Malcolm Bradbury: "Why does love matter to you so much?"

Iris Murdoch: Well, it's absolutely central to human beings. It is the most important thing about being a human, loving and being loved. I think it's the central problem.

Well, of course. Nothing could be more simply said. Nothing could possibly have so much truth in it. For love is the central problem. Loving people can take a lifetime: in more senses than one. And of course the fact that one wants to love and be loved in return rather complicates things. So also the fact that there are as many sorts of love as there are relationships though loving people without entanglements into relationships is what the good man ought to aspire for.

With the exception of the few good characters in Murdoch's novels, the love relationships of her characters are almost always erotic in nature; they are sometimes incestuous. Such relationships are, moreover,
to be found in plenty, scattered all over the whole body of her work. In fact, the prime pastime, even work of her characters seems to be an indulgence in love adventures. Examples, I presume, are unnecessary. Perhaps, this is the ground on which the hostile Murdoch critics stand and carp. Though few contemporary writers are less sexually explicit, it is certainly a distinctive feature of her work that there is much written about characters in love, about the act of falling in love itself, about personal relationships. But this has to be distinguished from promiscuity. Though changing partners is a regular feature of Iris Murdoch's novels, such changes are always accompanied by mental anguish and, as Adam Mars-Jones puts it, 'agonies of tenderness and remorse'. In an interview with him published in *The Times of India*, Iris Murdoch has said,

I am very, very hostile to promiscuity which as you rightly say, does not occur in my books. It's not a subject I'm interested in, and I don't see why I should deal with it.

Not promiscuity, but erotic love: the abiding theme of all literature everywhere, is examined again and again, in novel after novel from yet newer angles by Iris Murdoch. It is obvious that she perceives erotic
love as a large part of the moral quagmire, sucking its unresisting, unsuspecting victims into a bottomless pit. The shifting, changing partnerships are used more to explore the nature of the obsession, and are not dwelt upon in and for themselves. In other words, Murdoch's interest is more in the why of these interactions than in the detailed how.

The question that arises at this stage is: why something as beautiful and rejuvenating as love between two individuals tying them together with tenuous threads of attraction should be considered a moral problem. The answer seems to lie in the illusory and temporary nature of erotic love. The very mysteriousness of its nature, a mysteriousness that uplifts the soul, contains the seeds of falsification to which it is so easily prey. While one individual out of many is suddenly infused with mysterious significance, this same feeling, apparently radiating out to the other, is also feeding its own fat self. Erotic love, in short, breeds upon vanity and illusion. Heavenly from one point of view, it is also subject to the utmost degradation. Precisely because it is so beautiful and promises so much, it is very quickly and easily debased — hence its crucial importance in the moral life of humankind. Together with this arises its moral role in the social framework. What about social institutions like marriage? If romantic love is absolute and obeys its own mysterious
imperative, how can it respect institutions? But if it
does not, at what cost? There is no easy distinguishing
between the moral claims of romantic love inside the
institution of marriage and the moral claims of an
extra-marital love. Is erotic love made respectable,
given sanctity by the social institution of marriage?
If so, is the old-fashioned claim of the moral
uprightness of calm domesticity true? What,
incidentally, is the relationship between domesticity
and erotic love? Between sacred and profane love?
These, and many more are the questions in the light of
which Murdoch examines her own peopled world webbed by a
tangle of erotic relationships.

In the consideration of erotic love, note must
also be taken of the quasi-Freudian nature of Iris
Murdoch's perception of love. Because the source of
love is Eros, it is basically erotic in nature. It is
full of energy and capable of changing one's whole
world, but it is also at the same time, very 'attached'
and egotistical, and this understanding of the human
psyche is Freudian indeed:

... yet human love is too profoundly
possessive and also too 'mechanical,' to be a
place of vision'.

Freud traces all sublimated thought, feeling and
action to the restless libidinous id and ego. Human love stems from the dark energy of the Eros. It is mostly sexual in nature and is also 'mechanical' — in the sense that the psyche is a mechanical entity and to keep itself going feeds on illusions about love and the loved one.

Yet the difference between her perception of love and Freud's has to be stressed. Though she takes account of Freud, she does remark in a video interview done for Icelandic television that Freud was too much of a reductionist, that there are dimensions which are far beyond simplified explanations of the human driving force — the erotic energy. Freud reduces all to sex; Murdoch speaks of love. In the same interview in The Times of India which was referred to earlier she says:

Popular Freudianism has made people too suspicious of idealism, of the higher things that people really do want, the desire for virtue, which will, of course, take different forms at different times.... And what should concern us more than love? Primarily in some sexual sense, but also in the sense of one's work and one's ambitions, one's passions and what connects one with the natural world. That is love. That is the energy.... There is nothing strange in making that central.
Though arising from undirected latent sexual energy, love can be refined and honed away from illusion and fantasy. It then becomes akin to Goodness. As they stem from the same source, erotic love too has something of the attributes of refined love, though distinction has to be made between them for the former is love as an emotion, a feeling, and the latter is seen as a moral task. Since Iris Murdoch takes both into consideration, Peter Conradi rightly observes that she gives to sexual love and transformed sexual energy a central place in her thinking.

II

It has been noted that erotic love is a continuously recurring theme in all of Iris Murdoch's novels. This part of the chapter will highlight the different aspects of this theme in the novels where it finds dominant thrust. The novels under consideration are *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, *The Black Prince*, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, *Nuns and Soldiers*, *The Good Apprentice*, *The Book and the Brotherhood* and *The Message to the Planet*.

