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Iris Murdoch's Novels of Male Adultery: *The Sandcastle, An Unofficial Rose, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, The Message to the Planet.*

David Parker, in *Ethics Theory and the Novel*, discusses “the suggestive fact that some of the richest stories in European culture over the past 150 years or so, many of those most widely regarded as ‘canonical’, have been about adulterous and/or triangular relationships”. He goes on to point out that “in these novels it is the dilemma of a woman, always a woman of some sexual vitality, married to a figure D.H. Lawrence called a ‘social being’”.¹ This woman falls in love with a “man Lawrence called an ‘innocent’: he is in some sense at one both with his own darker nature and with ‘the great living continuum of the universe’”.² There are cases of this type of situation in Iris Murdoch’s novels, but her more interesting triangular plots explore from various angles the case of the male adulterer.

Of the four novels which deal with male adultery as a major theme, *The Sandcastle* fits Parker’s model of “social beings” and “innocents” – with a reversal of the sexes – but significant differences appear in the later novels, as sympathy is transferred from the erring male to the wronged wife, and implied criticism of the husband’s egotism increases.

The Sandcastle is Murdoch’s third published novel, and is a departure in style and setting from *Under the Net* and *The Flight from the Enchanter*. The central romance which is the focus of the novel has drawn dismissive remarks about its “women’s magazine theme”.³ But as Murdoch says, romantic love is “a great subject for a novel ... because it’s the central drama in the lives of most

¹ Parker, 71.

² Ibid., 72.

people”;⁴ and in 1961, she said that in writing *The Sandcastle*, “my aim was simply to write a love story”.⁵ Given Murdoch’s belief, expressed throughout her non-fiction writings, in the power of and necessity for love, and its intimate connection with morality and spiritual freedom, it is natural that she would choose to concentrate on a situation like this, in which different kinds of love are explored. As she told William Rose in 1968, “love is my main subject”.⁶

The Sandcastle was published in 1957. In 1956 Murdoch published a paper entitled “Vision and Choice in Morality”. She writes of

positive and radical ... moral attitudes which emphasise the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals “taped,” the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique.⁷

These attitudes are proposed in opposition to a “universal rule” of morality. Elsewhere, she makes explicit links between this type of moral attitude and the aim of the artist, and she sees the novel as “the form of art most concerned with the existence of other persons”.⁸ One would therefore expect that these qualities of receptiveness to others would be an indication of some measure of moral worth. *The Sandcastle*’s central character, Mor, for all his weaknesses, has this kind of openness to others: it is this that makes him vulnerable to the emotions which get him into trouble. The language the narrator uses in describing Mor’s thoughts – words like “attend”, “apprehend”, “mystery” – often echoes that of

³ Dipple, 16.

⁴ Bellamy, 54.

⁵ Barrows, 498.

⁶ Rose, 25.

⁷ Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” 87.

⁸ Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,” 278.

her philosophical essays, and so do the ideas: as he anticipates his second meeting with Rain Carter, with whom he later falls in love, Mor thinks, “Nothing is more educational, in the end, than the mode of being of other people”.⁹ And his unpleasant wife, Nan, is a representative of the opposite opinion. “Nan hated eccentricity, which she invariably regarded as affectation. She did not, it seemed to Mor, care to conceive that other people might be profoundly different from herself”.¹⁰

A.S. Byatt complains that this novel, in a sense, falls between two stools: in another book, what he might build [that is, a life with Rain] could have had less flimsy power from the beginning, and this could have made the whole less of a foregone conclusion; in another book again the foregone conclusion might have had more real compelling necessity and less consolation about it.¹¹

The life he might have built with Rain is indeed difficult to envisage, but it cannot be described as a consolation that the defeated Mor returns to the victorious Nan, who, despite the access of self-knowledge and interest in her husband which has resulted from the threat to her marriage, still engineers the destruction of his future with Rain in an underhand way: Mor feels that “his whole previous life contained him like a strait-jacket”.¹² The dilemma is presented strongly enough that the novel could be read as a criticism of Mor’s cowardice in not grasping his chance of happiness and fulfillment, while the consequences, had he done so, are not ignored: “there would be a new life and a new world. But that which he was about to break would never mend, and he

⁹ Murdoch, *The Sandcastle*, 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, 68.

