Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves. False love moves to false good. False love embraces false death. When true good is loved, the quality of the love is automatically refined.

Iris Murdoch in "The Sovereignty of Good"

The Nice and the Good (1968) marks a new direction in Murdoch's career as a novelist. The period between 1961 to 1966, when her famous Gothic novels were written, has been considered the most problematic of her career. It affected much of her popularity. She came to be known as a writer of "cerebral, sexually adventurous fiction." The Nice and the Good marks something of a break with its predecessors. There is a new authoritative, stylistic confidence and a maturer philosophical view point. Descriptive capacity first exhibited in The Bell is now strongly in evidence. The earlier obscurity produced by philosophical concerns and symbolism is minimal in this book. In the Gothic novels the main characters were symbolic and
centred around some philosophical myth. *The Nice and the Good* is an 'open' novel with no such mythical centre. She no longer appears to be interested in building a symbolic system or a myth. Her basic method now is a loose form of allegory. Her mythological figures, if any, are "deliberately attached to particular pieces of canvas" as though she were trying to show that they are human creations.² Like the editor in *The Black Prince*, she believes in metaphors "best used briefly and then thrown away."³ The philosophical ideas and moral principles are worked out at the experiential level and the ruminations of the characters. These are not thrust upon them by the author. John Ducane's efforts at moral analysis and a just vision, Mary Clothier's attempt to conquer her past guilt, Theo's struggle to master the burden lying heavily on his heart are all psychologically realistic and indirectly communicate the larger philosophical issues which engage the author's mind.

The novel attests to the fact that Iris Murdoch has finally made a successful attempt to distance herself from the text in order to give her characters a natural primacy. The plot develops directly out of the actions of her characters. She has made a good use of an omniscient narrator who moves from one character to the other and from one scene to the next, linking the plot through the shifting perspectives and viewpoints. The identification of her ideas with the personalities of the characters has shaped the novel into a suitably flexible structure. There is a clarity of presentation
and openness making it "more loose textured and larger in scope, more full of light and air." The openness implied here refers to the inclusion of more accidental, separate and free characters. Murdoch's interest in a large cast, even to the extent of including those who have a life outside the plot, is what she has learnt from Shakespeare. Her novels from 1966 onwards use the Shakespearean comic form and frequently refer to it. According to A.S. Byatt the plots of The Nice and the Good, A Fairly Honourable Defeat and The Black Prince are overt parodies of Shakespearean plays particularly A Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado about Nothing and Hamlet.

At the centre of the novel is the idyllic Trescohe country house in Dorset, belonging to Octavian and his wife, Kate. They have made it into a kind of sanctuary or a happy commune for the less fortunate members of the circle. Amongst them are Mary Clothier, a widow with an adolescent son; Paula, a college friend of Kate is a divorcée with twins; Willy Kost, a melancholic German refugee scholar; and Octavian's brother, Theo, an ex-engineer who has returned home from India under a cloud, like Humphrey Finch in An Unofficial Rose. Resemblance of this menage to the courtly world of Shakespearean comedy can easily be seen. All of these characters are more or less unconnected and separate, like the members of the Imber Community. They have come together by chance. Octavian humorously calls the women in the household his "harem."
describes this group as a kind of extended family destined to become more prevalent in the western countries because of the increasing divorce rates, unemployment and lack of houses.8

The official-intrigue-cum-spy story genre, so common in modern fiction, is the obvious form in which the novel moves. The nexus of the plot centres around the unravelling of the mystery of the suicide of Radeechy, a senior bureaucrat in the Whitehall. This task is assigned to the legal advisor, John Ducane. The solution of the mystery is, however, joined to more serious concerns. The main investigation leads Ducane to another enquiry, highly moral in nature. His moral transition joins the limited mystery form to some of Murdoch's consistent philosophical ideas on freedom, goodness, power and love.

Talking to W.K. Rose in 1968, the year this novel was published, Iris Murdoch mentions a change in her subject of interest. She attributes this change partly to philosophical development. "I once was a kind of existentialist and now I am a kind of platonist."9 As an existentialist, the problem of freedom had fascinated her. But as a platonist, what engages her attention is love. However, the inextricable way in which these concepts are bound in her philosophy and fiction proves that it is not easy to separate them. Love has always been a matter of commanding interest to her and has formed the substance of her novels right from the early days. She refers to two kinds of love. The romantic love is egocentric
and a great source of fantastic illusion. The real love is selfless and involves the apprehension of reality. Knowledge of reality acquired through a clarity of vision and disciplined overcoming of the self and fantasy is freedom or virtue. Many of the central characters in her novels struggle to achieve this moral freedom and love is instrumental in this task. Following the Platonic bent, most of her novels trace the moral progress of her major characters from mediocre illusion-ridden lives. Blinded by self-interest, romantic notions of freedom and a misty vision, they are engaged in transforming reality into various self-designed patterns and forms. Their moral development is a gradual transition from this stage to a condition where they have a better insight into themselves and others. This evolution is achieved by a loving and compassionate attention paid to the individual reality of people or situations confronting them. The direction of attention on individuals and obedience to reality is an exercise of love and freedom. In this respect we notice that her definition of freedom as "knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than ourselves," is very close and almost indistinguishable from the concept of love. She considers love as a perception of individuals and the "extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real." Both freedom and love involve the imaginative recognition and respect for this otherness. Thus, in spite of her conscious desire to give more importance to the theme of love, the subject of moral
freedom is still traceable in her later novels.