"Human beings are roughly constructed entities full of indeterminacies and vagueness and empty spaces. Driven along by
their private needs they latch blindly onto each other, then pull away, then clutch again. Their little sadisms and their little masochisms are surface phenomena. Anyone will do to play the roles. They never really see each other at all. There is no relationship ... which cannot easily be broken and there is none the breaking of which is a matter of any genuine seriousness. Human beings are essentially finders of substitutes." (FHD 233)

Thus says Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Though Iris Murdoch does not entirely endorse the cynicism behind the words, yet the game of substitution has a large part to play in her novels. Erotic substitution is rapid in the early work. In *The Severed Head* each of the three principal male characters falls in love with each of the three female characters. The frequency and rapidity with which partners are made and exchanged attains a quality of stylised art. The later novels have a more deliberate and leisured handling of Eros, making for a realistic and psychologically accurate depiction, the whole thing suffused in a moral ambience. *The Severed Head*, however, remains a paradigm for the temporariness and madness that characterises erotic love. *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* plays a variation on the theme by inducing these exchanges. The
novel, a riveting saga of a fairly honourable defeat of the good in the world, manages to make a many-patterned whole of the meaning of goodness, of power and evil and of erotic energy. Though what stays in the memory most are the unforgettable scenes where Tallis, the Christ figure, and Julius King, the satanic figure, meet, the host of characters who make up the main action of the novel are carefully developed. Rupert and Hilda are a perfectly matched couple, celebrating, when the novel opens, their twentieth wedding anniversary. Their only worry is their teenage son, a university drop-out, now living with Tallis Browne. Into the scene enters Morgan, (Hilda's sister, married to Tallis), who is recovering from a broken love affair with Julius King in America. Julius himself comes to England and the stage is set for action. There are also the endearing, homosexual pair of 'married' lovers, Simon, (Rupert's brother), and Axel.

The unstable Morgan, unsuccessfully getting over Julius, finds herself in renewed torments of unrequited love on seeing him again. Eager for any sort of contact, she takes on his wager that he can interfere in Simon's relationship with Axel. This is in the middle of a discourse by Julius on the vanity and the illusory nature of human love. Julius King, of whom more will be said in the chapter on Power, bored with what he terms Morgan's 'persecution' of him and trying to get her off
his back, decides as an after-thought to make her also the victim of his sinister designs. Rupert, the well-meaning though slightly full-of-himself husband of Hilda, is the second victim. In selecting Rupert, Julius is perhaps motivated by two things. One is the Forsters' seemingly impregnable marriage. The second is Rupert's own image of himself as a good man and his half-philosophical book on goodness which he has almost finished writing. Rupert's smugness irritates the sardonic Julius. He decides that Morgan and he make a pair and "sets them at each other" as it were.

The second part of the novel is devoted to the denouement of this cynical and almost satanic plan. Making use of letters (one set of which was written by Morgan to Julius in America, the second written by Rupert to Hilda—and purloined by Julius from Hilda's desk) which he posts to the unsuspecting Rupert and Morgan at regular intervals, Julius succeeds in making them fall in love. It may be explained that names and dates in the letters are crossed out so that a letter written by Morgan to Julius, for instance, when it is planted in Rupert's desk, is easily mistaken by Hilda for a letter from Morgan to Rupert. The language and contents of love-letters, remarks Julius to Tallis, are boringly the same. That love can be so induced is an astonishing eye-opener. More disturbing is the projection presented of the reality of erotic love.
What is it? Is it love at all? Or is it only vanity, illusion and lies? Do Rupert and Morgan really love each other or their own far more interesting (to themselves) selves? Julius King reports to Tallis later, "Mix up pity and vanity and novelty in an emotional person and you at once produce something very much like being in love". (FHD 406) Whether they love each other or not, Rupert and Morgan have certainly succeeded in changing the focus of their emotions and interest. Morgan is no longer interested in Julius. She is far too busy analysing Rupert's sudden interest in herself. When Julius knowingly visits her after she has received Rupert's first letter declaring his love (a letter originally written by Rupert to Hilda, and stolen and posted by Julius himself), she is short with him and longs for him to go away; this is so unlike the earlier scenes where she invents all sorts of excuses to visit him and talk to him. Rupert too is conscious of a sudden break in the easy communication he has had with Hilda for so many years. Hilda, confused and depressed over the lack of contact with her husband, is easy prey to Julius's half-insinuated remarks. She discovers a love-letter written by Morgan (planted by Julius) in Rupert's desk and leaves him to go off to their country cottage in Wales. Rupert is inconsolable; Morgan is determined not to lose Hilda. Julius gleefully reports his deeds to Tallis, but confesses that things have got
out of hand. But by the time Tallis tries to sort things out, Rupert is already drowned in the tiny swimming pool in the Forsters' garden.

"What about Hilda?" asks Tallis pertinently. Julius tells him that Hilda is a harder nut to crack since:

"... She (Hilda) is a very good-natured and kindly person who doesn't think too much about herself. She's not interested in herself, the way the others are. This is what makes her so restful to be with." (FHD 407)

But even Hilda cannot stop herself from making a rather dramatic exit to the country. Nor can she overcome a rather selfish instinct to be the first one to tell Rupert that the whole tangle was but a device and a trick. If a long-standing marriage based on affection and good sense and avowed love fails, what is to be said of love in general? Is it only vanity and self-interest? If erotic love can be induced, is it love at all or only a reassertion of the fat ego? A Fairly Honourable Defeat disturbs the reader with its relentless exposure of self-centredness masquerading as love, and it certainly raises a number of questions about the nature of love.
In *The Black Prince*, the next novel which focusses on erotic love as the dominant theme, Iris Murdoch examines the heightened self-awareness that the state of being in love induces, the delirium characteristic of falling in love. Rapture, so much a part of the early phase in erotic love, is searchingly probed by the author. This novel is also a superbly crafted detective story, a treatise on the nature of art and an astounding testimony to the appallingly natural devious working of the human mind. It is an astonishing piece of art and any critical analysis of the novel is bound to fall short of its merits. In the discussion here, I will limit myself to the theme of love presented in the novel.

Bradley Pearson is the male narrator of the novel, through whose tortured consciousness we are told the story. Bradley, a retired Inspector of Taxes, is a writer, a failed writer in the eyes of the world, but one who is waiting for the perfect moment to descend upon him when he can begin his book. A contrast is afforded by Arnold Baffin, Bradley Pearson's friend and a deplorably successful writer. The novel is full of reflections on the nature of literature both discussed in the course of the various incidents that take place, as well as implied. The novel opens with Bradley ready to make an escape to his country cottage to be by
himself and to write, when events overtake him. Characters arrive in quick succession: Francis Marloe, the failed psychiatrist and Bradley’s ex-brother-in-law, his divorced wife Christian from America, Rachel Baffin, Arnold’s lonely wife ready to fall in love with Bradley, Bradley’s unhappily married sister Priscilla, and finally, Arnold’s eighteen-year-old daughter Julian with whom the elderly fifty-eight-year-old Bradley unaccountably falls in love. When this surprising event takes place with something of the shock of an explosion in his life, Bradley realises ‘that the act of falling in love floods the being with immediate ecstasy’; awareness is heightened:

"... There was no hurry. Time had already become eternity. There was a huge warm globe of conscious being within which I moved with extreme slowness, or which perhaps I was ... Everything in the world was Julian." (BP, 207)

He realises that this is a condition of insanity. That anyone can be an object of such a love is an additional proof of the madness and temporariness that characterises erotic love. Julian reciprocates Bradley’s declaration of love. This may be explained as the vanity and illusion of adolescence working on her
side. Against parental opposition, Bardley whisks Julian off to the country cottage where he had planned to write his great book, leaving his half-crazed sister Priscilla in Francis's care.