¹² Murdoch, *Sandcastle*, 295.

now knew he would never cease to feel the pain of it”.¹³

In an interview in 1978, Murdoch said, “An author’s relation to his characters reveals a great deal about his moral attitude”.¹⁴ In *The Sandcastle*, the third-person narrator stands in a clearly sympathetic relation with Mor, which is not to say, of course, that approval of all his actions is implied. It is significant that Murdoch chose to write this novel principally from his point of view, rather than that of Nan, or Rain, or one of the children. She has commented that

it would have been a far better novel if I had spent more imaginative time detaching Nan from the story and not letting her just play the part of this rather tiresome wife but making her somebody with quite extraordinary ideas of her own, playing some quite different game perhaps, having some dream life of her own which is quite different from that of the other characters.¹⁵

It certainly would be a different novel if Nan excited the reader’s empathy to a greater degree. The mistake Murdoch makes is a tactical one. By the time we are exposed to any sympathetic treatment of her, we have been enlisted on the side of her husband and his would-be lover, and the demoralizing effect on Mor of her casual domination within the marriage has been well established. Her final ploy, which could have been regarded by a sympathetic reader as the justifiable act of a woman desperately afraid of losing the husband she loves, only confirms the earlier bad impression. It is also significant that Mor does not sleep with Rain before they are discovered by Nan. This allows him to accrue even more of the reader’s “moral sympathy” to outweigh any indignation felt on Nan’s behalf. Of the other characters, the reader’s sympathy is most actively

¹³ Ibid., 278.

¹⁴ Magee, 26-7.

evoked by their daughter, Felicity. The narrative closes, significantly, with her tears of relief at the reunion of her family, and for her sake we are glad that her father has not abandoned the family. The only clear moral thrust tends towards ambiguity, or perhaps the Hegelian idea that Murdoch discusses (without endorsing) in “The Sublime and the Good”: “the experience of tragedy ... is the envisaging of a conflict between two incompatible goods. Not a conflict between good and evil but between two goods, which are seen to be such because they incarnate different real social forces with real claims in society.”¹⁶

The Sandcastle is not a major work, and it is not one of Murdoch’s best, but it is far from a failure. It has a richness of texture in its early chapters which provides an almost sensual pleasure, and the second half of the novel is absorbing and exciting. In her 1956 essay, she wrote:

Certain parables or stories undoubtedly owe their power to the fact that they incarnate a moral truth which is paradoxical, infinitely suggestive and open to continual reinterpretation. ... Such stories provide, precisely through their concreteness and consequent ambiguity, sources of moral inspiration which highly specific rules could not give.¹⁷

Perhaps this novel was written with this aim, and if it falls short of “moral inspiration”, it at least entertains and provides plenty of “concreteness and consequent ambiguity.”

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“None of her novels,” writes Lorna Sage in “The Pursuit of Imperfection,”
“dwells exhaustively on its subjects, or on its own language. The imaginative

¹⁵ Bigsby, 116.

¹⁶ Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Good,” 213.

¹⁷ Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” 91.

curiosity that is always left over feeds into a new book.”¹⁸ Thus, *An Unofficial Rose* (1962) could be regarded as a reworking of the love triangle in *The Sandcastle*. It is, of course, much more than that, but the lyrical opening, with the elderly Hugh Peronett thinking back regretfully from his wife’s graveside to the love affair which he abandoned many years before in favour of his conventional marriage, puts one in mind of Mor as he might be twenty-five years after his affair with Rain. Hugh is certainly not an older version of Mor, and the other characters are clearly quite distinguished from those in the earlier novel, but there are suggestive parallels.

In Murdoch’s exploration of some of her recurrent themes, such as the mythologizing of an enchanter figure by other characters in a novel, the plots and characters are not always given enough grounding in psychological realism to be convincing and distinctive. However, in the case of the adultery theme, her novelistic imagination has worked well to give the situations she is exploring realistic settings and emotional justification, and too schematic an analysis of the parallels between these four novels might do her less than justice and play down the important ways in which she has re-imagined new possibilities. Thus, both Mor’s beloved and Hugh’s ex-mistress are artists, but one is a young *ingenue* and a painter, and the other is a highly intelligent ironist and writer of detective stories; each novel has its “demon child”, but Felicity is confused and pathetic, trying to use magic rites to influence events, while Hugh’s granddaughter Miranda is clever and manipulative and wields more than her share of influence by force of personality and cunning.

