Chapter-5

THE BLACK PRINCE TO HENRY AND CATO

This chapter takes into consideration the four novels which were written during the period 1973-1976. These novels were published at roughly a year’s gap between them: The Black Prince (1973), The Sacred and Profane Love Machine (1974), A Word Child (1975) and Henry and Cato (1976). They are generally longer, they have dispensed with the circumscribed limit of chapter divisions as a formal structural device and their philosophical point of view is far more comprehensive and complex. On the whole, these novels, as a group, may be viewed as some of the easiest of all Murdoch’s novels.

The group of novels under consideration is characterised by certain features that set them apart from the earlier novels. First of all, Murdoch has employed a consciously deliberate narration which demonstrates a striking innovation on the part of the novelist. Two of the four novels, here, are written in the first person and in each of them there is a marked focus on how the story should be told. The Black Prince, for instance, recounts the life of a novelist whose greatest novel is The Black Prince. Similarly, the eponymous hero of A Word Child, Hilary Burde, lives with an obsession of order that becomes part of the novel, an obsession which prompts to present his life piecemeal, dividing it into
As the titles of the next two novels suggest, they are third person novels: *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, and *Henry and Cato*. There is a duality of narration, for the titles of both the novels contain ‘and’, hence the narrative focus inevitably falls on the both segments. *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* narrates the lives of two women opposed to each other and in relation to Blaise Gavender, whose wife Harriet represents sacred love, and whose mistress Emily represents profane love. The roots of this personal opposition ramify into further oppositions - good and evil, truth and fantasy, love and hate, life and death. *Henry and Cato* extends this dialectic still further, interweaving stories of two lives-two school-friends whose lives have taken opposite course. Both Henry and Cato are diametrically opposed for Cato enters the priest-hood while Henry makes it good to USA and settles for an academic post in a mofussil American University. It is Henry, however, who is obsessed with the question of morality and Cato who degenerates into a murderer. The novel shows how the overtly good moves towards evil and the apparently bad strives towards good. Murdoch seems to suggest that appearance and reality are simple and plain but rather elusive when circumstances take an unexpected turn, highlighting the vicissitudes of life.

Another remarkable feature of these novels is the introduction of the thriller element which is particularly prominent in them. For instance, *The Black Prince* begins with an apparent murder, *The Sacred
and Profane Love Machine with the mysterious appearances of an unknown boy in a suburban garden, A Word Child with the equally mysterious appearance of a coloured girl at the door of the protagonist’s seedy London flat, and Henry and Cato with Cato’s attempt to dispose of a revolver by surreptitiously throwing it into the Thames. Apparently these novels are concerned with the theme of violence which is typical of the underworld. The violent world of novels, in fact, presents women being threatened and beaten up, murders being committed, and melodramatic accidental deaths.

Not unlike the earlier novels, these novels depict a godless society in which people no longer feel tormented by the angst about the loss of God, with the only saving grace in the person of Cato for whom the matters of faith and the Christian God are of paramount importance. Instead, these novels contemplate right and wrong, good and evil, sin and forgiveness as innately human responsibilities. Morality and the concept of ‘Good’ are retained as worthwhile concerns. No doubt, the three novels at least have consciously divorced morality from God. This evidently makes human beings all the more responsible towards themselves and society.

Significantly, the question of morality in these novels is closely linked to the force of love which may redeem or destroy a person’s life. Murdoch has introduced this brand of love on purpose as redemptive love replaces religion; it purifies the emotions, moving away from the selfish and personal towards the spiritual and universal.
However, these novels simultaneously recognise love’s destructive capacity which is powerfully explored. When love turns too profoundly possessive, it naturally ends up in destruction. And this possessive love often leads to disaster in the novels under discussion.

The Black Prince might easily be termed as a milestone in Murdoch’s fictional career. It won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1973 for her. Significantly this novel has been considered by many critics as her finest work. Richard Todd has appreciated it as follows:

Certainly it is virtuoso in its technical self consciousness, in the way in which it challenges its own text and reliability, and speculates on functionality, it may be thought of as Murdoch’s closest approach to the ‘post-modernist’ novel. Thematically, it represents a brilliantly self-imposed challenge, since it is undoubtedly the most solipsistic of her novels: her theme, however, has constantly involved attention to the dangers of solipsism.¹

Solipsism means belief that all reality is subjective, or that the self can know no more than its own state. With its thematic emphasis on solipsism, The Black Prince is certainly the most complex and intricate of her previous novels. However, its accessibility is its saving grace. In true thriller fashion, it begins with an imagined murder and ends with a real one. The title of the novel is derived from a historical context. The historical Black Prince, son of Edward III, lived in the fourteenth century and fought and died in the Hundred Years War without ever coming into

royal inheritance. Like the historical prince, Bradley Pearson, the protagonist fights and dies for his view of truth and love, whilst never coming into his inheritance. Critics are nearly unanimous in their view that *The Black Prince* takes its title from Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* (Act IV, Scene V 1. 42) from a somewhat bawdy scene in which the clown declares his ability to serve ‘The Black Prince, sir, alias the prince of darkness, alias the devil.’ Murdoch seems to imply that such a ‘Black Prince’ is served in the novel, but his identity is by no means so straightforward.

Notwithstanding the ambiguity of the title as suggested by Francis Marloe in The Postscript, the fact of Shakespearean parallel cannot be dismissed outright. If the Black Prince is the devil, he is also Hamlet procrastinating until it is too late to act, 'he is also the Black Eros, destructive in his love, one of the ‘dark gods’ whom Honor Klein said could not be cheating.²

*The Black Prince* is a superb thriller, a black book about marriage, a dark book about authorial rivalry. It is also a reflective book about love. It is the story, in three parts, of Bradley Pearson’s love affair with Julian Baffin, the daughter of his friend, enemy and fellow writer Arnold Baffin. The first part ends at the point at which Bradley realises that he has fallen in love with Julian. The second part deals with his declaration of this love and with the response of the small court of characters. The third part concerns elopement, consummation and almost

immediate discovery of the lovers by Julian’s father. The book’s subtitle ‘A Celebration of Love’ suggests that it is a novel about Platonic Eros and its relationship with true artistic and moral vision.

Murdoch has almost exhausted her fictional resources in constructing this novel. The book is framed by a Foreword and Afterward by a fictional editor P. Loxias, another name for the Greek God Apollo. This novel is written in prison by Bradley Pearson, with a Foreword and Postscript by him. There are four Postscripts by other characters who make Pearson’s version of events indeterminate and doubtful. They also speculate as to the identity of Loxias. Hence the need of the intermediary Loxias as publisher and editor who gets the manuscript out of prison and publishes it with commentary. The novel keeps up a running commentary about Hamlet and is also full of writers and readers. This explains that 'the novel is about the intricacies of art, and the fate, destiny or doom that plague the artist who must write what he considers the truth. 3 The two major characters are writers. Arnold’s young and unformed daughter Julian is to become a writer. His embittered powerful wife Rachel conceives herself a frustrated artist. Bradley’s neglected office friends Hart Bourne and Grey-Pellham are Civil Servants but also ‘literary and journalistic persons.’ Julian's friend Septimus Leech recurs in The Sacred and Profane Love-Machine as a blocked writer being treated by Blaise. The four postscripts are by characters who have read Bradley’s novel and are critics and interpreters. The narrator, Pearson, as well as telling his

story, keeps up a series of Hamlet-like soliloquies about the relations between life, art, sex, suffering, truth.