The madness and outrageousness of erotic love are strikingly brought out in the dismaying spectacle of the love between Bradley and Julian. The irony of the situation is underscored when Bradley, on Priscilla's repeated wishes to have her things brought back from her husband, goes to her house and sees Roger (Priscilla's husband) arm in arm with a beautiful young woman, young enough to be Roger's daughter. The misery and sheer cruelty of Priscilla's situation strikes him even as some part of him is outraged at the sight of an elderly man fawning over a young girl. What now of his own situation?

Another dimension to the theme of the madness of erotic love gets underlined at this point. What is its relation to duty, to the claims of a moral undertaking? That Bradley is morally bound to look after his unhappy sister is the point no reader can fail to miss. The horror of Priscilla's position, more correctly the horror of being someone like Priscilla - is all too clearly brought out. It is also noted that Bradley successfully consummates his passion only after hearing the news of Priscilla's suicide. What is this? What is
Murdoch trying to say? That a person in the throes of Eros can so completely turn a blind eye to the sufferings of a close relative is a shocking testimony to the blindness and self-centredness of erotic love. If erotic love prevents the paying of attention to everything, does it mean it is a-moral or inimical to morality? It certainly leads its victim deeper into the quagmire of illusion and self-centredness.

Something has to be said about the title of the novel: The Black Prince. The cover design shows a detail from Hamlet. The whole novel has references and allusions to Hamlet interspersed throughout. Young Julian also dresses up as Hamlet while waiting for Bradley. Beyond this, there is no integral relation between the novel and Shakespeare’s play. Perhaps the title refers not so much to Hamlet as to erotic energy, the dark driving force, the black prince of the world, insidiously working on human weaknesses, triumphing over all sorts of human situations and psyches.

The claims of sexuality versus the claims of domesticity is the theme of the next novel after The Black Prince to deal prominently with human love: The Sacred and Profane Love Machine. The title of this novel is misleading, for what is the word ‘sacred’ doing here? It is not even suggested as something to be desired and yet hauntingly absent as the word ‘Good’ is
in *The Nice and the Good*. 'Sacred' does not really seem to serve a purpose here. If Emily personifies the profane love machine, can Harriet — the more genteel and housewifely of the two — be said to personify the sacred love machine? Surely not. For Harriet, with all the pent-up love in her heart, is seemingly one of Murdoch's 'good' characters, but falls short of the rigours of the required standards. This will be seen as the novel is discussed.

Blaise and Harriet Gavendar are apparently a happily married couple, with their teen-aged son, David, several dogs and a suburban house and garden. But Blaise, a self-appointed psychotherapist, has had, we are told as the novel unfolds, a secret affair of nine years standing with a girl called Emily McHugh and a son, Luca, by that relationship. He is bound to Emily by mysterious but indubitable ties of erotic love:

"... The dark forces had never been stronger or more clearly seen, but he was not their puppet. They rose into the bright air like a fountain and carried him skyward with them. He had never fretted after, never even dreamt of, a woman who could so complement his own strangeness. This was not just intense sexual bliss, it was absolute metaphysical justification." (SPLM, 72)
There is here a suggestion of some sexual perversion which only Emily can satisfy. Though the initial days of their love have passed in a haze of ecstasy, the birth of the unexpected Luca and the strain of conducting a secret liaison take a toll of their love. As compatibility changes to bitter quarrels, Blaise slowly turns towards his restful wife and the comforts of a calm, married life. His marriage now seems to him real and the other relationship a burden.

Things come to a head when Luca, a disturbed child, finds his way to his father's house. Blaise confesses to his wife who nobly rises to his pleas for understanding and love. As often happens, however, with Murdoch's would-be good characters, she mistakes her moral level. She wishes to encompass everyone: Blaise, David, Emily and Luca, in her love. She succeeds only in 'managing' the situation—to officialise Blaise's visits to Emily. She, moreover, yearns to possess Luca. Harriet's intentions are not entirely free of self-centred and possessive streaks, though at the level of action she does everything that is right and good. But she succeeds in eliciting the readers' sympathies. Harriet is perhaps the only character approaching the tragic in the Murdoch oeuvre. After a disastrous tea-party that she arranges, which ends in blows, Blaise sees his dark queen Emily in a renewed light. That
Proves the undoing of Harriet, for Blaise buys a new flat for himself and Emily and shifts there, promising to visit his wife now and then. Harriet moves to her neighbour's house; this neighbour, Montague Small is a detective story writer with a secret grief. Finding herself rejected by even Monty and Edgar Demarnay, the Greek scholar who had once proposed to her, Harriet flees to her brother in Germany taking Luca along with her. At the Hanover airport, she is killed by some terrorists even while she shields Luca's body with her own. The accidental death perhaps underlines the accidentalness of all human doings. Emily and Blaise are now freed of all shackles and the novel ends on a note of irony, with a pregnant Emily thrilled with the linen cupboard of her new house.

This disturbing novel raises many questions about Eros which are not easily answered. What is the legitimacy of domesticity as against the strong pull of a sexual imperative? Is there such a thing as moral duty in the erotic world? Is erotic love, shaped and moulded into a happy domesticity, the legitimate love? In such a case, should sexuality be curbed? Murdoch definitely recognises the strength and the presence of sexual energy in all human relationships. But she also seems to suggest the old fashioned view of the need to preserve a marriage, and more importantly, not to harm or hurt the people who are directly involved. Not for
nothing do we sympathise so acutely with Harriet. The test question seems to be: how would two good unselfish people behave if they fell in love with one another while being married to other people? But, on the whole, the few good characters of the Murdoch novels are remarkably a-sexual entities.