Closely allied to the concept of freedom is the theme of power and enchantment. Power, the enemy of love, creates an atmosphere of enchantment. A group of Murdoch novels described as Shakespearean revolve around central enchanter figures. Malcolm Bradbury refers to them as "extraordinary psychopomps." Such a figure appeared early in her novels in the shape of Mischa Fox in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, Hannah in *The Unicorn* and Emma in *An Unofficial Rose*. A figure of power works like an 'alien god' dominating the other characters. From his superior position he refuses to accord independent and equal status to others. By becoming a focus of their fantasies and myths he increases their self-enchantment. They look up to him as a god who can resolve their problems and give meaning to their inadequate existence. He provides an illusory consolation by imposing a form on their experiences. He himself is a romantic figure, desirous of escaping the contingency of the world, by pursuing an unreal form or identity bestowed by power. It is the attitude of other people towards the power figure that endows him this power.

Richard Todd cites *The Nice and the Good* and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* as superb examples in which most of the issues concerning power are raised in a suitable manner. According to him there are mainly two types of power figures. One who manipulates others from a distance and the other who
becomes involved with the rest of the characters. Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* wields power in a detached and aloof manner in the style of Oberon in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He is a Godlike puppeteer who tries to demonstrate the truth of the Platonic assumption that human beings are more or less puppets and can only respond to the chords of egotistic passion. He stage-manages a little drama between Rupert and Morgan, making them believe that they love each other. His success in breaking up Rupert and Hilda's happy marriage goes a long way to prove Murdoch's point that Rupert is morally blind. He had never really risen above abstractions and theories. He is unable to resist the power of Julius King because of his inability to 'see' others apart from the orderly theoretical schemes he had imposed on them. Had he possessed a little more of moral vigour and freedom the enchantment would have dissolved.

Although both the novels deal with a similar social group, yet *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* reveals that world at play, while *The Nice and the Good* shows it at work. Ducane in this novel is a realistic improvement on the earlier power-figures. There is a working purpose behind his use of power which is set in the everyday context. The power of Julius King, like Iago's in *Othello*, demonstrates no such believable context and motive. Ducane is closer to Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*. His authority involves him with the cast instead of raising him above them. As Richard Todd suitably comments,
"John Ducane's exercise of power is seen to be less dilettante and more closely related to obligations to society." At the end of the novel, he learns to distinguish between the just and exploitative use of power.

Another factor marking *The Nice and the Good* as a turning point, is her developed philosophical viewpoint. She undertakes the serious examination of death as a powerful force for the destruction of the dreamy, self-aggrandizing ego that hinders moral growth and freedom. The idea of death forces the attention on good and releases the hold of the normal deluded working of the egocentric self. The absolute of death clarifies the vision by the negation and effacement of the self. It opens the way to love, virtue and freedom. "A genuine sense of mortality enables us to see virtue as the only thing of worth." Both Murdoch and Sartre try to give a realistic context to Plato's image of life outside the Cave by considering death as a crucifixion of personal desires. Ducane's moment of epiphany and insight into the meaning of reality and life emerges out of his almost close brush with death. Although references to death as a clarifying and 'unselfing' agent had been taken up as early as *The Unicorn* but from now onwards it acquires paramount importance.

At the centre of the novel, we have Ducane's moral progress towards freedom and discovery of reality. In the process he learns the meaning of goodness and justice. He is the Faust
who must descend to the underground in search of truth.  

Like many other main characters of Murdoch's novels, he learns how to face the starkness of truth and to exercise true moral freedom by discarding the forms and patterns he had contrived for himself and others. He is a Scottish Puritan whose chief ambition is to lead a "clean, simple life and to be a good man" (p.32). This aim of his is almost like a rationalist's egocentric dream of freedom expressive of the fear of contingency and messy human relationships. That is perhaps why like Jake Donaghue, he is still a bachelor at the age of 43. He enjoys the supreme state of independence from all entangling relationships except those that are convenient to him.