The book has received diverse readings. A S. Byatt has commented unfavourably on its deliberate indeterminism. Richard Todd argues that there is nothing to stop us reading it as the story of a foot-fetishist. Lorna Sage argues, by contrast, that it could have been told in the omniscient third person there would have been much lost in the way of local effect, but nothing of consequence in ‘placing the story as a whole.’ Elizabeth Dipple convincingly argues that *The Black Prince* is the story of Bradley’s ascesis through love. She unfortunately neglects the question of sex in relation to this ascesis. She surmises that Bradley’s trial and imprisonment for a murder he did not commit is an apt concupance for a writer who secretly wished to be lionised. In fact, Bradley sacrifices his life for the sake of his ex-mistress Rachel who kills her husband Baffin. The poetic justice in Bradley’s case is brought about by his death from cancer.

Despite the diversity of critical opinions on *The Black Prince*, the fact remains that Bradley attracts almost all the readers which makes him a great figure. His identity as the eponymous hero is not certain. It is Julian, dressed wholly in black, who takes on physically the guise of Hamlet, and indeed it is her father who is killed and lies dead at the end of the novel with ‘a little puddle of blood in his ear.’ Both Bradley and

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Arnold are guilty of loving too much and too little. Arnold, like the characters in A Severed Head, falls in and out of love with little or no understanding of love’s consequences. He declares love in turn for his wife (Rachel), Christian, and finally, and perhaps forever for his own daughter Julian. He is romancer and philanderer as superficial as his novels appear to be. Bradley, on the other hand, comes to love late in his life and falls absolutely and irrevocably, destroying in his fall, his sister Priscilla, Arnold and ultimately himself. Bradley’s initials as B.P. appear to point to his identification with the Black Prince.

Bradley Pearson, like a number of Murdoch’s protagonists, has risen from humble origins to a position, not of affluence but certainly of comfort. He and his sister Priscilla have as their childhood background their parents’ unsuccessful gift shop and newsagent’s in Croydon, with both their parents now dead. Bradley and Priscilla appear to have no other blood relations, though both have made uncongenial marriages and in both instances their marriage partners (Christian and Roger respectively) have deserted them and taken on other sexual commitments. From the very beginning, Bradley appears to be at pains to establish himself as indecisive and burdened with anxiety about his every move and what attitude he should take to his acquaintances. When, however, he is faced with the first crisis- of Arnold’s attack upon Rachel - he acts swiftly and firmly. He takes control of the situation and offers a subtly edited version of the actual events that allows Arnold to vindicate himself in his own eyes, despite his obvious guilt. It is his capacity for action, rather than his indecision, that turns out to be Bradley’s tragic flaw. When he elopes with
Julian and abandons Priscilla, he unwittingly provides a justification for later accusations of heartlessness on his part. When Rachel kills Arnold, Bradley’s attempt to protect her by hiding the truth and wiping the poker clean of Rachel’s finger prints, land him in misery i.e. prison.

Bradley is wrong not only about the artistic inspiration and what is required of the artist in terms of participation and observation but also about the composition of his own erotic self. Life, Bradley knows, pathetically and continually aspires to the condition of art, to impose form where none is required. A sheer concern for one’s dignity, a sense of form, a sense of style, inspires more of our baser actions than any conventional analysis of possible sins is likely to bring to light.⁶

And this only becomes Bradley’s doom because he tries to give life ‘a form.’ He claims to be ‘a seeker of wisdom and truth’, but he runs away not only from truth and wisdom but also from love, beauty and self-renewal. His relationship with Priscilla, his sister, who needs all his attention, his relationship with Arnold Baffin his friend and a rival artist, with Rachel – Arnold’s wife, with Julian - Arnold – Rachel’s daughter, Christian - his ex-wife, in various ways, highlights his incapacity to relate himself to others. He cannot commit himself to people, places and objects. He is filled with theories of art which he cannot produce. He cannot even produce a good, racy autobiographical quasi work of art.

His very belief that art is not the reproduction of the oddments of life shows his tendency to romanticise. Art which precludes suffering,

muddle, horror is not art. Art must connect itself to lived experience and reality. It cannot be created in void. Since life happens to be its subject matter, people and their experience through interaction with others form the staple food for creative exercise. The creative spirit must draw its sustenance from the very thinginess. Bradley’s inattention to environment and people (especially to his sister Priscilla who needs his love) reveals Murdoch’s sustained conviction that true art enjoins on the artist the commitment to the act of telling the truth. Like the idea of the good, truth in art is double in focus. On the one hand, it demands full attention to all the details of every aspect of the creatures of quotidian. On the other, it implies the Platonic truth she partially images in The Black Prince. Inattention may easily lead to mediocrity which is the bane of impulse towards supreme art. Priscilla once tells Bradley:

You understand nothing of horror - no wonder, you can’t write real books. You don’t see the horror.  

This inability to perceive and face the horror implies moral cowardice on the part of the artist. Bradley reflects on his own. It had often, when I thought most profoundly about it, occurred to me that I was a bad artist because I was a coward. Would now courage in life prefigure and even perhaps induce courage in art.  

His youthful divorce from Christian was followed by some affairs which he declines to talk about. When Rachel makes sexual

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8 Ibid, p. 144.
overtures to him, he shifts his interest in his milieu and takes some steps to resume his connection with Christian. His realisation that art depends on life for sustenance is a step forward, but his impotence when he actually finds himself in bed with Rachel, announces his failure in art also. Bradley’s failure in bed convinces him that his affair with Rachel is going to lead him to a terrible muddle. He is also convinced that the visitation of the creative Eros is imminent. Therefore, he decides to pack his suitcase to leave London in search of solitude and in search of his muse. Later he comes to realize that the experience, he wished to escape from, is the only instrument for his self-realization as an artist. The book Bradley so much wanted to write comes into being not out of his anxiety to produce good art instead it comes automatically into being out of the lived experience and reality. It comes easily and naturally as he admits in the end:

This little book is important to me and I have written it simply and as truthfully as I can. How good it is I do not know and in a sublime sense I do not care. It has come into being as true art comes, with absolute necessity and absolute ease. That it is not great art I dare say I am aware.9

The events of the story as these seen through Bradley’s eyes are to do with a complete shift in his vision of the world—a shift which is produced by sudden and overwhelming experience of love for Julian. Earlier, the love of an old man for a young girl is something which

Bradley considers ugly and pathetic. The union of Roger and Marigold is viewed in this context. Still earlier, his physical distaste for collapsing flesh and smells associated with middle-aged distress are part both of his sexual isolation and his vision of reality. He always considered himself an ascetic and was repelled by Priscilla’s distress, Marloe’s seedy homosexual misery and Rachel’s attempt to involve him in adultery. But Julian is an exception for he loves her as a real woman in the real world.