_Nuns and Soldiers_, the next novel to be studied here, is one of Murdoch's sunnier works. In fact, the whole novel seems soaked in a kind of bright sunshine. The French setting, which makes up part of the novel and which is the scene where the two lovers fall in love and are again reconciled after a bitter separation, lends its sun-blest holidaying atmosphere to the whole book.

The novel starts off grimly enough. Guy Openshaw lies dying of cancer. His wife Gertrude is grief-stricken, for their marriage has been a good one. There is a group of 'chorus characters' who are Guy's family—uncles and cousins and also friends. On the periphery of the group are two non-relatives: Tim Reede, an impecunious young painter, and the Count, a person of Polish origin (not really a Count), a great friend of Guy's secretly in love with Gertrude. Anne Cavidge, an ex-nun and former University friend of Gertrude's, arrives on the scene, having left her convent. Guy dies. Gertrude is in a frenzy of grief, but slowly recovers with Anne's help. Meanwhile Tim, having run
short of money comes to Gertrude for a loan, and she sends him to her cottage in the south of France as a caretaker. Gertrude, wishing to get over the heartrending business of confronting every fresh memory of her dead husband, herself goes over to the cottage in France. Tim and she meet in the solitude of a twilit evening in the French countryside, among the olive trees and the rocky hillside. After a morning's visit to the beautifully described and evoked rock: the Great Face—and the quiet, shimmering Pool in the hills, Tim and Gertrude fall in love. Surely, the rock and the pool are symbolic respectively of the stillness that is real love, and the not so pure erotic energy stemming from it:

Coming nearer Tim saw that the whole circular surface of a pallid creamy whiteness which contrasted with the surrounding rock, was gleaming with water which seemed to be somehow exuding from the round shallow pores with which it was lightly pitted. The water veiled the rock yet did not drip into the pool below. (NS, 153)

The pool itself is mysteriously alive:

... Gazing at the strange pool Tim saw, with a further thrill of surprise, that the whole
body of contained translucent water was very, very faintly, throughout its entire extent, shuddering or quivering but with so small a vibration that the transparency of the medium was unaffected, while being, as it were, shot through by swift, invisible almost motionless lines. Nor was the tension of the surface disturbed at all. The basin was evidently a source, but where exactly the water rose from and where it departed to Tim was unable to determine. None spilled over the side, nor was any streamlet visible nearby. The beautiful radiant pool simply quivered in perpetual occult donation and as perpetual renewal. (NS, 154)

Tim connects the 'Great Face' with his work, with his being an artist. It stays in his mind like a reality and he has love and reverence for it. The pool, on the other hand, frightens him with its magic. He apprehends it as dangerous and thinks that Gertrude and he were bewitched after she swam in it:

There had been as it were an announcement of truth, and he felt still a magnetic tension as of a persisting bond between himself and the rock. He could believe that the rock
existed now, ... His fear of the pool, for
he feared it, was different, sharper, a fear
of what was magical, dangerous. (NS, 271)

The rock and the pool are mysteriously hidden in
the hillside. They are secret, like the secret force,
the submerged drive of erotic energy. Tim derives
considerable artistic inspiration and feverish energy in
that sanctuary, where the two natural things simply
exist like erotic energy which is simply there. One may
usefully remember Freud's notion of art as the product
of sublimated sexual energy. Gertrude swims in the pool
— is she getting back into the magic circle of
attachment and need of the world after a very brief
spell (less than three months) when the death of her
husband had shut her off from everything worldly? For
it is the evening of the same day that she is able to
perceive Tim in a different light and begin to want him.
The rock and the pool — because of the mysterious way
they are evoked, and the fact that they provide an
almost continual point of reference in the novel (for
Tim at any rate) — seem to hint at a deeper significance.

Gertrude and Tim fall in love barely a few months
after Guy's death. It is a triumph of the imperative of
Eros over death, captured in the gaiety and innocence of the exquisite dancing scene in the garden in France:

Gertrude, as if she could hear the same silent music, came down the steps and joined the dance. Instinctively, hands on hips they danced with the zigzag snakelike motion of a hay. It was as if other dancers were present to whom, as they passed, they turned their backs until, in the middle of the meadow, solemnly, unsmilingly, they passed each other, reached the extremities of the space and came weaving back. Gertrude's small bare feet flashed among the blue flowers and it was toward her swift feet that Tim looked each time as he approached her. At last, the music ceased, the dance was done, they slowed down and in the centre of the meadow took hands and smiled. (NS, 190)

This is a startling 'happening'. Gertrude has, till this moment, been plunged into the most terrible grief after Guy's death. How can somebody so grief-stricken fall in love with another entirely different person?
And even as she is in love with Tim, some part of her is mourning for her husband's death. What exactly is Iris Murdoch saying about love here? That erotic love may shock, but it is still a fact of life? The whole concept of fidelity is being re-examined here. Guy, on his death bed quotes some lines from a Scottish ballad to his grieving wife:

Nobody knows that he lies there
but his hawk and his hound
and his lady fair.
His hound is to the hunting gone,
his hawk to fetch the wild fowl home,
his lady's ta'en another mate ...
Many a one for him makes moan,
but nune shall know where he is gone.
Over his bones when they are bare.
the wind shall blow forever more. (NS, 257)

He advises her to seek joy after his death and to seek it intelligently, though the reader infers that he must have had a fair amount of anguish even as he advises his wife so. Gertrude declares it to be impossible and yet only a few months later (not so much as three) she has
indeed taken another mate. What exactly is fidelity then? For Gertrude is wholly in love with two entirely different people, not only in rapid succession, but seemingly simultaneously, for even as she is blissfully in the arms of Tim, she acutely misses Guy. This theme is dealt with much more severely later in The Book and the Brotherhood and The Message to the Planet. Here, Murdoch is prepared to look gently at such 'selfish need'. One of the reasons for an absence of irony in her treatment of the erotic adventure in 'Nuns and Soldiers' is that Gertrude and Tim are free to love; their love will not harm anybody unlike the affairs in the last three novels where the principal participants have spouses or children who will be irreparably harmed. The erotic involvement in these later novels seems finally narcissistic.