In his endeavour to be a good man, he plays the priestly role of a 'father confessor' or an advisor to the crowd of characters at Trescombe. He is the "avuncular ear for all the disturbed characters who attribute to him powers as a dispenser of advice and consolation." He is respected by them and they confide in him. He is the only person whom Mary Clothier relates the intolerable memory of her husband's ghastly accident. It is Ducane again whom she solicits as an advisor for her son who was sulking over the unresponsive Barbara (Octavian's adolescent daughter). When Paula is disturbed over some secret trouble and she does not unburden to anyone else, Mary requests Ducane to intervene. She says:

I do wish you'd have a serious talk with Paula too. She's awfully upset about something, and she won't tell me what, though I've positively asked her.
Paula, under his magnetic influence reveals her anxiety regarding the anticipated arrival of her former lover who foreboded trouble for her. Similarly, her husband Bizanne later makes disclosures to Ducane which could have damaged his job and reputation. In fact, to all of them, including Kate and Octavian he is a godlike figure. In the last chapter when his mystique is shed off, Kate tells her husband, "we thought he was God, didn't we..."(p.343). Like an enchanter or a god, he freely exercises his charm on them. They attribute to him powers and qualities that grow out of their own fantasy and a desire for consolation. He wins a reputation for respectability and 'niceness' which is different from 'goodness'.

Nowhere is his egoism and distorted concept of freedom more apparent than in his attempt to break his relations with Jessica after carrying on a liaison with her for 18 months. With scant consideration for her, he decides to cut short his relationship as it interferes in the pursuit of his glorious private goal. He wants to be free of this involvement for reasons chiefly associated with his puritanism that could not brook a long, secret and messy affair. His passion for orderliness, propriety and form is stronger than his love for her. "We've got to simplify things. One has got to simplify one's life", he tells her. To which Jessica gives a natural and realistic reply. She says, "I don't see why. Suppose life
just isn't simple" (p.81).

He wants to tidy up the past in order to conform freely to the pattern of a simple, clean, and good life framed by himself. But the past has an impact on the present and relationships cannot be easily snapped for they involve concrete living human beings. Jessica refuses to be cleared away. She is an 'untainted pagan' like Dora in *The Bell*, lacking in moral sense. She had latched on to Ducane because she was attracted by his age, solidness, puritanism and association with people at the top. His puritanism seemed to her what she had been seeking for all her life. She loves him without reservation. Considering him as a wise person she longs to be instructed and guided by him. But John, fearful of this hunger in her, refuses to play the role of a teacher. "The gulf between them... remains a yawning chasm of non-communication."18 His refusal to attend to her needs is a refusal to face the contingent reality of another person. He wanted to set her free of his power, for he had no designs of marrying her. But more than that, he wanted to be free himself. His motives are tainted by selfishness, particularly because he wanted to carry on the Platonic fantasy-relationship with Kate Gray. For him, the wonderful thing about Kate was that she was unattainable. She is happily married and did not impose a threat to his independence. "There was in the situation, no danger" (p.29). His affair with her is symbolic of his insistence on a safe and simple way of life. She and her
household provides him with a kind of resting point, a home and a family with the additional advantage of leaving him uninvolved and unentangled. But just as Jessica refused to be cleared away so easily "the calm, innocent tidy love he had envisioned sharing with Kate Gray cannot survive the strains placed on it by his imperfection and deceit."  

In the beginning, therefore, it is apparent that in spite of all his obvious intent to be good, his goodness is merely expended in the directions of niceness. Being 'nice' is easier and implies conformity to conventional ordinary morality of the contemporary philosophers with the stress on overt acts of goodness. Just as Jane Austen defines moral categories like 'sense' and 'sensibility' in her novels, Iris Murdoch has tried to give new meaning to these standbys of ordinary language i.e. the 'nice' and the 'good'. The contrast between the 'nice' and the 'good' is between easy sincerity (the prescription of the existentialist creed) and the desire for the hard truth which is difficult to discern. The well-to-do couple, Octavian and Kate Gray are 'nice' and are aware of doing good to others, of giving them happiness and not harming them in any conceivable way. They have collected a few unhappy souls around them with the conscious desire of doing them good. They represent the 'nice', while being happily convinced that they are 'good'. The self-consciousness with which they go about spreading their "careless magnanimity" is a form of self-love or self-esteem. 'Nice' people like Kate find life
easy because of their ignorance of higher ethical values. Their goodness is self-regarding, like the pleasures of the Freudian man which feed the "fat relentless ego". Only people like Ducane and Mary Clothier who genuinely aspire to be good have to face the austere demands this goal makes on them. Real goodness, Ducane learns gradually, is not a matter of logical decision or a wise manoeuvring of a patterned life. It requires a kind of objective, unselfish love, unnatural to human beings. Such a love requires humility and self-effacement. Ducane acquires this kind of objectivity needed for virtue during the course of the investigation. The conflict between his private romantic notions and the public decision he has to make, impels him to clarify his vision.