As the plot moves forward, with the events unfolding themselves, we are made aware that Bradley’s capacity for right and truthful perception starts initially with his falling in love with Julian. Julian has been in the background earlier, ripping up love - letters, childishly asking for Bradley’s little Bronze water buffalo, flying a balloon which Bradley chases. He buys her a pair of purple boots also. But these events fail to register on his mind and also fail to link up with his erotic being. It is only when Julian appears to study *Hamlet* with him that he recognises himself in the grip of a power that he has no preparation for. His impassioned interpretation of Shakespeare’s relationship to his masterpiece makes Bradley victim of the passion of love. He knows that love can change the quality of consciousness. He finds Julian pretty, he finds his own middle-aged body beautiful, he finds Roger and Marigold beautiful, he wants to cultivate a friendly rapport with Christian, he reads Arnold’s work and brings out a favourable review, he attends to his dying sister Priscilla. His love-experience generates magnanimity. He has a vision of cosmic order and a sense that he is face to face with the Good, the Real and the True. He says: Of
course, the mind of the lover abhors accident... My love for Julian must have been figured before the world began... I realised now that my whole life had been determinedly travelling towards it... Her whole life had been travelling towards it.\textsuperscript{10}

Later on he says, this was no delirium. Those who have loved so will understand me. There was overwhelming sense of reality, of being at last real. The tables, the chairs, the sherry glasses, the curls on the rug, the dust: real.\textsuperscript{11}

Certainly, in Murdoch’s fictional universe, any character who feels that his or her life has a necessary non-accidental form is deluded. Bradley’s fantasies of love pour forth through his impassioned lyricism; but his inadequacies also get highlighted. He regards his art and his love stemming from the one and the same source. So he feels justified, though only personally, in recognising himself a renewed man. Though he thinks that his enlightenment has come about, yet soon he is proved wrong because, ‘our mixed nature readily degrades the purity of any aspiration.’\textsuperscript{12} And he naturally feels that love does demand a strategy. In fact, Bradley is so profoundly obsessed with his own self-renewal in his passion for Julian, he allows Priscilla to die, then he hides the fact from Julian and tells a lie about his age. The persistence of the idea and belief that it is intense human love that produces art is broken fairly quickly by Bradley’s too human lies and moral inadequacy.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, p. 209.
Bradley’s moral progress is shown to equal the progress towards good art, this is unfortunately the stage he has reached. Bradley Pearson is Murdoch’s ‘metaphor for stages of art’ and The Black Prince is a metaphor for life since art feeds on life. Having achieved the intensity of love, he is imperfect in other dimensions. Bradley is pitted against another novelist Arnold Baffin who is his protege and who is a commercially successful writer. Bradley writes about him:

Mr. Baffin is a fluent writer. He is a prolific writer. It may indeed be this facility which is the worst enemy. It is a quality which can be mistaken for imagination. And if the artist so mistakes 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...  

Evidently, Bradley’s criticism of Arnold is biased and spiteful, a self-justifying act to hide his own limitation and weaknesses which culminates in the symbolic murder of Arnold when he tears his entire volume of work. This incident betokens a serious failure of insight and moral discrimination, a failure of calmness which leads to violent acts. Violence, in turn, leads to guilt and punishment a means to knowledge and virtue. This progress is, sadly, denied to Arnold Baffin who falls a victim to his wife’s violence culminating in his death. Unlike Bradley, who nourishes a continual grudge against the world, Arnold is shown to be lazy and inattentive. He tells Bradley that he lives with a continuous

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sense of failure, yet he writes and publishes because writing for him is a project of *joie de vivre* and his stuff has some merit, otherwise he would not publish anything.

Arnold also believes that a tacit self-criticism promotes true art in the artist. This self-consciousness can prove be a positive asset if an artist has the capacity to pursue his art in the right direction. In Arnold, Murdoch highlights a serious failure which is not rectified even by his self criticism. Likewise, there is no ambiguity in the text that Bradley is mediocre, both as a man and as an artist. He sets no ideal for himself. The focus on Bradley’s story is a deliberate attempt on the part of the novelist to call attention to the ideal of true art towards which an artist must aspire.

What makes *The Black Prince* so engaging is the muddle created between the creative and personal lives of Bradley and Arnold. Bradley is falsely implicated for Arnold’s murder (committed by Rachel) and confined to prison. He waited all his life to write his masterpiece, but it is in prison that he can translate his dream into reality. His trial for Arnold’s murder and the consequent unexpected dreadful and unjust public humiliation become the real points of life, whereas all his ideas of transformation had been illusive. The trial leads him to write his present book. Because of this trial Bradley becomes a new man - this time a chastened and humble man. His final education is brought about through a series of disturbing experiences and humiliation and defeat to a point where he acknowledges the weakness and finds himself in a precarious, helpless situation. He also realizes, at the time, his purgation through
guilt and punishment. He writes in his Postscript: I had not willed
Arnold’s death but I had envied him and (sometimes at least) detested
him. I had failed Rachel and abandoned her. I had neglected Priscilla.
Dreadful things had happened for which I was partly responsible ... In
fact I meditated profoundly upon my responsibility... I surrendered
myself to the trials as to a final exorcism of guilt from my life.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, the guilt, the trial, the subsequent punishment reveal to
him the true vision. They teach him the pain and final joy gained from the
loving attention to the world. This true vision unites him to his love and
inspires him to create his work of art. Moreover, as he admits, the writing
of this book is an apotheosis of his love for Julian. In his new incarnation
as a changed man (sadder and wiser though) he feels:

The book had to come to being because of Julian, and because
of the book Julian had to be... she somehow was and is the book, the story
of herself. This is her deification and incidentally her immortality. It is
my gift to her and my final possession of her. From this embrace she can
never now escape.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{The Black Prince} is a la its editor, P. Loxias, a love story which
depicts the broken marriages, love and violence. Ironically, Bradley’s
romanticism in love and art is sufficiently marred by the violence which
deromanticises the novel to a large extent. Unlike many of the earlier
novels \textbf{The Black Prince} is not really concerned with the tribulations of

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 389.
marriage, though its results can be seen in the failed marriage of Priscilla and the moral oppression within that of Arnold and Rachel. Instead, the novel follows Bradley’s journey of self-discovery; it is a difficult and painful experience for him. Bradley is overwhelmed by doubts about his own identity as his past overshadows his creative and personal life as well. He is a child of confused background- an uneducated father ‘nervous, timid, upright, conventional’ and a mother who always felt that she had married beneath her. This prompts him to almost obliterate his background and recreate himself in his own image. Yet, as he himself acknowledges, he increasingly identifies himself with his father’s rigidity. His father’s fear of improper behaviour is particularly manifest in Bradley’s reactions to any suggestion of sexual or marital irregularities. He is unable to accept any responsibility for his own failed marriage and claims that after the divorce he lived for years with a sense of guilt. Likewise, though he believed it impossible for his sister to be happy with her husband, his immediate reaction is to advise Priscilla to return to Roger whom she has left. You can’t leave Roger. It doesn’t make sense. Of course you’re unhappy, all married people are unhappy.\textsuperscript{16}

In the like manner, when Rachel proposes some sort of extramarital affair to him, he is uncomfortable and stiff with her.

Although, marriage, love and violence emerge as potent themes the discussion of art is a particularly significant aspect of this novel, since it appears to encapsulate many of Murdoch’s thoughts about

her own writing at that time. The novel is also rich in classical and mythological references, which serve as a framework for the action and which become enabling agents for the discussion of art and life. More than this, perhaps, is the aspect of intertextuality which places Hamlet in the foreground.

The next two novels of this group - The Sacred and Profane Love Machine and A Word Child both deal with the theme of love. Murdoch has depicted two kinds of love here - love within marriage and extramarital love. She is equally concerned with the morality that governs love in its various incarnations and manifestations. The theme of love has been explored in several of the earlier novels, particularly in A Severed Head, although here, unlike in the earlier novel, the marriage bond is less evident.