Compared to *An Unofficial Rose*, the plot of *The Sandcastle* is simplicity

¹⁸ Sage, 119.

itself. One interesting aspect of the later book is that, unlike those in many of her more dramatic novels, where people implausibly fall suddenly and often disastrously in love, few of the attachments between characters are new – nearly all have been formed or forming for years, and this adds to its naturalism.

One way in which this novel improves on *The Sandcastle* is in its more balanced view of the central marriage, and its more circumspect and intricate analysis of the dynamics of the relations between husband and wife. The demoralizing effect of Randall's behaviour on Ann is well conveyed:

The particular quality of her long battle with Randall had seemed progressively to empty the certainties by which she lived, as if the real world were being quietly taken away, grain by grain, and stored in some place of which she had no knowledge. This did not make her doubt the certainties. There would be for her no sudden switch of the light which would show a different scene. But there was a dreariness, a hollowness. She could not inhabit what she ought to be.¹⁹

Murdoch has named the struggle between Ann and Randall as an example of the conflict she often dramatizes between the artist (Randall) and the religious figure (Ann). Discussing the qualities that can make a “good character” interesting, she admitted the possibility of a “demonic” or eccentric aspect of these characters overriding their “good qualities”. “I think Ann ... is a good character without being demonic, but then, of course, it may be that she's not interesting enough. There is always this problem.”²⁰ Ann's refusal of happiness and lack of self-assertion does give her a dullness that many readers would find not only unattractive but also irritating. Ann rejects Felix partly from a sense of

¹⁹ Murdoch, *An Unofficial Rose*, 119.

²⁰ Bellamy, 136.

wifely duty:

Looking back on her last interview with Felix, Ann felt that it had simply been a muddle. Yet deep in the muddle there was, there must have been, some decisive form. What had most struck her, before seeing him, as essential had been her image of Randall returning, Randall searching for her, Randall crying for her, and not finding her. She had been, at this, overwhelmed by a tide of pity and compassion for Randall, a tide she could only in the end say of love for Randall. This feeling, which was in its way blinding and suffocating, seemed to make it impossible for her to say yes to Felix;²¹

and yet “she had not meant the words as Felix had taken them”, and “if he had only seized her when he came in, if he had kissed her ... she felt she must have submitted.”²² She does not believe that Randall will come back, and even believes that her moral duty is perhaps to set him free, but she

had never really had the conception of doing what she wanted. The idea of doing what she ought, early and deeply implanted in her soul, and sedulously ever since cultivated, had by now almost removed from her the possibility ... of a pure self-regarding movement of will. ... She was prepared, moreover ... to see in her absence of straightforward operative desires something corrupting, something deadening.²³

Murdoch’s narrator asserts, though, that Ann is wrong to accuse herself, and that she is calling “her good an evil”. The reader is explicitly warned not to make the same mistake.

Randall has a fantasy, lying in bed with Lindsay, in which he “picture[s]

²¹ Ibid., 304.

²² Ibid., 305.

himself based on Ann and the roses and having as many other women as he pleased without troubling.”²⁴ This particular form of male egotism is worked through in two later novels. Blaise in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974) runs two households for many years, until he is forced to tell his wife about his other family. Here for the first time the question of the wife’s complicity in her husband’s adultery arises, to be more fully explored in *The Message to the Planet* (1989).

There is only the faintest suggestion, contradicted by the narrator, in *An Unofficial Rose* that Ann’s nature – her “dreadful lack of vigour, ... [her] lack of any hard surface to grasp or to brace oneself against”²⁵ – might have partly caused Randall’s bad behaviour. Harriet, the wife in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, is also innocent in every way of her husband’s love affair with Emily – unknowing, and guiltless. When she is finally confronted with the truth, however, her instinct is to try to control the situation by taking over and giving Blaise “permission” to allocate time and money to her rival. The existence of Luca, Blaise and Emily’s son, seems to make it all the more essential to behave fairly. This situation, however, is not sustainable. It relies on too many evasions of the truth. “It was psychologically necessary to Harriet to feel that she had played a good, even an absurdly good, part. But she was aware enough to know that the sheer awfulness of the situation had an impetus of its own which was beyond her will and beyond the will of others too.”²⁶ She can only sustain her “absurd goodness” by believing Blaise’s transparently insincere denial of his continuing love for Emily. She likens his predicament to a physical disability:

²³ Ibid., 266.