Gertrude and Tim are survivors. They have what Dora in The Bell has: 'an instinct for happiness'. As surely as the black and white dog that survives the ordeal of the underground canal and is deposited in safe waters and on safer land. Tim too survives near-drowning in the canal and the bumps on his head and the knocks on his fortunes, and ends up in the arms of
Gertrude, now his welcoming wife. Unlike The Severed Head where the comedy seems black, or The Nice and the Good, where the author's irony ridicules Kate and her amorous adventures, here the irony playing over Tim and Gertrude is gentle and sometimes altogether absent. What redeems their hedonistic acts is perhaps the fact that they have fewer illusions or images of grandeur than other Murdoch characters caught in the throes of Eros. They are both shown to have some kind of moral struggle. Gertrude is strong, intelligent and warm though in the end seen to be selfish. Some of her former husband's penchant for accuracy has rubbed off on her. In fact, the redeeming factor in Gertrude is that she mourns for her husband's death even while in the arms of her second husband. There is a kind of honesty here which is admirable. Gertrude acknowledges that her relationship with Guy was true but so is the relationship with Tim now true. She takes account of both. The sort of shifting relationship that she has with the shadow of her dead husband also shows the ups and downs of her affair with Tim. By turns she feels her dead husband's shadow upon her, at times kind and understanding, at times accusing. This is no doubt the subjective working of her own mind. But it does show that Guy is still the standard by which she feels judged. As for the love that Tim and she bear for each
other, they are both sure that it is not a passing fancy. Both share similar emotions and, as if the mutual feeling is not enough, they are tested again and again by the frequent misunderstandings caused largely through social pressure, and the disapproval of Anne Cavidge, the ex-nun:

There was no doubt about the fact of her being in love with Tim, and Tim being in love with her. This was the real, the indubitable and authoritative Eros: that unmistakable seismic shock, that total concentration of everything into one necessary being, mysterious, uncanny, unique, one of the strangest phenomena in the world. This happening itself was something like a vow, and to this reality she was bound as to a new innocence. She was as if shriven. She loved Tim with passion, with tenderness, with laughter and tears, with all the accumulated intelligent forces of her being; though there were times when she was rational enough to ask herself, well, and what follows from that? (NS, 194)

But over Gertrude's relations with the Count, the author's eye does rove ironically. For Gertrude is
crafty enough to marry Tim and yet retain the Count as an admirer in her retinue. Anne, however, proves elusive. Happiness over having her own way with Tim, and with the Count, cuts Gertrude off from reality in some sense, for she now accuses the sacrificing Anne, of being ungenerous in going to America instead of staying in Gertrude's snug nest.

The characters in Nuns and Soldiers are, by and large, fairly high-minded and morally upright. The book has more would-be good characters than most novels of Murdoch: Guy, the Count, Anne, Daisy, the ubiquitous Manfred and Tim. Anne is of course considered a figure of good by most critics, but I have a few reservations which will be considered in the next chapter. Tim, by contrast, is apparently pretty feeble. But the reader’s perception of him slowly changes. Weak, not very truthful, sometimes thoughtlessly unscrupulous, he yet manages to see the world around him remarkably clearly:

... but he was idle and lacked confidence. He was almost but not quite aware that he chose daily to remain mediocre. His efforts tended to be either 'sketches' or 'spoilt'. Yet he kept on drawing, and in this activity something purely good, often mislaid, tended to come back. He knew nothing, he read nothing, but he kept on looking. Tim
possessed by nature a gift yearned for by sages, he was able simply to perceive. (NS, 124)

He also appreciates the value of things around: he is economical with his canvas, papers, paints. He creates art out of leaves. How beautifully described is the festival of leaves:

... These little works of art lay about in gardens, stuck to damp pavements, or were collected into little treasure-trove piles by leisurely men in squares and parks. Sometimes they hovered in the air like butterflies in front of Tim's dreamily outstretched hand. He collected them, at first picking up so many that he had to crush them by stuffing them into his pockets. He could not resist these masterpieces which were lying about free of charge. (NS, 400)

As with things, so with people. He perceives the worth of human beings. He sees the irascible Daisy as free of malice and full of spirit. He reveres Guy. He sees the strength of Gertrude and relies on that strength. He likes the Count for his shy ways. And as with his painting, so with his relationships with people: he
lacks the confidence so essential to maintain relationships. He is, in a nutshell, humble. A humble man, says Murdoch (and this has been noted earlier), stands more chance of becoming a good man (The Sovereignty of Good, 104), though it must be, in all fairness, admitted that Tim has enough reasons to be humble.

Elizabeth Dipple has an interesting analysis of Tim Reede in Work for the Spirit. Reading the 'Great Face' and the circular pool in the French landscape as aspects of the divine, she says that it works on Tim rather as Christ does on Anne, clarifying Tim's apprehension of external reality. She also connects this with the other noble, 'real' act of Tim: the clean break of relations between Daisy Barrett and himself, and the collages of leaves which follow later:

... This conjunction of rock and circular pool Tim labels the Great Face, and sees it as beyond nature, a numinous presence of undisputed external divinity, and a reminder of the divine in him. Its function parallels the work of Christ on Anne, and assists Murdoch in using Tim as a link between Christ and Nature.

And thus the erotic love relation between Gertrude and Tim is shown in a redeeming light. They are, as it
were, blessed by the author herself: they are blessed with happiness.

If Tim and Gertrude are tied by the strong bonds of sexual love and down-to-earth, everyday, ordinary cheerfulness of good meals and choosing wallpaper, the affair between the feckless Harry Cuno and the wooden Midge McCaskerville in The Good Apprentice never actually manages to focus into the real. A relationship fostered in secret, lies, illusion and falsity has little hope of being a robust and full-blooded thing. In Nuns and Soldiers erotic love seems to have its feet firmly planted on earth: the two lovers know how to go about the business of being happy. Erotic love in The Good Apprentice appears to create a haze of improbability and illusion. In fact it is not the novel's main theme at all. The main thread of the story is about goodness, an apprenticeship to the good, and also about 'the good apprentice'. It reflects too on the difference between true religion and magic: between the good man and the artist. The theme of erotic love is but a subsidiary thread, but it serves in knitting up the web of complicity and illusion caused by the corrupted Eros.