The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, on the whole, depicts a world of mediocres, morally closed and sexually obsessed characters. Blaise Gavender, one of the central characters is a man of dual morality. He is a victim of confusion in his relations with others. He turns out himself into a person incapable of authentic existence. He survives on two loves—one sacred and connubial, the other profane and adulterous, to sustain his image of himself to support his happiness. In his moral dilemma, he cannot envisage giving up the ‘sacred’ love of his wife Harriet but he still wishes to enjoy the ‘profane’ love of his mistress Emily. The half-truths, the lies, the deceptions and the emotional cruelties that this involves prove finally insoluble, except by death.
Besides Gavender, there is Monty Small, who whets Blaise’s plan to continue his double love-life. Monty Small, a famous and a rich detective fiction-writer, suffering from pangs of guilt for having killed his wife, hopes to get rid of his demons by practising meditative discipline, and Buddhism. He is projected as another mediocre being. Both Blaise and Monty settle for a diminished one-sided existence. Blaise is devoid of spiritual quality that ennobles and elevates a person. Unlike Martin Lynch Gibbons in *A Severed Head*, who placed in exactly similar circumstances comes to realise the limits to his freedom, Blaise willfully fails to see the mystery of human personality and is confined to his mediocrity. His increased concentration in his own mind hinders any meaningful interaction with the world. He remains content to create fictional images from Milo Fane to Magnus Bowles, back to Milo Fane. Monty brings to focus the circularity of moral progress.

But, more than Blaise or Monty, it is Harriet Gavender who holds the strands of the story together. Even Emily, Blaise’s mistress, cannot bring herself to hate her. Blaise reflects about her: Harriet’s sweetness was very ordinary really, her selflessness was selfish in a very ordinary woman’s way ... Something that he loved in Harriet was her absolute openness, her non-peculiarness, her (dreadful word) normality. Harriet was right out in the open, in the light.¹⁷

Obviously, Harriet’s first virtue is a clear conscience that makes her thrillingly aware of being loved and loving. Love, as a matter

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of fact, is her whole existence. She loves her husband Blaise, her old-fashioned kitchen, her son David, she loves the slow parade of the English year with its sad, increasing store of memories. She mothers, with care and love, awkward, unwanted domestic oddments and homeless dogs. She would like to mother Blaise’s patients too. In short, she positively and half-consciously suffers from a sheer excess of ‘undistributed love’. Her desire to be needed, to be at the centre of her family, has been so abundantly fulfilled that she will always act rightly, with humility, with decency. Her salvation, as she sees it, and rejoices in it, lies in her formidable power to support those she loves. She gains her absolute fulfillment in marriage for which she has abandoned her ambition of being a great painter.

Her modesty and humility are the valuable aspects of her composed and unassertive temperament. As a result, she has no desire to seek identity. Her charities are easy, pleasant and rich in the rewards of gratitude. The complete harmony between her experiential and living self is assumed by her as well as by other characters in the novel as a saintly strain in her character. In fact, Harriet’s innocence and goodness allow Blaise to continue a double-life for nine years. He is ultimately so obsessed with the loss of his virtue that he hopes to be redeemed by an angel. On being prompted by Monty to tell the truth to Harriet, he admits. In now confessing this [I] can only cast myself onto your love as a religious person casts himself onto God.\textsuperscript{18}

Harriet’s first reaction to Blaise’s revelation is to feel that the past has been absolutely changed. But soon she takes command of the situation and expresses a desire to see the mistress and the child. She finds herself able to move from the role of loving and successful wife to that of a confident and forgiving wife. She sees it as her duty to love and to forgive for she does not want that Blaise should sacrifice and abandon Emity and Luca. In her charitable generosity, she is also prepared to accept them as part of her family, perceiving this as an extended family. Her practical ability, understanding and domestic skill will support her to manage this, as she has managed everything earlier. However, Harriet’s goodness offers Blaise an easy solution to continue his morally debased double life.

Ironically, Harriet’s virtue becomes the cause of Blaise’s further moral decline because he fears no consequences. But she, in her own way, asserts egoism though of a morally more reputable kind. The situation has granted her a power: She suddenly realised with an absolutely new feeling of energy, she was simply in control. All these people now depended upon her. She and only she could, if it were possible at all, help, heal and avert disaster.\(^\text{19}\)

Both Harriet herself and Blaise forget that she is simply energised by pain. Once she realises that she alone can direct and encircle what is happening, she assumes a morally superior posture and allots Emily and Blaise the role of wrong doers. When she wishes to meet

Emily, there is a motive behind this spirit of ‘welcome’. As a matter of fact, Harriet needed to swallow Emily whole, know the worst and be certain that she could survive it.\(^{20}\)

Harriet, then, becomes obsessed with herself, interested in herself, pleased with herself, with her ability to endure pain, with what she calls her ‘power’. It is, then, a Harriet-owned world, a world brought into being by her so-called goodness. Emily has an assigned and inferior role in this world. Harriet has arranged party to make public Blaise-Emily relationship but sadly, the party ends up as a failed exercise. Edgar’s outburst after a bout of drinking exposes the falsity of the situation:

Because you are good you think that you can save them, but it is they who will defile you. You must not assent to what is wrong, that is not what the Gospel requires. You are believer in Christian marriage... You must come away so that he can see what he has done. As it is, he sees nothing. This is a lie, this man is a lie, and he must live it and undo it... They will not tolerate your forgiveness, in the end they will hate you for it, they will go on intriguing as they have always done... and you will find too late that you have not been a healer, but an accomplice of evil... He has not acknowledged his fault, he is continuing in it, and you will eternally be his victim, abandoning him to wicked ways and conniving at his sin.\(^{21}\)

\(^{20}\) Ibid, p. 188.
Edgar’s sustained attack is really double-edged. As a moral being one must act boldly to combat evil because to perpetrate evil is also sinful. Harriet’s assumed role of a ‘forgiver’ contributes to the proliferation of evil since it makes Blaise complacent. It is Harriet’s duty to discover the truth. However, she still persists with her illusion that whatever she had done so far was out of a desire to do good and act rightly. Even the party arranged by her, she thinks, is one of her right acts. But after Edgar’s outburst she is obliged to review her position:

She had thought that she was in control, that she was the one who was looked to. But now it seemed that she was not in control after all, nobody was in control that she was a victim, that they were all victims.\(^{22}\)

Any pretence to goodness is bound to be frustrated as it is already tainted with the visions of self. The mind must be cleansed of all distraction. Spiritual wisdom flows only when the heart is purged of all corruption. Clearly Edgar’s exposure implies all this and also makes Blaise, at the same time, conscious of his duplicity and falsehood. Harriet’s brave endurance in the face of Blaise’s exposure for the time being gives him great relief. But now he realises that he had substituted one kind of cage for another. Blaise seems to have made his choice, but it is Emily who becomes suddenly aware of her new role. She decides that she must end this deception. Harriet had handed over Blaise to her to be shared. She realises that Harriet will wield power over them by remaining

\(^{22}\) Ibid, p. 214.
guiltless, so she decides: The power of pure destruction was still hers. She could still make it death-or glory.\textsuperscript{23}

Later, her slap to Blaise brings the scene as well as action to a finale- Blaise defects to Emily’s side and abandons Harriet. The machinery of forgiveness, set in motion, is suddenly halted and thrown out of gear by the profane love machine (Blaise and Emily). The situation now subjects Harriet’s goodness to test. Harriet comes to realise the dreadful emptiness at the real centre of things and is forced to admit that the image of saint she aligned herself with has been an illusion. Sadly aware of being in the middle of a false role, she admits to Monty:

But it was not saintliness. It was sort of power - I can understand how she hated it - I had to be the one who decided things - and I so much wanted to console Blaise.\textsuperscript{24}

Once deprived of this power, Harriet assumes a structure, an identity demanding personal freedom. A completely submissive wifely role, a shut-in life had made Harriet believe in her goodness - a goodness that operates without structure, a goodness which is invisible. This new awareness that dawns on her undermines her hold on goodness. In order to assert her freedom, Harriet finds substitutes... Monty, Edgar, David, Magnus Bowles. Her love turned into despair energises her and she plans to keep herself afloat in the world in which she lives. She has at least seen the duality of this world, hence she now plans to substitute a simple,

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, p. 250.
happy married world for a series of mythologies which certainly are created by her newly acquired structure. Her wish to change the object of love from Blaise to Monty to Edgar to Magnus Bowles is part of this mythology. But curiosity cannot operate without a loving object. Rejected by Blaise, Monty and Edgar, Harriet flies to her brother with the child Luca. While sitting at the airport, Harriet reflects on her situation. Running away had altered nothing, it was an empty gesture. She still feels: Blaise needs me terribly, he needs my forgiveness to perfect his happiness with Emily.25

But she also knows that Blaise, a charlatan as he is, will take Harriet’s act of generosity for granted. In the end it is she who will be left alone. There is no calm space anywhere. She is caught in her own mind and condemned by her own being. Trapped in the whirlpool of emotions, she has nowhere to go. Thus goodness, as in the case of Tallis in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, is defeated but one might say rather dishonourably as Harriet is killed in a terrorist attack while she was reflecting on her defeat.

Harriet’s death reaffirms the accidental nature of life and goodness both. Love, Harriet possesses in abundance, but the real meaning of love is not understood. She seems to present the ‘sacred’ love. The title borrowed from Titian’s painting of the same title makes the issue confusing since Harriet is chosen to present both kinds of love – ‘sacred’ as well as ‘profane’. Her abundance of love, pity and sacrifice align her to

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the sacred. But the moment these qualities are put to test, the reality of love exposes itself. Harriet epitomises the dictum that most efforts at virtue, if imperfectly understood, end in destruction. The process of Harriet’s failure presents Murdoch’s dissection of spontaneous and unwilling frailty even in characters whose urge to love and be selfless has achieved the optimum level.

Love outside the marriage bond is once more the thematic focus of Murdoch’s next novel *A Word Child* (1975). This love is again shown to be utterly destructive. Hilary Burde is the ‘Word Child’ in the novel and metaphorically the eponymous hero whose uncontrolled love destroys Gunnar Jopling’s first wife Anne and then, years later, Gunnar’s second wife Kitty. ‘Unlike most of the previous London novels’, remarks Prof. Hilda Spear, ‘the action is placed in a winter London of cold, rain, fog and ice, reflecting the unremitting misery of the protagonist.’

Hilary, a prostitute’s child from an illiterate and almost utterly loveless background, is engaged in a quest for lost innocence. This quest ironically ends, through a series of accidents, in a total detachment from the environments, but brings a greater concentration on his own self. The novel shows how an individual’s inward concentration on himself can be stultifying and death-producing. Hilary Burde is a study in character of a man egomaniacally asserting his moral scantiness instead of looking humbly at truth.

Believing himself to be ‘bad’ Hilary acted accordingly and

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26 Hilda Spear, Iris Murdoch, p. 82.
found himself rejected by the aunt who took him and his half-sister, Crystal into her caravan home. He was sent to an orphanage, where he lived without love and, on his part, in a permanent state of hate until, through the intervention of a dedicated English teacher Mr. Osmond, who also perhaps loved him, he began to reshape his life. He realised that he was clever, had a gift for languages and loved words. He becomes a word child. Thus his long journey began, not from rags to riches but from ignorance to academic success, to a First Class degree at Oxford and to a College Fellowship.

His original quest was to free himself and his sister Crystal from the poverty and deprivation of their orphaned childhood, which had made him violent and destructive. But this quest is overtaken by a change in his life and circumstances. He falls wildly in love with Anne Jopling the wife of his patron-mentor Gunnar Jopling with whom Hilary has a relationship which is clear yet surrounded by mystery. Their relationship is really central to the narrative and one is prompted ‘to ponder the extent to which the relationship is sublimated and homosexual, with many of the other characters-in this instance Gunnar’s two wives - acting as unacknowledged substitutes.’

Hilary, falling desperately in love with Anne, had at last tried to persuade her to leave Gunnar and their young son Tristram. Anne, frightened and confused by her recent discovery that she is once more pregnant, had provoked Henry into crashing the car on the ‘motor-way’.

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27 Richard Todd, Iris Murdoch, p. 81.
Hilary had been seriously injured and Anne killed. Much later, Hilary discovers that Gunnar, contrary to what Anne had told him, apparently never knew, or at least had never said to anyone, that she was pregnant. With this catastrophe, however, the promise of a bright career and the hope of a happy future, both for him and Crystal, suddenly come to an end.

Both Hilary and Gunnar – Anne’s husband - get alienated by her death. Both fail to perceive the honest and true things that lie about them. Gunnar suffers another loss when his son, Tristram commits suicide. His second wife Kitty is desperate to have a child. She is determined to redeem the past, though not for Hilary’s sake, but for her own sake. She wants to bear a child from Hilary, as Gunnar is rendered impotent through an operation and Hilary, she thinks, owes them a child, as he had killed Gunnar’s child that Anne was carrying. Kitty seeks to arrange a reconciliation between Hilary and Gunnar - twenty years after Anne’s death.

This act of reconciliation opens his old wounds as Hilary is haunted by the guilt of having killed Anne. He remembers ‘how happy she had been when I first met her, and I could see too how destroyed she was later, destroyed by me and my terrible love.’

28 The destruction of Hilary’s love is also the destruction of all his hopes, academic as well as material. He becomes burdened and obsessed with his past. This, further, brings the problem of identity. The curious dilemma of Hilary’s mental and moral make up is that he does not like to be reminded of the past.

‘I mourned and mourned about the destruction of my hopes’, confesses Hilary. Feeling lonely and alienated from society, he cannot tackle his situation. His energy is consumed in misplaced notions. Hence he cannot find a meaningful role for himself. He becomes anti-life and lives in almost total segregation from the world, which, if apprehended truly and humbly, helps in the apprehension of truth and reality. Burdened with guilt, he organises his life strictly in a mechanical order. He lives by a set of rules which he has himself invented. He reminds us of the figure of T.S. Eliot’s Prufroek who measured out [his] life with coffee spoons. Like Prufroek, Hilary measures out his life in a similar meaningless social round, assigning particular evenings to different friends and colleagues: Monday, Clifford Larr; Tuesday, Arthur Fisch; Thursday, Laura and Freddie Impiatt; Friday, Tommy; Saturday; Crystal. This repetitive routine serves to give a sense of order to his existence, in that each day is pre-arranged and purposive. It also conceals from Hilary himself the fact that his whole life has lost its purpose. He lives from day to day, from week to week and doesn’t have to think about rearranging his life, for it is predetermined: ‘My days gave me identity, a sort of ecto-skeleton. Beyond my routine chaos began and without routine my life (perhaps any life?) was a phantasmagoria.’