²⁴ Ibid., 292.

²⁵ Ibid., 266.

²⁶ Murdoch, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, 213-4.

Harriet's marriage vows had indeed prepared her to travail for her husband, and she had always been ready to. Was she to repine that the ordeal, when it came, was such an odd one? If Blaise had become blind would she not have read to him, condemned to a wheelchair, would she not have pushed it?²⁷

That there is a significant qualitative difference between these situations and the existence of a mistress during half of their marriage is another fact Harriet tries to suppress.

The narrative of this novel has the most even balance of focalization between the three main characters of any of those under consideration. All are fully dramatized in their attempts to deal with the invidious situation, their rationalizations and evasions of the truth; and all are treated with some degree of sympathy, although it is undercut by varying levels of irony. The narrative voice keeps its distance even from Harriet, who is the most sympathetically portrayed of the three.

It is, of course, Blaise's moral dilemma which is at the core of the plot. His hand is forced by the appearance of Luca, Emily's son from their relationship, in the garden of his marital home, and he decides he must now tell Harriet about Emily before she finds out in some other way. Typically, then, it is not a brave decisive move but a desperate attempt to salvage the situation and keep it under some sort of control. His mental gymnastics are recounted at some length. He is absolutely divided between the two women, and he is of course honest with neither of them.

Men in other ages and societies had been able to have two, or many

²⁷ Ibid., 192.

more, women whom they kept incarcerated in separate places and visited when they felt in the mood. An elderly less-loved wife could be retained as an amiable companion, or simply out of pity, and should feel no resentment at that. A man, any man, surely needed various women, there were so many possibilities and styles of love and affection and habit. Why should some of them automatically exclude the others? He led a double life. Did that make him a liar? He did not feel a liar. He was a man of two truths, since both these lives were valuable and true.²⁸

The egotism of this train of thought, and its sexism, are plain. Blaise exalts his selfish desires into a rational system of belief. He and Emily share a physical bond which the narrator refers to as “peculiarity” or “strangeness,” presumably some form of sado-masochism, and this justifies them at the beginning: “sin was an awful private happiness blotting out all else; only it was not sin, it was glory, it was his good, his very own, manifested at last.”²⁹ Expressed like this, his love for Emily acquires an almost spiritual status. When he is living with her in their new flat, having left Harriet, he feels at first that their “intense mutual erotic love, love which involves with the flesh all the most refined sexual being of the spirit, which reveals and perhaps even *ex nihilo* creates spirit as sex”,³⁰ creates its own justification. This passage calls into question the natural assumption that the sacred love of the title is Harriet, and the profane Emily. In his affair with Emily, it has been a matter of reproach that Blaise has settled for second-best in his marriage, while Emily has “remained true to her deep thing”.³¹ His materially secure and rather mundane relationship with Harriet could then be

²⁸ Ibid., 80.

²⁹ Ibid., 72.

³⁰ Ibid., 261.

³¹ Ibid., 72.

seen as a type of profanity. However, there are two moral systems operating here (calling to mind Parker's idea of the conflict of the Romantic and the Judeo-Christian ideals) and it is explicitly stated elsewhere that Blaise has felt "that Harriet was his sacred love and Emily his profane".³² What is clear is that Blaise feels justified in his double life, and has not the moral strength and imagination to act rightly at first and conduct himself creditably later on. The narrator makes it clear that the cage inside which he finds himself is "made of long wrong-doing",³³ and although he believes his sin to be a good, it is still a sin.

Harriet is killed fortuitously by an indiscriminating terrorist, and this gives Emily an unexpected and complete victory over her. We see her happiness with her new status as Blaise's wife, as she and Blaise work "silently, surreptitiously, feverishly, like people trying to conceal a crime, to erase all traces of Harriet's existence",³⁴ but Murdoch balances this by sixteen-year-old David's terrible grief at his mother's death and his alienation from his father, as well as eight-year-old Luca's retreat into silence after the shock of witnessing Harriet's violent death.