Midge, wife to Thomas McCaskerville and mother of their thirteen-year-old son, Meredith, is in the midst of a secret liaison with the famous dilettante Harry
Cuno. The novel shows them well into the middle of their affair. We are not told how it all began. We see them when they are already lovers and adept at arguing interminably about their situation. Iris Murdoch brilliantly shows (through their conversation), how 'machine-like' their relationship has become: their arguments run along well-oiled and frequently used grooves. The reader has an awareness of the automatic nature of the things said in their talk, that it is all empty rhetoric and self-protecting lies. They see themselves as King and Queen (terms they frequently use for each other):

They were there, Midge in her red and purple and Harry heroic in his wild shirt, a long spear of blond hair adorning his open chest, like a king and queen, glowing fateful and majestic in the intense rainy light of the room. (GA, 88)

The reality shows them up as poor hunted creatures doomed to a relationship of lies and secrecy. Midge sometimes senses the reality:

"...you spoke about a net that you lived in -- what I live in is lies -- wherever I reach
But most of the time they are content to wallow in illusions:

"That's a paltry reply, refusing so great, so perfect a happiness for fear of a scandal! Everyone does such things these days, there is no such thing as scandal. We must live with the truth of our emotions. A love like ours is self-justifying. Believe in it, give yourself to it. A love like ours is rare, it is a marvel upon earth." (GA, 91)

Midge and Harry fantasise. What they do not acknowledge to their deeper selves is the moral responsibility they carry — that of being true to the real world. The real world consists of Meredith and Thomas for Midge, and of Stuart and Edward for Harry. In *Nuns and Soldiers* the lovers were not bound by restrictions of children and marriage. When one contrasts the shifting nature of the interaction between Harry and Midge with the open one between Gertrude and Tim, it becomes clear that other people, the network or the web in which one is bound, matter enormously if happiness, let alone salvation, is to be gained. One is free to love if there is no one else to be hurt (as in
the case of the widowed Gertrude and unlike the case of married Midge). That seems to be Iris Murdoch's moral assumption, underlying these projections of love. It may also be noted that there is a progressive development from Nuns and Soldiers through The Good Apprentice to The Message to the Planet. Gertrude and Tim are free to love; Harry and Midge do it secretly and unhappily; David and Jean in The Book and the Brotherhood attempt to do it openly but almost at the risk of losing their sanity; Jack in The Message to the Planet openly attempts to keep both wife and mistress.

Here, in The Good Apprentice, though Harry Cuno is a widower, a twice-married man, Midge has a loving and, as yet unaware, husband and a child. Meredith their son also gets caught in the network of lies when, having discovered his mother with Harry in the bedroom, he has to witness his parent putting her finger to her mouth in a silent but daunting bid to make him an accomplice in the deception.

Harry is a typical social charmer, a reductionist, who refuses to look at the complexities of things, who is famous for nothing much in particular. Midge strikes the reader as a curiously wooden character - one does not know whether it is by intention or by omission. For all that the author tries to place her physically with a colourful description - Midge's many dresses, her love...
of flowers and their arrangement, her red-painted nails—she never comes across as being wholly real. She remains someone's figment of imagination. It is perhaps the unreality of her situation and her inability to break out of it that strengthens the impression.

It is left to Stuart (the 'good' character of the book of whom more will be said in a later chapter) to bring Midge out of the illusion and into reality. He is an unwilling witness to their affair, and riding back together in the car after the catastrophic denouement of their clandestine love, Midge wakes up to the falsity of her position and feels haunted by him. The conversation between her and Stuart after she comes knocking on his door, trying to get rid of him in her thoughts, shows the distance between the good and the false, the real and the fantastic and illusory. The following conversation between Midge and Stuart establishes the reality (the first speaker is Midge):

"Suppose I -- Oh never mind --
You set yourself up so. I think you should return to the real world."

"I think you should. I believe your romance with my father is some sort of dream. You can make it a reality by telling your husband. Then perhaps you can all see what to do next."
"You know nothing, you feel nothing. Falling in love is a renewal of life. You seem to have chosen death."

"I think you should renew your life by realising how much you love Thomas and Meredith." (GA, 330)

When Midge unconsciously realises the unreal nature of her love for Harry with the help of Stuart, her mind retaliates by fixing upon a substitute: Stuart, as it happens. When she confesses this to him he responds in a characteristic manner:

"Stop it," said Stuart, "you don't really believe or feel any of this, you don't even understand it, it's just emotional babbling — you're having a nervous crisis, you are suffering from shock, ... you are not yourself — go away and rest ..." (GA, 371)

It is finally left to Edward, prompted by Stuart, to visit Midge and sort things out to her and present the truth. This act of Edward makes two important things happen: Midge gets a foothold on reality after a long absence away from it, a period marked by systematic lying; and Edward himself manages to renew his own self in the act of helping Midge renew hers:
"... But this being in love is an illusion, in a sense it must be, it's a momentary flash. Stuart's external, it's all in you, Stuart is nothing, he is powerless, he is an unreal element; I mean he's just a happening, you've invented him. In the way you imagine it you're not really connected at all. (GA, 470)

The Eros operating in the love between Harry Cuno and Midge is the low eros, compounded of part passion, but mostly made of illusion and vanity. There is nothing much to redeem it -- a tangle of falsity perpetuated by two illusion-ridden minds, a mess that exerts the most unhealthy consequences on the people concerned.

In her exploration of erotic love, Iris Murdoch goes a step further in The Book and the Brotherhood to show the willful irrationality of its nature. The self-centredness associated with it in Nuns and Soldiers was seen in the light of a half-innocent animal satisfaction. In The Good Apprentice and The Book and the Brotherhood, as has been noted a little earlier, it acquires ugly proportions. It has illusions of power and grandeur associated with it; we have seen how Harry and Midge think of themselves as king and queen or as
gods. In *The Good Apprentice* such talk receives only a half-satirical, ironic treatment, for Harry is feckless and Midge cares enough to be frightened of the consequences of her illicit love. However, the two lovers in *The Book and the Brotherhood*, Jean and David Crimond, undergo a sardonic treatment at the hands of the author. Their sexual aberrations have a sense of evil. They stoop to none: their love is conducted openly and they are lords of everything. Jean leaves her husband twice for David Crimond and both times comes back to him after a stormy affair with her lover. Crimond too is arrogant: he takes away his friend's wife without any feelings whatsoever of guilt or remorse. He has only to snap his fingers for Jean to come running back to him and when she does not fulfil his expectations he drops her (twice) unceremoniously.