His dependence on the endless round of the underground trains symbolises the purposeless and buried life to which Hilary has condemned himself. However, the singular redeeming feature of his personality is his feeling for his sister. He determines that Crystal should rise with him and his plans for his own life include plans for her
improvement and for giving her a better life. Like Jake in *Under the Net*, Hilary has a solipsistic view of life and his desire for Crystal’s happiness is entirely for his own satisfaction. However, he remains emotionally handicapped and makes no attempt to understand the nature of human love. Crystal provides only a space for his ambition and he frustrates her humanising love also. It seems, in the beginning, that Crystal’s love may penetrate and demolish the dense facade of his highly structured life, but Hilary imprisons her also. He is determined to keep her in his demonic control.

Crystal remains only a symbol of innocence and goodness. When she reveals the details of her relationship with Gunnar, Hilary’s past stands altered but with the likelihood of another drama in his life. His history stands an example of a trapped man idealistically endowing the objects of his perception with a symbolic power which the cynical surface belies. His effort to frustrate the humanising love of Crystal brings him close to the power figures in Murdoch’s fiction. Crystal lives alone in a bed sitter and until close to the end of the novel she appears to be confined to her one room, never visiting either Hilary or Arthur. And the reason is quite simple: she is not allowed to come out in the open.

Like *Under the Net* this novel abounds in images of containment and imprisonment: Hilary works in ‘the Room’ and describes the colleagues who share it with him as his fellow captives. Arthur’s place of work is said to be ‘cupboard.’ Hilary’s obsession with the London Underground train system is symptomatic of his desire to confine and be
confined. Tommy is equally obsessive and refuses to let go of Hilary and continues to pursue him. Again, Crystal is forced to abjure marriage and remain an apparent virgin through the sheer force of Hilary’s will. What governs the action throughout the novel, however, is the enslaving obsession with the events surrounding Anne’s death, which haunts both Hilary and Gunnar.

This naturally leads to a consideration of the major themes of this novel: suffering, guilt, reconciliation and forgiveness. The novel does not raise the issue of the existence of Good without God, but rather broaches the question whether there can be forgiveness without God. Despite his rejection of God, Hilary desperately wants to be forgiven. For this purpose, he wants, perhaps, the possibility of God’s existence. He explains to Tommy, ‘I can’t be relieved of pain. Sin and pain are inextricably mixed. Only Jesus Christ could sort them out.’ 29 It is his obsession with the idea of his own wickedness that makes him ruin his own life and, inevitably therefore, Crystal’s life too. He feels that he has lost his ‘moral self-respect’, and that, despite his suffering, redemption is impossible without God but he asserts: ‘there is no God... it’s a positive thing that there is no God.’ 30 Thus his redemption remains impossible. In fact he is not essentially wicked by nature but made so by his circumstances, He is one of those ‘people who are not bad [but] find themselves so situated that they are unable to stop themselves from doing

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the greatest possible harm to others.\textsuperscript{31}

Evidently, Hilary is a victim of his situation but he still persists in his badness. He feels guilt for the death of Anne and the inconsolable pain of Gunnar but his guilt serves to fuel self-pity which, in turn, fuels self-justification: if his destiny is to suffer, then he is not responsible for his sin. He considers his guilt as irrational and views everything mechanically. A negative and maddening character, Hilary is made to carry the entire burden of the text. He has a convincing past and therefore a plausible self. His behaviour operates in accordance with the most convincing logic. Life is huge and chancy and often plays cruel jokes on Hilary Burde. Whenever there is a possibility of something better coming in the way of Hilary, his chance is frustrated. All through the novel, the very accidentalness, characterising human affairs as well as the operations of psychic machinery, remains under focus. Egocentric as Hilary is, he turns a demonic agent, a spiritually blind creature. His lack of moral and spiritual resource to tackle the unhappy situation arising out of accidents becomes too obvious. He knows neither remorse nor the suffering, which he had imposed on himself, can redeem him. He asks: Can sheer suffering redeem me? It did not redeem me, it just weakened me further.\textsuperscript{32}

The past cannot be altered and Hilary makes no attempt to change his ordained life. His knowledge which he shares with Arthur: There are no miracles, no redemptions, no moments of healing, no

\textsuperscript{32} Iris Murdoch, \textit{A Word Child}, p. 126.
transfiguring changes in one’s relation to the past blocks all possibilities of making a humble effort, to come out of the shell of self-inflicted misery after the accident. It is not that he is without moral support from others, for Arthur, Clifford, and Crystal suggest to him to make a reconciliation with the past. But Hilary’s knowledge of the precariousness of such a venture seals any further progress. Arthur even begs Hilary to submerge his ego in the performance of good deeds. When Kitty finally seeks to arrange a reconciliation between Hilary and Gunnar, the very first meeting in the real sense coincidentally takes place at the Impiatt’s. It reflects Hilary’s state of mind, his vision becomes distorted with hatred. His letter to Kitty is written with a poison-pen: ‘One does not suddenly get over hating somebody, people do not forgive, it is impossible’.  

When, at last, both meet for the first time, to try to liberate themselves from their obsessions, Hilary of his remorse and Gunnar of his thought of revenge, it does not work. Hilary sees the attempt as a lie and the hopes of reconciliation are badly thwarted. However, when both he and Gunnar reconcile to the trick fate had played on them, something fateful again occurs. Hilary falls in love with Kitty and he is once again far away from seeking the truth.

Hilary knows that all human conditions are full of illusion. He also knows that both he and Kitty are in a false place and their love is marked by falsity. He reflects on the consequences of this liaison that it may not be possible to deceive Gunnar the second time. Still he finds

33 Ibid, p. 290.
34 Iris Murdoch, a Word Child, p. 220.
himself unable to move, out of the cyclical pattern of pain, suffering, deceit and separation. Ironically and disastrously, Gunnar, who was supposed to have been away, enters the scene of the last meeting between Hilary and Kitty, in which Hilary had resolved to bring the matter to an end. But sadly enough, he is unable to make his dramatic betrayal to Kitty. In a riverside scuffle neither man is injured but it results in Kitty falling from the edge of the jetty into slimy mud and she subsequently dies of exposure. Hilary later discovers that he has been unwittingly betrayed by his jealous finance Tommy.

Not much later, Hilary learns that Clifford Larr has committed suicide. The last time Hilary had seen Clifford, on a Monday when routine was still in force, they had quarreled and Hilary had said to him, ‘Go away... I never want to see you again.’ Now he is filled with remorse as his cruel words cannot be retracted. He enters St. Stephen’s Church, close to Clifford’s flat, and sits down to reflect how again and again his cruel destiny overtakes him.