As a legal advisor to the case, he is placed in a position of authority and power. The enquiry rakes up unsavoury sex scandals, black magic and blackmail. Ducane discovers that Radeechy had conducted black masses in the vaults under the Whitehall offices. Pigeons and naked women required for the performance of these rites were supplied by McGrath, an employee of the same department. One of the women was McGrath's wife, Judy, who is also known as Helen of Troy. She is a woman of easy virtue who tries to entice men. In order to blackmail others, her husband follows her with a camera. She tries to work her sensual magic on Ducane also but he resists her enticements. The evil-minded McGrath, Unable to blackmail
John Ducane through his wife, threatens to do so on the basis of two letters that he had written, one to Jessica and the other to Kate. Richard Bifanna, another colleague is also embroiled in the scandal. He is the morally culpable accessory to Radeechy's suicide and the murder of his wife. Richard had suppressed the suicide note left by Radeechy revealing the facts of his wife's adultery and blaming Richard for his death.

All of this is, however, functional. The real theme is the self-searching which this messy case forces on Ducane impelling him to revise his ideas on justice and goodness. Early in his life, he had given up his career in the courts, as he considered judging morally wrong. He had observed that no human being is worthy of being a judge. "In theory, the judge represents simply the majesty and impartiality of law whose instrument he is. In practice, because of the imprecision of law and the imperfection of man the judge enjoys a considerable area of quite personal power which he may or may not exercise wisely" (p.75). Rationally speaking, he understood the need of law courts and that the English law on the whole was good. But he hated the "confrontation between the prisoner in the dock and the judge, dressed so like a king or a pope, seated up above him" (p.75). Ducane had however at moments, pictured himself as being the only person humble enough to be a just man and a just judge. This illusion that he alone is capable of being one expresses a dangerous desire to shape and command
the world,

Ducane had exercised considerable influence on other characters but had not been much concerned with power he had over them. For the first time he comes to understand the immense moral danger involved in the use of power. Once he is in possession of the knowledge that Biranne, whom he personally detests, is a witness to the suicide and was also present when Radeechy had killed his wife, he becomes aware of the mastery he had over him. This information, if disclosed in the report, could be highly damaging to Biranne leading to loss of his name and job.

This ensues in a prolonged moral struggle. On the one hand, he detested the idea of ruining the career of Biranne, while on the other, his image of himself as a just man and professionally capable, saw of no escape from making himself into a "cold judicial machine", that could not eschew the facts. His rational concept of goodness insisted that it was one's plain duty not to hide a murder. Concealment would damage his own image and reputation. Mary refers to his morally wrong method of coming to a decision in this jumbled and messy case. She says: "Then shouldn't you just think about the decision and not about yourself? Let the machinery work and keep it clear of the jumble" (p.273). Her advice is what in Murdochian terms would amount to the need of keeping the "attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning
surreptitiously to the self. But this important lesson is delivered to him after a brief but terrifying encounter with death, an extreme situation in which Murdoch seems most at home. The anticipation of an unavoidable death unmasks the true meaning of justice and goodness to him. The incident takes place in the grotto named Gunnar's Cave where the rising tide imprisons him with Pierce. As both of them huddle under the water, he has a vision which awakens him to the vast egoism of all human activities.

I wonder if this is the end, thought Ducane, and if so what it will all have amounted to. How tawdry and small it has all been. He saw himself now as a little rat, a busy little scurrying rat seeking out its own little advantages and comforts. To live easily, to have cozy familiar pleasures, to be well thought of.... He saw the face of Bannan near to him, as in a silent film, moving, mouthing but unheard. He thought, if I ever get out of here I will be no man's judge. Nothing is worth doing except to kill the little rat, not to judge, not to be superior, not to exercise power, not to seek, seek, seek. To love and to reconcile and to forgive, only this matters. All power is sin and all law is frailty. Love is the only justice. Forgiveness, reconciliation, not law (pp. 306-307).

This insight, though temporary, is a rare and occasional gift granted to human beings blinded by their self-created illusions. This moment of grace and sudden clarity of vision signals an end of an era in Ducane's life. Before the almost certainty of death he loses the obscuring sense of a self-designed role of a good man and a just judge. Death, the destroyer of all images dispels all the roles and forms. His concepts of goodness and justice undergo a process of deepening.
Like the Marsyas, he is flayed out of himself into the light of truth. He is free in the sense that he has learnt to transcend his solipsism. The need for killing the 'rat'-the ever desiring self always safeguarding its interests, dawns on him. He recognizes the value of love and forgiveness.