It can be seen that a stream of sexuality runs through all the relationships — except those with Jenkin Riderhood — in the book. The cover picture shows the Nataraja: Lord Shiva dancing the dance of destruction within tongues of flame. The book too depicts the macabre dance of sexuality, power, religion, terrorism, technology and human psychology: the whole boiling pot of the modern human situation. The tongues of flame are perhaps pointers to the sexual nature at the base of most human doings. The picture of the Shiva also explains the technical aspect of the book. Though
Murdoch specialises in innovative closures and endings, in what Deborah Johnson terms, "the tendency of her fictional worlds to explode or dissolve just before the novel ends", yet the whole narrative of The Book and the Brotherhood seems on first reading unwieldy. It is as if the author rather wearily sets about laboriously twining one aspect with another, only to find a third or a fourth left out. Suguna Ramanathan in her book Figures of Good has a satisfactory explanation:

... What strikes one about this novel is that its flow precludes a strong narrative line. The way events turn into other events and human relationships form and merge, emphasizes the lack of a focal point towards which the action moves. Even Crimond's completion of the book, the failed suicide attempt, and Jean's return to Duncan seem set for other and similar developments, are singularly lacking in finality, and imply that the sort of unity which narrative usually possesses has been deliberately set aside by the author because the concept of meaning and coherence in life has largely vanished from the Western world.
This line of thought is reinforced by reference to the cover picture. The 'tandava nritya'—the dance of destruction is a long merging of one movement with another, a whirl of different dance movements without a central pose of arrest.

This dance throws light on the Jean-Crimond dance at the Commemoration Ball in Oxford with which the novel begins. Here one could also relate the energy of Eros with the energy of the divine dance, that which brings the cosmos into being. The dance at the ball is only a sign of the endless 'dancing' between pairs that goes on, suggesting the ceaseless nature of the erotic drive underlying human behaviour. To come back to the events of the novel, Jean, Duncan's wife, has had, some years before, an affair with Crimond. Reconciled later with her husband, she has managed to live happily enough with him, though Duncan himself has a few unhealed mental wounds after the escapade. We are told this—the history—in retrospect. The novel opens with the words 'David Crimond'—much the same as *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* opens with the words 'Julius King'. We are first told that he has come to the ball. A little later we are told that Jean and he are dancing together before being taken ourselves to the little scene of erotic drama:
Jean Cambus had hitched most of her long red dress up over a belt round her waist, revealing her black-stockinged legs, and her flying skirt came little below her knees. Her narrow hawk-like face, usually as pale as ivory was flushed and dewy with sweat and her dark straight heavy shoulder-length hair, whirling about, had plastered some of its strands across her brow. Her fine Jewish head, usually so stately and so cold, had now, her dark eyes huge and staring, a fierce wild oriental look. She did not, in the weaving of the dance, turn her head, her small feet in low-heeled slippers seemed to dart upon the air, only when her gaze met her partner’s did her glaring eyes flame up, unsmiling. Her lips were parted, indeed her mouth was slightly open, not breathless but as if with a kind of rapacity. Crimond was not sweating. His face was, as usual in repose, pallid, expressionless, even stern... His light blue eyes did not follow his partner, nor did they, when he faced her, change their cold even grim expression. His thin lips, drawn inward, made of his mouth a straight hard line. With his conspicuously long thin nose he reminded Gerard, watching, of one of the tall Greek kouri in the
Acropolis museum, only without the mysterious smile. Crimond danced well, not with abandonment, but with a magisterial precision, his torso stiff, his shoulders held well back, as taut as a bow and yet as resilient and weightless as a leaping dog. (BB, 33)

"I am glad I saw this. He's like Shiva," murmurs Jenkin after the dance is done. Jenkin himself is shown dancing with Rose a little later and Rose thinks, 'Dancing with Jenkin was a simple and predictable matter since he danced in the same way whatever the music.' (BB, 39)

This is a direct contrast to Crimond. The drama and suppressed excitement associated with the Jean-Crimond dance is simply absent here and so is the feverish glamour. Quiet and simple, Jenkin moves in an entirely predictable and hence entirely harmless manner. There are no waves of power emanating from Jenkin. Jenkin is the culminating point in Murdoch's series of good figures.

The dance itself is done but the chain of destructive consequences follow all through the novel. Jean leaves her husband, Duncan, a second time and lives
in a strange, unreal relationship with Crimond, chockful of exhausting passion and a feverish, unhealthy intensity. Their contact with outside reality has snapped. They live, as it were, in the illusion of their minds. Their conversation too is (like that of Harry and Midge) extravagant, showing a delusion of power: "feeding on love like two gods". They sometimes sense that they are only 'playing at real life' (BB, 309). Once Crimond's book is finished and there is no more work to be done, the nightmare of self-destructive willing begins for the two lovers. Crimond is in despair and talks of death. Their sexuality seems converted into a despairing, exhausting intensity:

At night, sleepless, and preventing her from sleeping, he held her, without love-making, exceedingly close as if his whole body were feeding upon hers. Jean was exhausted, frightened, worn out by an intensity of love, his love, her love, which sometimes seemed something so final that she found herself thinking, somehow or other we are done for. How will it end? Their condition seemed to be crowding on toward some disaster. (BB, 351)

The disaster upon which their love wrecks itself is the mad suicide pact conceived by Crimond: a long straight
road and the crash of the two opposing cars. Jean goes through the detailed, logical and insane preparations as in a kind of nightmare. Her numbness dissolves only on the road, at the last minute, when she swerves her car to avoid colliding with Crimond's. Crimond's motive behind the arrangement of the suicide pact is dangerously logical: he wishes to avoid the destruction of his 'great love' for Jean in some small, unworthy way. He refuses, that is, to develop a prime failure of all Murdoch's power-obsessed figures. A development, or maturing would entail all sorts of entirely human muddles, and this, Crimond's will will not allow. He has seen an insanely romantic picture of glory, courage and eternal love in the joint suicide and when Jean fails to do her part, he walks away washing his hands off her, leaving her to salvage the situation as best she can.