Clifford had been carried away by the cold river and I had not stretched out my hand to him, not even touched his fingers... tears of vain tenderness and self-pity came into my eyes. I needed Clifford... Only he was gone, and it felt to me as if I had killed him in a fit of anger, killed Anne... I had been turned silently out into the desert.35

This outburst reveals that inspite of his ‘bad’ and ‘demonic’ nature, Hilary has a lot of tenderness for Clifford who was much devoted

to him. W.S. Hampl has attempted to trace the homosexual strain in Hilary-Clifford relationship:

“Homosexual” desire ‘appears’ in... A Word Child (1975) when the reader learns that the homosexual character Clifford has carefully appraised the heterosexual character Hilary as a possible partner. Even though Hilary identifies as heterosexual, he does make the following comment: ‘It was not that I was in any way homosexual, though I sometimes attracted men.’ Hilary knows that he has, true to form, attracted Clifford and that Clifford has examined him and found him an unacceptable choice... Despite being put under such scrutiny, Hilary remains close friends with Clifford. Hilary disclaims any type of homophobia... A Word Child, then, contains a supposed homosexual who chases a heterosexual who does not mind being chased.36

Though Clifford’s relationship with Hilary had been strictly Platonic, with no suggestion of any possible future consummation, the text, by ridding itself of the homosexual character, definitely disallows any such possibility. Murdoch’s texts commonly employ such a plot device; they introduce two male characters who display some degree of homosexual interest toward each other (though sometimes the interest is one-sided), only to violently remove one of the characters.

Clearly, then, Hilary’s pain and remorse at Clifford’s death betoken his humanity. He feels that everything is grossly muddled up,

penitence, remorse, resentment, violence and hate. So, he must remain unforgiven, unreconciled, unredeemed as he moves towards the final chapter of his self-analysis. He has lost Kitty, Clifford and Biscuit and is doomed on Christmas Day to lose Crystal, whose decision to marry Arthur comes to him ‘like a bombshell’. Perhaps Tommy will succeed in marrying him; she had once offered him forgiveness on behalf of God. At the very end she asks for forgiveness for herself but she does not realise how much she needs it. But Hilary survives to live on in hell of his own making ‘a double intensified eternal damnation, He remains only a word child, not a child of this human world-full of sympathy, love and understanding.

**Henry and Cato**, the last novel of this group, deals with the theme of love, both sacred and profane. The novel coincides with *The Fire and The Sun*. A brilliant study of Plato’s view on art and morality against a metaphysical background, it reveals to a great extent Murdoch’s own stream of mind. Human mind is essentially limited and fallible. True self-knowledge is difficult to possess. In self-indulgence, one becomes either a dreamer or a cynic. The novel presents the story of two overreachers who are out in search of the meaning of life. They are waiting for their lives to be defined. They constantly make decisions, reasoning out all sorts of situations and logically justifying their actions. Henry ascribes himself the role of a social saint and Cato assumes the role of a spiritual saint for himself.

The important thing about **Henry and Cato** is that it examines
Cato’s conversion from atheism to Christianity; his beliefs as a Catholic priest and his ultimate anguish at his loss of faith. The problems of morality which surround him are thus seen in a religious perspective. At the same time the novel looks through Henry at problems of morality outside the Christian dispensation, involving the query whether Good is possible without God. The two eponymous protagonists had come together in childhood through their shared sense of oppression and their desire to establish their own identity. They come from different social standing and background.

Henry is the younger son of the Marshalsons of Laxlinden Hall: Cato is the son of a scholar, a university lecturer, a failed Parliamentary candidate, a militantly atheistic father and a gentle mother who died when he and his sister were children. The story begins when both Henry and Cato, for different reasons, have been away from home for several years and have more or less lost touch with each other. Henry goes to America and becomes an art historian. Cato rejects the stern rationalism of his father and embraces Catholic Christian order as a priest. Henry’s flight across the Atlantic is the result of his learning that his older brother Sandy is dead and that he himself has inherited the ancestral home and fortune. What delights him, however, is not inheritance but Sandy’s death. What mattered was that bloody Sandy was no more. The section in question brings out the salient facts of Henry’s life and reveals, at the same time, his worried perception about his own identity. He sums himself up in a series of single-word concepts which figure out the man as he was perceived by others:
‘Luxurious Henry... private Henry... Alienated Henry... lost Henry... refugee Henry... leave- taking Henry... Timid Henry... escaping Henry... tolerated Henry... Inferior Henry... tactless Henry’ and finally ‘drunk Henry’.37

Henry’s perception of himself, as a man victimised by his past, encourages him in his determination to destroy that past. He identifies himself with great characters like Hamlet, Hannibal and Hitler. In his assumed role of a social saint he now wishes to destroy the paternal legacy of the Laxiinden Estate: When there are poor people and homeless people I can’t just sit on this property, and all this money.38

He is not simply motivated by philanthropic instinct, it is the spiritual aspect of renunciation that appeals to his imagination, ‘You gave up the world, why can’t I he asks the destitute Cato who owns only one kettle. He decides, thus, to sell his estate. He plans to utilize the money to help the village. His inclinations are aptly foregrounded in the following excerpt from the novel:

He could not morally, spiritually, psychologically become the person into which that odious ownership would make him. He had always hated possessions, always wanted to travel light and live a stripped life, and was he now crippled by a sentiment about an ancestral home?39

But the plot establishes the futility and fraudulence of an ill-

39 Ibid, p. 177.
executed plan, which in fact is a move in the direction of personal freedom than a genuine act of renunciation. The passion for social justice, when not matched with excellence in moral and human terms, becomes a farce. Embittered by the childhood ill-treatment by his mother Gerda, he is intent on taking revenge - a virtual matricide. His spiteful oedipal revenge cannot be taken as an act of renunciation. He is neurotic and self-obsessed though his philanthropic spirit later prompts him to reach out to others with genuine love and sympathy. Stephanie, whom he intends to marry, is taken merely as part of his inherited property. Beckmann, Stephanie, Cato, Gerda, Lucins, all of them are perceived through the coloured (biased) lens of romanticism and hatred.

Despite his egalitarianism, Henry’s motives are confused. In the absence of a controlling faith, however, lacking a God to guide him, he panics, feeling like ‘a man destined by dark forces to commit a murder for which he had no will and of which he had no understanding’. There is a double irony in the fortunes of the two friends, for though it is Henry who has rejected Christianity and Cato who has found it, Henry's ideas are, without his recognising it, based upon Christian morality, whilst Cato turns from God, tries to persuade Henry to hold on to his house and wealth. It is Cato who finally commits a murder for which he had neither will nor understanding.

In Henry and Cato, Murdoch seems to have watered down morality to a more concrete plane. Henry exemplifies Good without God

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in action. Although he does not fulfill his plan of renunciation by selling all his possessions and giving the money to the poor, he at least initiates a more practical plan of building a model village on his land. Though he does not marry the poor and lowly Stephanie, his response of love, pity and understanding changes her life, even if the ransom money which he leaves at her flat is left accidentally. Over and above everything else, he responds to the demands of love: when Cato appeals to him for help he finds that he cannot blindly put his friend’s life at risk. So, despite his fear, he risks his own life to save his friend. Finally, when the nightmare is over, he marries Colette who loves him, and chooses happiness. He is the first to see the kestrel, which both he and Cato recognise as the symbol of the Holy Ghost, hovering over the wasteland. It acts as a positive and transforming gesture in that on his return to Laxlinden he identifies the change in himself. It seems as if he is transported from his selfish, solipsistic life into an unexpected and aspired for goodness.