Effingham in *The Unicorn* has a similar spiritual revelation, that with the death of the self the world naturally becomes an object of love. This indeed is a sign of moral progress and freedom that comes out of self-effacement.

His moral progress is evident in the acceptance of his shortcomings. As a character immersed in a moral struggle, he had begun by believing in his superiority over others and in his separation from evil and guilt. He now sees himself as a fake and a "whited sepulchre." He realizes that he had deceived Jessica and Kate by keeping them in the dark about each other. He recognizes his suppressed homosexual inclinations for Fives, his chauffeur and Peter McGrath. He becomes conscious of his lax moral behaviour and the sexual attraction he had managed to suppress for the golden beauty, Judy McGrath. In resisting this seductress and in refusing to pay off McGrath he learns to straighten himself morally. He discovers/there may be demons and powers outside, such as the ones with which Radeechy had played, but the real demon resides in the mind of man. "It is I who am Lucifer" (p.216). He sees in himself the egomania reflected in Radeechy's cryptogram that reads: 

Radeschy Pater
Dominus i.e. an equation with God. Although he is too hard on himself yet there is some grain of truth when he describes the evil spirits around as little things compared to the great and dreadful evil that leads to war, slavery and all man's inhumanity to man. This evil he saw in the "cool, self-justifying ruthless selfishness of quite ordinary people such as Biranne and himself" (p.323).

The conflict in his mind about dispensation of justice in the Radeechy case is resolved. He decides on a private form of justice, instead of the harsh legal one demanded by his profession. Once he is assured of Biranne's remorse and that he still loves Paula, his ex-wife, he decides to conceal his disclosures. Instead, he stipulates a reconciliation of the two as a kind of moral punishment. This compassionate form of justice he finally works out is brought about by the insight he has gained. Murdoch does not intend to show that he has suddenly been metamorphosed into a good man. Such a sudden change, according to her, is impossible. It only implies that he has learnt something about the reality of evil and the vast selfishness which lies at its roots. His gesture is but an infinitesimal attempt to 'see' a little of the complexity of that reality.

For the first time he learns to perceive others sympathetically and justly. The incident in the Grotto had convinced him that forgiveness, reconciliation and compassion
is all that matters in this world. With this knowledge, he initiates the prime move towards uniting various other couples apart from Paula and Biranne. He enables Judy McGrath to be consorted with Fivey. He restores Kate Look to Octavian and brings Pierce closer to Barbara by teaching him forbearance.

But it is for Mary that Ducane for the first time learns to feel the impersonal, transcendent love, that is of the highest order as distinct from the self-seeking, possessive love Jessica felt for him. He had earlier failed to apprehend Mary as a separate individual. "She was far too plain an object to remain visible to him" (p.334). He was used to her as one might be used to an efficient servant. Gradually he develops a growing respect for her and begins to 'attend' to her. He comforts her for what she describes as an inability to have loved her dead husband in the right way. He tries to free her of the obsession with the past by convincing her that chance, accidents or contingent happenings are beyond man's control and have to be accepted with resignation. Real love includes this acceptance. As both of them come to a mutual understanding, Ducane learns:

No love is entirely without worth, even when the frivolous calls to the frivolous and the base to the base. But it is the nature of love to discern good, and the best love is in some part at any rate a love of what is good" (p.336).

He and Mary communicated by means of what was good in them. For him she is the Mother Goddess, the very embodiment of
goodness and generosity. This respect, trust and apprehension of her virtues defines a kind of love that can 'see' the other person as she is, and not as a mere extension of one's romantic vision.

An important factor responsible for moral and psychological unfreedom is the excessive preoccupation with the past. Living obsessively in the past is a kind of mental enslavement which not only prevents one from facing the present but also hinders attending to others. "Obsessions shrink reality to a single pattern."23 The situation worsens if the obsession is accompanied by guilt. Such a feeling is the subtle tool of the 'ingenious self' and can play a demonic role. Paula makes a lucid Murdochian commentary on this aspect:

Is it fruitless to think about the past and build up coherent pictures of what went wrong? I have never believed in remorse and repentance. But one must do something about the past. It doesn't just cease to be. It goes on existing and affecting the present, and in new and different ways, as if in some other dimension it too were growing (p.122).