Jean, of course, as she had the first time, goes back to Duncan. In fact, we see Duncan overtaken twice by similar events. It is Iris Murdoch's favourite mould: to show a character put through similar demeaning sets of events, not once, but twice. It occurs in The Bell, The Unicorn, A Word Child to mention some novels. This characteristic form needs some comment. I think, as a reader, one rather complacently assumes that people or characters in books learn from experience. It is perhaps Murdoch's endeavour to show how accidental we all are, how much determined by our sort of erotic
energy. Learning from experience, improvement of our minds in that sense may largely be a myth. It is perhaps to project this view that situations repeat themselves in her novels.

The main thing to be apprehended about Crimond is the demonic nature of his will. He is idealistic—a committed Marxist living by his cause. He is also ruthlessly assertive. He accuses Gerard and his set of feeling satisfied with 'false, soft morality' and refuses to have anything to do with it. He has the temerity to push Duncan down a flight of stairs in Duncan's own house after making love to his wife, and later to throw him bodily into the Cherwell after a publicly erotic display in a dance with Jean. Much after he and Jean have broken up, to carry out his aborted plan of self-destruction, he invites Duncan to a dreadful duel. He has arranged it so that only Duncan's pistol is loaded, which, though aimed at Crimond, leads to Jenkin's accidental death. Though Duncan pulls the trigger, the murder has been committed by Crimond. He is morally responsible, which he acknowledges by his grief and copious tears after Jenkin's death. The reader has earlier listened to an exchange between Jean and Crimond where he says, answering Jean's question, that perhaps he might cry when the world ends (BB, 310). Though Crimond is a committed idealist, he shows a lack of moral responsibility which is seen to be not
only selfish but even irrational. He is the popular hero: strong, powerful, idealistic, who makes choices and gets what he wants— the sort of hero popularised in the novels of Ayn Rand. Iris Murdoch shows how dangerous and harmful such a philosophy is.

In the most recent (one cannot say the last) novel, *The Message to the Planet*, illusions of power have disappeared from sexuality. What remains is selfishness of such extreme nature that it acquires irrational, childish proportions.

Jack Sheerwater, the painter, his wife Franca and his young mistress Alison form, what is called in the novel, a *ménage*. Their adventures, or rather misadventures, form the subplot of the novel. The main theme of *The Message to the Planet* is that of power in relation to powerlessness, to be considered in a later chapter. The sub-plot of erotic love has really no direct connection with the main plot. Jack and Franca are but idle onlookers of the Marcus Vallar and Ludens events which constitute much of the novel. At best the sub-plot offers a contrast of a material world as against a spiritual world; the problems of the flesh as against the problems of the spirit.

The problem of the flesh in the novel is easily summarised. Jack, a painter of some repute though less
genius, is the husband of the apparently stoical Franca. It is revealed that he has had relations, earlier with other women, with Franca's knowledge, and, as it were, her blessing. And now Alison, a tall, young healthy goddess has entered the scene. The Jack-Alison relationship is richer and promises to become permanent. Jack is loth to let either of his women go; he wants both worlds, the restful, comfortable, domestic scene with Franca and the festival of youth and sex with Alison. He, moreover, wants both his women under one roof. He is seen to be monstrously selfish:

"... It is lies which poison people's lives, lies and fear and muddle. Lying makes people demoralised and morally careless. You know that I have never lied to you about the situation and I never would ... what I want now is order all the way through, continuity and stability. You must want these things too. We are free people and how we deal with each other is our affair. You have accepted what some would call my infidelity because you love me and you know that my love for you will never cease. Our pact with each other is deep and eternal. Absolute love precludes jealousy. You know what I think about jealousy and why I have never felt it. If one embraces the whole world one is never
Murdoch pulls off a tour de force. The dialogue is almost Dickensian in its ironic exposure of hypocrisy and selfishness.

If Jack is out and out a selfish hedonist, Franca appears to be a foil for him with her habit of giving in to his wishes without a murmur of protest, in acquiescing to all his demands. She seems a paragon of selflessness. But in her case too, the self is seen to work deviously to obtain its own ends. It is true that she calmly accepts his sexual adventures. But she has silent images of smashing his head or driving a knife into his side even as she is talking to him. She is astonished by the violence of her feelings and her jealousy of Alison. She finds relief in contemplating various kinds of violent vengeance, also aware that the quiet, but inwardly seething, knowledge of her own hatred and anger against her husband, hidden under a smooth facade, is the most perfect revenge of its kind.
Franca's insidious selfishness raises two questions. The first implicates her husband: has she managed to make of him a lesser person by constantly giving into his desires, not wanting to go through routine quarrels, not wanting him to think less of her? The desire to please him, to want him to think well of her, has slowly turned into poisonous resentment. Her love is thus selfish both in origin and in its present form. The second question involves a larger framework: has Franca, like Harriet in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, aimed at more than what her moral level can withstand? Trying to be better than what one can probably achieve, going against one's moral level is always seen to have disastrous consequences in the moral world of Murdoch's novels: Michael Meade in The Bell, and Cato in Henry and Cato bear testimony. This second question also raises a much larger inquiry into the nature of moral improvement. Does Murdoch think it at all probable that the human soul, in its aspiration toward the good, can achieve some measure of goodness, or at least a lessening of self-interest? Can erotic energy be refined with conscious intention?

In Franca, Murdoch examines, in detail and with great accuracy, quiet resentful violence. Hilary Burde in A Word Child and George McAffrey in The Philosopher's Pupil are violent people. But in Franca, violence is contained and devious, and all the more frightening for...
not being expressed: she cannot break a cup even when she tries to do it.

Against such patience, Alison has to make an exit. Franca, who has made elaborate arrangements to go off to America and join her painter friend, Maisie Tether, is, at the last minute, informed of Alison's departure by Ludens. She gets her husband back. But the question remains: at what cost and against what guarantee? The futility of enmeshing oneself too deeply in the erotic quagmire as well as the near inevitability of erotic attraction are the twin projections which Murdoch seeks to make here in The Message to the Planet, and elsewhere, all over the body of her work.

This chapter has sought to discuss the different angles from which Iris Murdoch sheds light on the erotic love embodied in almost every human relationship in her novels. Since she sees this dark energy of Eros as the primary driving force behind every human activity, it is not surprising that the problem of erotic love should receive such emphasis in her work. It proves a well-nigh impossible task to study each erotic relationship — and perhaps it is not essential to do so, as long as the study tries to cover the different aspects of Iris Murdoch's understanding of the problem. This chapter has tried to highlight some of these.