In the later part of the twentieth-century, women’s writing was beginning to offer a direct commentary on, and, in many cases, a detailed examination of women’s sexual status and attitudes in society to the changing ideas about the choices women were making regarding their virginity and sexual conduct. Novels by Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Mary McCarthy, Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, and countless others, offered a range of perspectives on the effect of new birth control methods, the consequences of freer attitudes to sex, and the inevitable correlative issues of pregnancy and abortion. These novels took many of their perspectives from, and threaded back into, debates among feminists during the second-wave and were shown to present women as recognizing and actively combating the suppression of the same rights surrounding sexual exploration that were afforded to men. The contrast that this presents in terms of Iris Murdoch’s fiction is an important one as many of her male characters offer the standard social response to the knowledge...
that female characters in these novels have either lost their virginity, or that they are believed to have done so. Additionally, many of these attitudes are highly reminiscent of the kind of moral pomposity put forward in nineteenth-century novels and the kind of hypocrisy that was noted and mocked by writers like Henry James or Thomas Hardy, both of whom are known to have influenced Murdoch.

The effect of these seemingly archaic presentations is such that Murdoch could be seen to be upholding male-designated roles of either virgins or whores. In previous centuries, this sexual double-standard often resulted in what Elaine Showalter has called “the female malady,” a term meant to refer to a perceived passivity, hysteria, and frigidity in women but which is instead a response to the impossibility of choosing correctly between maintaining innocence and virginity and gaining sexual knowledge. This article is therefore concerned primarily with the manner in which female characters perceive and manage their own sexual status in Murdoch’s fiction as well as with highlighting the ways in which Murdoch explored the social perceptions of women who become sexually active. In doing this, the seemingly automatic switch in view of the sacred ‘virgin’ and the depraved ‘whore’ is examined in relation to several of Murdoch’s texts with a view to explaining the confusion experienced by women and the resulting mania and despair that they feel when presented with an impossible choice between purity and the realization of sexual desire.

The fact that many of these texts were published in the midst of radical cultural changes and shifting attitudes through the rise of feminist and sexual revolutions goes some way to explain Murdoch’s