The novel moves towards the exorcism of the obsessive demons which torment Mary Clothier, Paula, Theo and Willy. In coming to terms with their guilt, the moral point being elaborated is that man is a historical being who cannot totally break from the past. Its mistakes and evils are like fungi that tend to grow, poison and spread on the individual and social levels.24 But too much of absorption in the past guilt is a kind of vanity and self-esteem that hinders clarity of vision. Therefore, it must be confronted realistically. It may be
redeemed wherever it is possible, as in the case of Paula, Richard and Theo. But where nothing can be done as in the face of chance, accident or death (Alistair) the only way to progress morally is to accept it as Ducane advises Mary:

"Chance is really harder to bear than mortality.... It's not easy to do, but one must accept it as one accepts one's losses and one's past" (p.208).

Mary is the epitome of the good in the novel. She works selflessly for the Grays, untroubled by the thought of being extremely useful to them. She runs the house, controls the children but still feels that the benefits to herself were infinitely greater than what she did for them. She is basically 'other-centred' in her attitude and if there is any self-engrossedness in her it is of a kind which pertains to feelings of guilt and self-accusation. She had seen her husband Alistair dying in an accident that took place immediately after a heated quarrel. Years after the incident she fails to rise above the feelings of guilt. The 'gaseous tentacles' of the memory of Alistair constantly hover over her until these are expelled by a new re-enactment of death and loss. This takes place simultaneous to Ducane's moment of epiphany. As she sits in the local boat outside the grotto where her son and Ducane are entrapped, fearful that Pierce is dead, she has a moment of intense meditation which makes her refocus on her previous way of looking at the past. A sort of 'sad impersonal love' is a by-product of this ruminative brooding:
Death happens, love happens, and all human life is compact of accident and chance. If one loves what is so frail and mortal, if one loves and holds on, like a terrier holding on, must not one’s love become changed? There is only one absolute imperative, the imperative to love; yet how can one endure to go on loving what must die, what indeed is dead? O death, rock me asleep, bring me quiet rest. Let pass my weary guilt, ghost out of my careful breast. One is oneself this piece of earth, this concoction of frailty, a momentary shadow upon the chaos of the accidental world. Since death and chance are the material of all there is, if love is to be love of something it must be love of death and chance. This changed love moves upon the ocean of accident, over the forms of the dead, a love so impersonal and so cold it, can scarcely be recognised, a love devoid of beauty, of which one knows no more than the name, so little it is like an experience. This love Mary felt now for her dead husband and for the faceless wraith of her perhaps drowned son (pp.309-10).

These thoughts release her from the bondage of the guilt-pattern of the past, transforming the obsession into an impersonal love for her husband, enabling her to live in the present. She begins to recognize her feelings for Ducane and that she loved him “with her whole thought-body, her whole being of yearning” (p.334). Such a metaphysic of love reminds us of the 17th century metaphysical poetry of Donne with reference to “her body thought.” The love of Mary for Ducane is passion matched with consideration, a union of the body and the mind.

The other characters who are reconciled to their obsessions are Paula and Richard Biranna. Paula, a divorcée is caught up in a traumatic experience in which she is more culpable than Mary. Her husband, Richard, though unfaithful himself, out
of jealousy upsets a billiard table on Eric, Paula's lover. The incident had been followed by the amputation of Eric's foot, his subsequent departure to Australia and a divorce between Paula and Biranne. The violence of the scene plagued Paula for a long time. She is released from this obsessive form by Ducane's terms of private justice and his insistence on a reconciliation with her former husband. She decides to go back to him and to live with the knowledge of his insane violence in the past. It is in the National Gallery, before Bronzino's Allegory of Time (formerly known as Venus, Cupid, Jolly and Time) that both of them make attempts to 'see' and cherish the real otherness of the other. With renewed love, Richard confesses his complicity in the Radeechy case. He frankly admits that he cannot promise absolute fidelity but assures her that he would keep his lies to a minimum. Paula, unsure whether she will be able to forget his violence, agrees to redeem the past for the sake of love. By liberating themselves from the hold of the traumatic past, both of them agree to make a fresh beginning. Their new relationship will be intellectual as well as sensual, for it admits of a new appreciation of truth, which Paula has learnt by looking at the painting more objectively. This time she attends to it not from Richard's subjective point of view who refers to the kiss of Venus and Cupid as a "real piece of pornography". Now she perceives not only Time but also Truth, the other figure in the painting and realises, "Truth stares, Time moves". She also sees the tenderness of Venus and Cupid and concludes, "How like Richard,
it all is, she thought, so intellectual, so sensual" (p.325).