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The Message to the Planet is a large book and contains two fairly loosely linked plots. The primary narrative concerns a young historian, Ludens, and his frantic attempts to wrest the meaning of life from the tiresomely enigmatic sage Marcus Vallar – one of Murdoch's enchanter figures who exert an implausible influence on other characters. The secondary plot concerns a more humanly involving and realistic triangular situation between the egotistical painter Jack Sheerwater, his

³² Ibid., 342.

³³ Ibid., 216.

wife Franca, and his young girlfriend Alison.

In this case, the focus has shifted entirely to the wife. Her point of view is the only one of the three which is dramatized, and her dilemma is explored in depth, so that it becomes irrelevant within the moral scheme what Jack or Alison decide to do, even though they are *prima facie* the guilty parties.

The new element in this triangle is that Franca has known about Jack's infidelities and has forgiven him, condoning his affairs so as to keep the peace with him. If it is part of the moral framework of *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* that Blaise's deceit is a major cause of the tragedy, this novel re-examines this idea by exploring the "open marriage" where deceit is explicitly excluded (which does not mean that it is not implicitly present). Jack affects to believe that "the bad thing about adultery was the lying, that was the poison",³⁵ and proceeds to have affairs whenever he pleases, keeping Franca informed and always declaring that she is his permanent, eternal love. She feels at first that she must accept this: "It did not occur to her that she might be pitied, she did not think of herself as a wronged or defeated woman. Her love connived at what she now took to be inevitable."³⁶ On this basis their marriage continues for some years. At the point where the novel begins, however, Jack is conducting an affair with the 24-year-old Alison, and he decides to offer her a permanent relationship. Franca is to remain his wife, and to continue living in the matrimonial home with them as a kind of dowager wife. She has long trained herself to hide her feelings: "Of course she uttered no reproaches and learnt to conceal her unhappiness, to conceal it even from herself."³⁷ The breathtaking

³⁴ Ibid., 339.

³⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Message to the Planet* (London: Penguin, 1990), 26.

³⁶ Ibid., 26.

³⁷ Ibid., 26.

solipsism of Jack's assumption that she will be content with this new arrangement is made possible by her continued concealment of her feelings from him, but she finds it increasingly difficult to conceal them from herself. Behind her calm exterior she seethes, entertaining fantasies of murder and worse.

At one time, even lately, she had thought that she could bear it, turning it all into pure love. She had imprisoned her anger and hate in a part of her mind, as something unworthy which could be overcome. Jack had said, and said again and again, that all would be well provided no one told lies. But now she herself, her mind and her heart, was composed entirely of lies, the anger and the hate were everywhere, and worse, the calculation, the conspiracy, the dreams of revenge.³⁸

Even when she breaks down and confesses her real feelings to Ludens, he does not believe she means it: "You've simply got to *live* this, *be* kind and good, be what you're really like, be patient." Her reaction is to wonder if he is right, "Can one simply, in the name of truth or good, carrying it like a banner, deny the existence of such a fierce awful tumult?"³⁹ As Gerda Charles says, in *The Message to the Planet* the "*menage a trois* ... [is] handled with such a superb understanding of the psychology of humiliation and anguish as to make one gasp."⁴⁰

Shortly after this conversation with Ludens, she tells her new friend, the American painter Maisie Tether, about her situation, and finds someone who echoes her thoughts, even though she denies them herself: "So you collude in a situation which demeans you, and exposes him as a rotter. ... I find this

³⁸ Ibid., 171-2.

³⁹ Ibid., 234.

disgusting, I pity you.”⁴¹ Franca, although she argues with Maisie, looks back at these remarks and finds them “invigorating”.⁴² Maisie thus plays a similar role to that of Edgar in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, but where Edgar’s truth gives Harriet only momentary strength which propels her on an ill-fated journey to seek her brother’s protection, Franca is fortified by Maisie to the point of deciding to abandon Jack. She is just about to leave for America to join Maisie, having left a letter telling Jack of her decision, when she discovers, before Jack knows, that Alison has left him as well. She has the choice, through chance, of intercepting Alison’s parting letter to Jack, or her own. Franca decides to destroy her own letter and return to him. Thus her love for and loyalty to Jack overrides her pride:

I can't fight, not against *him*, whatever pains there be, for I do love him eternally. As for the future, there might be bitter tears, but she felt that whatever the suffering she had fought the battle of it already. She had fought rightly, and been perfectly defeated, and that was right too.⁴³

Jack is not to suffer for his behaviour, and for once I believe Murdoch has weighted the scales against romantic love and in favour of independence and pride. There is disappointment built into this “happy ending”.

