creation of an „elegant complexity” that moves farther and farther away from a direct confrontation with actual people and events. Speaking of his admittedly biased portrayal of Arnold Baffin, he says that ‘it is as if I were building a barrier against him composed of words, holding myself behind a mound of words. We defend ourselves by descriptions and tame the world by generalizing....Art is so often a barrier....So art becomes not communication but mystification.’ (Murdoch, 1973:198) The process of writing a novel is for Bradley a defensive act that enables him to attain truth through irony.

The Black Prince by Iris Murdoch intricately weaves together the archetypal characters of Alazon and Eiron from Greek comedy, portraying a dynamic interplay between boastfulness and cleverness, deception and self-awareness. Through the characters of Arnold Baffin and Bradley Pearson, Murdoch explores the complexities of human relationships, the nature of art, and the subtle nuances of power and manipulation. These characters and themes serve to enrich the narrative, offering readers a profound exploration of the human condition.

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