Theo is another character who is entrapped by a tainted memory. He had taken vows in a Buddhist monastery in India where he planned to end his days. He had hoped, in this manner to leave his past behind and make a fresh start towards the good. He forgets to take into account the contingent factors of his personality and in Murdochian terms desires to acquire virtue in a leap. An incident made him feel that he was still the same and his relentless egotism had not diminished. In a weak moment he repeats an action from his past. He tried to seduce a novice in the monastery. The boy committed suicide and Theo fled from a "broken image" of himself. "He had given it his free and upright self. He could not humbly surrender to it his broken self" (p.350). The fear of the 'gap' which separates the 'nice' from the 'good' and true from false love was another reason which made him leave India.

He had seen, far off what is perhaps the most dreadful thing in the world, the other face of love, its blank face. Every thing that he was, even the best that he was, was connected with possessive self-filling human love. The blank demand implied the death of his whole being (p.350).

For a long time after this incident, he keeps on holding to the feeling of guilt and the romantic illusion that he may somehow be redeemed by the forgiveness of his Guru, the Buddhist Monk. He sheds off the consolatory idea of forgiveness only after the death of the old man. The giving up of this last illusion of being externally healed by him grants him real freedom.
Knowing that it was too late he decides to go back to the monastery. This choice is significant as it implies the acceptance of reality and one's limitations without any help from the ameliorating fantasy. This is a kind of action described by Murdoch as being "good for nothing", an action without any hope of a reward. Theo is the only one in the novel who understands the meaning of goodness and its appalling demand. He muses over the idea of returning to the monastery very objectively:

Why should he stay here and rot? Perhaps the great mountain of himself would never grow less. But he could keep company with the enlightenment of others, and might regain at least the untempered innocence of a well-guarded child. And although he might never draw a single step closer to that great blankness he would know of its reality and feel more purely in the simplicity of his life the distant plucking of its magnetic power (p.351).

Like Michael Meade in *The Bell*, Theo had wanted to 'unself' or break his personality. He had earlier attempted an easy escape from "the great mountain of himself" by withdrawing into a religious and monastic form of life. For this reason he had been unsuccessful in his effort. Only later, he learns the difficult lesson that 'unselfing' necessitates acceptance of the opacity, contingency and randomness of reality, not an escape from it. Theo's insistence on breaking the personality or self-effacement echoes of Buddhist and Hindu values. This standard of Indian mysticism as a measure of that sort of absolute which is the Good has been taken up in *Bruno's Dream*.
also, Ducane had touched on the same theme of the renunciation of the desiring and seeking self in his moment of epiphany. He describes the selfish ego as a 'little rat' that must be killed. Theo manages, to a great extent, in achieving success in this direction. His moral evolution is visible when he redeems his past by returning to the monastery with no hope of any personal gain but merely to watch the spiritual growth of others and to participate in the religious life of the community.

Another person who is obsessed with his past is Willy Kost, a German refugee who had suffered in the concentration camp. This melancholic scholar confesses to Theo that he could not forgive himself for having betrayed two fellow prisoners in a concentration camp at Dachau. His betrayal had caused their death. His brooding over the past horrors draws the attention and pity of all the other dwellers of Trescombe Lodge. He becomes a kind of a saint or a 'sacred sufferer' and a 'scapegoat' for them. They leave gifts like the binoculars, books, flowers, bird's nests on his cottage window. His visitors seem to have an urge to propitiate or protect him by the donation of these pointless gifts, offered in the "spirit of those who place saucers of milk outside the lair of a sacred snake" (p.92). The allusion is to a well known Hindu religious rite of offering milk to snakes. All the while, Willy remains immersed in his prison of guilt. He is released from it by an erotic encounter with Jessica Bird. He delivers an important lesson to her that proves useful in freeing her from the jealous possessiveness she felt for Ducane. He tells her:
Human fraility forms a system, Jessica, and faults in the past have their endlessly spreading network of results... We are not good people, and the best we can hope for is to be gentle, to forgive each other and to forgive the past, to be forgiven ourselves and to accept this forgiveness, and to return again to the beautiful unexpected strangeness of the world (p.192).

At this stage, it is worth considering Robert Taubman's critical comment that The Mice and the Good is "not a story that morally moves far from its starting point." This criticism is unjustified if we keep in mind the progress of most of the characters at the end of the novel. All of them manage to free themselves to some extent from their enslaving memories that have brought their lives to a stasis. Their frozen outlooks had deprived them of proper contact with others. As they forgive themselves, others and their pasts they emerge stronger and more capable of appreciating the "beautiful unexpected strangeness of the world". They learn to see with an unclouded vision which characterizes true freedom and is a mark of moral growth.