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Asked in an interview whether she considered herself a feminist, Murdoch replied,

Yes, certainly I’m a feminist. That is, I think that women, even in advanced civilized societies, are not free, and one’s got to fight, the

⁴⁰ Charles.

⁴¹ Murdoch, *Message to the Planet*, 250.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 253.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 539.

problem is really one of tactics. ... I'm not a feminist of the separatist kind, I mean someone who wants women to gather together and to write women's books, and develop ideas about female intelligence or sensibility or intuition or anything of that sort. I think that the liberation of women is a matter of women coming out of the ghetto, not inventing a new, jollier, ghetto, but coming right out and being everywhere.⁴⁴

But although she does not write as a "woman's author", it seems that in the case of this particular theme, her sympathies have undergone a change over the years. After *The Sandcastle*, with its sympathetic male (would-be) adulterer and unsympathetic wife, she has, in this procession of novels, shifted her authorial approval from the husbands to the wives, in keeping with her self-criticism about Nan's limitations as a character. She has said that she is "not interested in women's problems as such" and that "one's just a human being",⁴⁵ and that "the ordinary human condition still seems to belong more to a man than to a woman",⁴⁶ so she usually prefers to write about men; but the problems her male adulterers face are generally typical of their sex in her fictional world. They struggle to reconcile their imagined need for more than one woman with the reluctance of their women to share (and note Blaise's jealousy when he suspects either of his women of having an interest in another man). They want, in short, to have it all with impunity. Unfaithful wives like Midge in *The Good Apprentice* and Jean in *The Book and the Brotherhood* naturally face conflicts of loyalties as well, but they do not imagine that they can continue both relationships indefinitely the way Blaise and Jack do, or expect their spouses to wait for them indefinitely as Randall does. In each of these husbands, the

⁴⁴ Bookmark, 5-6.

⁴⁵ Bellamy, 133.

conflict between the two strands of morality, the Judaeo-Christian-Kantian and the Romantic-Enlightenment-Nietzschean,⁴⁷ is dramatized. Mor is tugged both ways, and Randall feels the pull of the Romantic morality more than the social: he is fascinated by the idea that Lindsay and Emma obey a moral code quite different from what he is familiar with. He says to Lindsay, “*Your* morality is not [depressing] ... It invigorates, it inspires, it gives life.”⁴⁸ Jack, it seems, believes he can honour both strands, but ends up happily finding that passion and duty can in the end be reconciled. Blaise practically embodies both, and the resultant split in his loyalties is fatal – if it had not killed Harriet, something or someone else would have been destroyed – and he finds when his profane love Emily becomes his wife, their relationship subtly changes: “The fact of being *married* to Emily came to him with a kind of shock of innocence and blankness, like a very white light, and while it made him feel deeply tender towards her it seemed to diminish their old vertiginous feeling of a unique kinship.”⁴⁹ In a way, these men resemble a bad novelist, whose “drive to resolve all conflicts” causes their work to become “schematic, shallow, sentimental, evasive, insistent, or non-explanatory”.⁵⁰ Their lives exhibit some of these qualities – Randall’s shallowness, Blaise’s evasiveness, and Jack’s sentimentality all spring to mind.

It is interesting to consider where the “goodness” of the wives in the later three novels resides, given Murdoch’s philosophical stance. Len McCall asked her about the effect of gender differences on the “capacity for ‘goodness’”, and she replied that although “it is difficult to generalize”, women are not involved

⁴⁶ Biles, 61.

⁴⁷ Parker, 37.

⁴⁸ Murdoch, *Unofficial Rose*, 124.

⁴⁹ Murdoch, *Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, 342.

in warfare, “and in that sense one might say that their area is less likely to be sinful. ... Women, in particular in relationship to children, have certain obvious and recognizable duties. This is a situation again where goodness is being ‘forced upon them’. This might be where one might want to say something to do with the female nature as opposed to the male nature.”⁵¹ Unfortunately she did not elaborate on what that “something” might be, leaving us to extrapolate from the novels.