Parallel to the social plot runs the religious plot, delineating Cato’s struggles demonstrating that only few have the capacity for relevant belief and suffering. Cato’s story is also the story of demythologisation and iconoclasm that Henry sought. Brought up after his mother’s death by a rationalist atheist father, Cato sustains a blinding conversion to Christianity. His conversion to Catholic faith and subsequent priesthood did not arise out of spiritual anguish, misery, extremity or any pressing need for transcendent consolation. It was a headlong rush into a new life of self-sacrifice and strenuous devotion. Certainly he derives, at first, a great satisfaction and comfort from the
newly-embraced religion, though it alienates him from his family. For a
time he lives within ‘a perfect happiness’, exulting in the spiritual power
which the confessional affords him. He dallies in the role of eccentric
priest, habitually wearing a cassock and living in slum conditions among
the people he purports to believe he is serving. Yet, inspite of all this
paraphernalia of humility and service, Cato fails when any personal
sacrifice is required from him. Besides, he is intolerant of the
shortcomings of Gerald Dealman, his co-worker at the Mission. He does
not bother to answer Father Milsom’s letter and is unable to give up
smoking. Likewise, he is unable to abandon his love for Beautiful Joe.

Cato’s spiritual crisis is precipitated by a human love so intense
as to obliterate Christ or to make him dispensable. He falls disastrously in
love with a seventeen year old boy called Joe. Cato’s belief in God is
replaced by a dream of redemption and love for the Beautiful Joe, who
has taken to a delinquent life. He reflects:

Perhaps Beautiful Joe had been sent specially to tempt him. When had he begun to doubt God? At the time when Beautiful Joe came
into his life, was not the boy playing with him, coolly probing him,
reaching into his soul and confusing his thoughts.\textsuperscript{41}

The confusion, thus, takes better of his intellectual faith and he
loses God. Once he has lost God, Cato leaves his priesthood; it also
implies the loss of truth for him. Having set himself free from his
religious calling and discipline, Cato sets out on a dangerous path as

\textsuperscript{41} Iris Murdoch, Henry and Cato, London: Chatto and Windus, 1976, p. 47.
Christian faith holds infatuation as a deadly sin:

And he gazed into the darkness and the darkness was not dead but terribly alive, seething and boiling with life. And in the midst of it all he saw, smiling at him, the radiant face of Beautiful Joe. This is love, thought Cato, and it is not an illusion and I must be faithful to it and undergo it.42

Cato’s disillusionment about God and his falling in love with Joe are coterminous. In fact, Cato’s pride in his ability to reform Joe and make him happy leads him to substitute Christ with Joe: the face of the Redeemer becomes the face of Beautiful Joe. Elizabeth Dipple’s observation is quite apt when she says: Cato’s ambition and image of himself as a priest were indeed limited, and Brendon correctly points out to him, he had scarcely begun the endless journey the spiritual life involves. In the novel we see a Cato whose vanity and egotism centre on his near-homosexual relationship with Beautiful Joe. Even vain Henry is astounded by the egotism in Cato’s letter asking for money to support the two of them, and the reader tires of Cato’s endless litany acclaiming himself as the only means of Joe’s salvation.43

In fact, Cato fails to understand that his hold upon other people like Joe is mainly due to his status as a priest. The moment he stops behaving like a priest, Joe loses all respect and love for him. He cares for

Cato, only as a priest for priesthood signifies some meaning in Joe’s life, it represents a life of austerity, a stripped life. Cato’s abandon of priestly austerity leaves Joe completely distraught: ‘I cared for you once Father, but I cared for the other you, the one that wore a robe and had nothing not even an electric kettle... I used to think there were two things in the world, you and somehow what you stood for, and the hell where nothing matters but money. Now I think there’s only one thing in the world. The hell where nothing matters but money.\(^{44}\)

Murdoch seems to suggest through Joe how people look in awe at spiritual persons and expect redemption from these religious men. They refuse to accept help from them when they lose their faith in God. Cato’s desertion of faith in God and his inability to see Joe as his equal makes Joe kidnap him and even attempt to rape his sister, Colette. Joe clearly tells him, ‘you should not have chucked the priesthood, that was the end. You deserted me. You gave up trying to save me.’ The loss of priesthood degrades Cato. He writes letters to Henry for paying ransom and to Colette to come to Joe. No doubt, Cato is shown to become morally bankrupt. When the fact of his kidnapping becomes public, he starts feeling excessively guilty. His guilt of moral cowardice makes him avoid society and confine himself to a hell of loneliness.

Obviously, Cato turns out to be a tragic figure towards the end of the novel. He forsakes God for Joe who, in turn, not only rejects him but holds him captive. Cato is morally failed priest who mistakenly thinks

\(^{44}\) Iris Murdoch, Henry and Cato, p. 203.
that his obsessive guilt is repentance. He finally kills Joe in an act of
desperation which reveals to him a different facet of his character. His
real guilt is his vanity linked to self esteem. Henry and Cato presents
Murdoch's views on priesthood. Cato’s Catholic mentor Brendon
Craddock tells Cato: The priesthood is a marriage. People often start by
falling in love, and they go on for years without realising that love must
change into some other love which is so unlike it that it can hardly be
recognised as love at all.\footnote{Iris Murdoch, Henry and Cato, p. 347.}

In priesthood, there comes a time when the priest feels
frustrated with God and religion. But the real beauty and pleasure of
priesthood is revealed when the priest instead of leaving the vocation,
continues in it and then starts discovering new conceptions about God and
religion. Brendon is a foil to Cato: he is a real priest whereas Cato is a
provisional one because he has not lived through the period of frustration
and a change of views about God. On the other hand Brendon, the real
priest, understands, ‘Humility is what matters, humility is the key.’ Cato’s
attitude is based upon Not Christ but I whereas Brendon’s motto is, ‘Not I
but Christ’. For Cato, his personal interests are far above his religious
pursuits but Brendon considers his religious duties more important than
anything else.

Cato’s affair with Joe leaves him emotionally devastated and
morally ruined. Both Henry and Beautiful Joe long for his priestly
approbation, though the one has no faith at all and the other brought up as
a Catholic, lives without any real hope for the future and dies at the hands of Cato in an appaling mix-up which Cato alone could have averted.

The novel, thus, shows how the moral dialectic has resulted in a complete reversal of expected roles; the ‘bad’ Henry has come to terms with life and is integrating himself into a family community which shows mutual love and forbearance; the ‘good’ Cato has cut himself off from family, friends, Church and God and has committed murder. In contrast to Henry’s happiness, Cato is left in desolation at the end of the novel. The foregoing discussion is mainly focused on men. The women in Henry and Cato are markedly different in quality from the men. None is engaged in an ambitions intellectual or spiritual project or knows much about painting and art history. The American Bella, whom we know only by Henry’s report, is a college professor but not notably intellectual. Gerda, who lives daily with a seventeenth-century Flemish tapestry and a good collection of paintings and furniture, is evidently unversed in their provenance. Colette deliberately withdraws from her college because she eschews the intellectual life; Stephanie is wonderfully ignorant and totally vulgar. Yet the image of woman aggrandised as goddess and redeemer is one of the most powerful and interesting in the book.

It is evident from the discussion of the four novels in the preceding pages that humankind is innately evil. These novels, thus, make a striking move forward in the investigation of evil. Each of these novels ends in deaths that have their origin in the selfishness and self-seeking of one or more of the characters. The murders in The Black Prince and
Henry and Cato, particularly, are brought about by a chance series of events and are by no means deliberate or calculated, while the deaths in the two intervening novels are examples of ‘accidental’ nature of life.

Certainly Henry and Cato is a much denser, more complex work which is vitally concerned with the differences between religion and morality. Its most important thematic concerns are with the characters basic apprehensions of religion, especially Christianity. It also points to the similar thematic preoccupations which figure in the group of novels to be discussed in the next chapter.