The basic theme of the novel, therefore, is ethical. It aims at the elaboration of moral precepts in a secular context. But the analysis is made in a psychologically realistic manner and is cogent with the characters of the persons involved. They reflect intensely upon the moral issues and try to act upon their reflections. Characters like Dacane, Mary Clothier and Theo are complex, life-like creations whose ruminations and actions are properly welded. Though there is a great deal of
idea-play going on, it does not inhibit them from acquiring a free, concrete existence in the novel. The only major character who fails to come alive and evoke sympathy is Jessica Bird. Her mental life is hazy and unclear and we remain detached from her anguished state. We do not come to know and recognize her as a distinct individual. In spite of all the care taken with her portrait, most of what she feels is an abstraction. For example, we do not understand her hunger to be educated by Ducane, for, this urge is revealed in neither action nor words. She is one of the main characters but is stringed with Ducane and her presence in the novel only serves the purpose of highlighting his character.

Murdoch's overriding concern with avoiding deliberate patterning or imposition of symbolic forms has led to the inclusion of contingency as a part of realistic scheme. But this intentional introduction of contingency has given certain situations in her novels an appearance of contrivance and artificial manipulation. To cite one example, Willy Rost meets Jessica in Ducane's flat, gives her a heavy dose of moral advice and immediately after this serious discussion hops into bed with her, which is both amusing as well as highly out of character. This chance sexual encounter appears to be conjured up by the author. This kind of willing up is considered by Murdoch as a weakness of the symbolical novel. It is regarding such patterned contingency that Brendan Hennessy remarks "Miss Murdoch's contingencies need more drama to illuminate them."
Except for such flaws, the novel has strikingly impressive qualities. It is rich and alive with vivid descriptive passage. The view from Trescombe House, given below, is an excellent example of her descriptive capacity:

The front door was wide open, framing distant cuckoo calls, while beyond the weedy gravel drive, beyond the clipped descending lawn and the erect hedge of raspberry-and-creamy spireas, rose up the sea, a silvery blue, too thin and transparent to be called metallic, a texture as of skin-deep silver paper, rising up and merging at some indeterminate point with the pallid glittering blue of the mid-summer sky. There was something of evening already in the powdery goldenness of the sun and the ethereal thinness of the sea (p. 19).

The meeting of Paula and Biranne in the National Gallery, under the Bronsino Canvas is another scene of dazzling descriptive beauty. In the painting sensual Venus and Cupid are shown as surrounded by Despair, Deceit and two empty-eyed masks of youth and age. The whole scene is unveiled by Truth and Time. It is in the presence of Bronsino that Paula and Biranne realise that they are falling in love. The under-sea experience of Ducane and Pierce is another impressive cameo. In this piece of concentrated writing, richly descriptive and ruminative, Murdoch alternates between what they feel physically and the intense mental activity in which Ducane is busy. It emerges into a graphic description replete with significance and beauty.

Both from the philosophical and technical angle, The Nice and the Good represents a landmark in Murdoch's fictional career. It exhibits her mature but pessimistic outlook.
about the importance of death as an instrument of knowledge and about the near impossibility of change to be brought about by self-effacement. A brief insight of the good may be granted in extreme situations like death, as a result of which man may shed off some illusions and forms he has falsely created. But this slight moral progress cannot be considered as absolute. If the characters are able to gain some freedom, no matter for how brief a duration, that by itself is a miracle. This theme forms the substance of most of her later novels. Another major subject of interest in her fiction from now onwards is the importance of the past and how too much attachment to it can curtail man's freedom. The insistence on living in the present with a proper outlook towards the past forms the hub of her maturer moral ideology.

Technically speaking, the novel owes a lot to Shakespeare who combines a marvellous pattern with free characterisation. It is psychologically realistic and has granted a degree of freedom to her major characters like Ducane, Mary and Theo. It has a large cast which displays a flexibility of formal control and creates a picture of the "manifold virtues of man and society". In this way the novel achieves a kind of combination of the qualities of the 'open' and the 'closed' novel.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


7. Iris Murdoch, The Nice and the Good (London: Triad/Granada, 1983), p. 10. All subsequent page references are to this edition of the novel and are incorporated parenthetically in the text.


13. An excellent comparative study of the two works has been made by Robert Hoskins in "Iris Murdoch's Midsummer Nightmare", Twentieth Century Literature, 18 (July 1972), pp. 191-198.


22. Marsyas was said to be a Phrygian satyr who played sweetly on the flute. Vain of his musical aptitude he hubristically challenges Apollo to a musical contest, in which he loses. As a punishment, he is tied to a pine tree and flayed alive. This agonising painful death points at the phenomenon of 'unselving' or the pulling of the self from the self. See James George Fraser, The Holy Golden Bough (New York: Criterion Books, 1959), p.316 and Robert Graves, Greek Myths (London: Cassell, 1955), p.77. Also refer to Chapter VIII of this dissertation.


26. Elisabeth Dipple, p.11.