Ann is good in Murdoch’s classic way. She has schooled herself in good behaviour as Murdoch recommends in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*:

The whole of morality involves the discipline of desire which leads to instinctive good action. This slow discipline, this gradual shift of inclination, is less visible, and indeed less interesting, than the dramatic head-on encounters between duty and interest, or duty and passion, which can be so effectively displayed and explored in literature.⁵²

But in what way does her acceptance of Randall’s behaviour – or at least her failure to reject him – differ from Harriet and Franca’s condoning of evil? All three are traditional good wives – faithful home-makers, unambitious for themselves, supportive of their husbands’ work, quiet and undramatic. But in Franca, the “discipline of desire” has cost too much, and it is obvious that her “good behaviour” is a facade behind which bitter and revengeful feelings are barely concealed, and that although she smiles over the thought that she “might be in danger of actually becoming as saintly as I seem”,⁵³ she is on a more reliable path to a good life by following Maisie Tether’s advice and refusing to

⁵⁰ Parker, 57.

⁵¹ McCall.

⁵² Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 384.

⁵³ Murdoch, *Message to the Planet*, 155.

martyr herself. Harriet's attempts to be good, like Franca's, are partly to do with maintaining a favorable self-image, but the shock to her long habit of trusting and loving Blaise leaves her without any refuge such as that Franca has in Maisie, and her violent death almost seems the only viable solution to her problems as well as those of Blaise and Emily: her dreadful misery is, at least, at an end. Having created an ideal figure of good in Ann, Murdoch in the two later novels subjects this ideal to increasing stress to see how it will break.

In a review of *The Message to the Planet*, Paul Duguid wrote that Murdoch's novels "collectively resemble an artist's insistent attempt to keep reworking a subject until the right picture emerges".⁵⁴ In these four novels, we can see her mind at work on the theme of male adultery, if not seeking a "right" picture, at least considering the implications, in each case, of a similar situation altered in one or two important ways. The "facts" change – which of the characters knows about the adulterous relationship, what they believe about it, whether or not there are children involved – but also, just as importantly, the point of view alters. The particularities of all these situations are, as I have said, vital to an understanding of their moral structure. But the particularities themselves have been given their arrangement by an author who is herself a moral agent, and Eagleton notes that "it impoverishes the literary to see it as all particularity, just as it travesties the political to see it as all abstraction".⁵⁵ Thus Murdoch made the decision to tell Mor's side of the story in *The Sandcastle*, and then to give equal time to Randall and Ann in *An Unofficial Rose*, to include Emily as well as the married couple in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, and finally to focus only on Franca in *The Message to the Planet*. It is tempting

⁵⁴ Duguid.

⁵⁵ Eagleton, 27.

to read into this progression an increasing sympathy with feminism: Johnson observes that “in general, the opening out of the plot-structures brings with it a liberation of the female characters”.⁵⁶ However, there is a parallel with these adultery plots in *A Fairly Honorable Defeat*, where Tallis, the wronged husband, becomes the figure of good, trapped in his dreary life, passively waiting for his circumstances to change, while Morgan is an egotist who believes she is free, and indeed has a freedom of movement traditionally available only to men. Caution is advisable before making generalizations about trends based on a small selection of examples.

The morality of these novels is complex. It is important, as Murdoch insists in her moral philosophy, to try to live well and unselfishly, but the “slow discipline of desire”⁵⁷ is easier to describe than to enact. Another review of *The Message to the Planet*, by Anatole Broyard, quotes her as having said “that good art is philosophy swimming, or philosophy drowning”. He goes on, “it may be too that fiction is her revenge on philosophy”.⁵⁸ It is the place where she tests her philosophical ideas and, often, implicitly finds them wanting; but it also provides the field for a struggle between her philosophy of fiction and her novelistic instincts in which the casualty has been, increasingly over her career, the very illusion of realism which is her highest aim. However, in these novels, the adultery theme has provided scope for her exploration of ethical questions without the intrusion of the bizarre. Sexual passion and jealousy cause enough eccentric behaviour to create narrative tension without the need to invent the kind of wild and improbable situations and odd characters that have often

⁵⁶ Johnson, 70.

⁵⁷ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 384.

⁵⁸ Broyard.

characterized her later novels.

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