



What Plato and Murdoch Think About Love

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Received: 10-07- 2012

Accepted: 25-07- 2012

Published: 31-07- 2012

doi:10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.3p.58

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.3p.58>

Abstract

There are many interpretations of love and lots of scholars write and talk on love; however, what exactly is the meaning of love? Iris Murdoch's works are an accumulation of emotional relationships and feelings of love. Her great subject is love, both sexual and non-sexual, and her characters are the portrayal of a small group of people caught up in convoluted ties of love and hate, with Eros ruling over them (Cohen 22). Murdoch was one of the most respected British writers and philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century and, of course, the postwar period. In Murdoch's novels, love is one of the central themes—marriage, as the institution of love, more often binds than frees. Her characters are mainly ego-centric people who struggle to love and are often overwhelmed by the factor of self-obsession, jealousy, ambition, fascination with suffering and charismatic power. They are absolutely ordinary people with a consuming demand for love, and mental and physical exile. Murdoch was inspired by Plato's ideas in many ways. Like art, here again Plato's idea of love is more skeptical than Murdoch's, whereas Murdoch kept it only as a way to the Good, creation, and happiness. Murdoch and Plato saw love more as a Freudian concept, the Eros, the word that comes from the name of the first Greek god of love. Both the philosophers, Plato and Murdoch, believed that this erotic longing and desires revived by Eros can led to a new direction, a way toward virtue and truth. Her protagonist or marginalized characters are usually tackling it with either vulgarity or the heavenly, which results in creation, art or salvation. Murdoch, as a major moral philosopher, usually grasps the chances to encapsulate her moral visions in her works, and created novels that should be counted as meditations on human love and goodness.

Keywords: Eros, erotic love and real artwork, moral philosopher, *The Black Prince*

Introduction

Among other ingredients, literary works are undoubtedly based on emotions, feelings, and experiences. In the same vein, Murdoch's works are an accumulation of emotional relationships and feelings of love that are regularly presented in her stories. Her great subject is love, both sexual and non-sexual, and her characters are the portrayal of a small group of people caught up in convoluted ties of love and hate, with Eros ruling over them (Cohen 22).

Iris Murdoch was one of the most respected British writers of the second half of the twentieth century and, of course, the postwar period. She was a novelist and philosopher who had audiences both in the academic circle and the lay readership. She was sentimental, sympathetic, and always ready to discuss any subject. Like all writers, she had a novelist's curiosity about new people and places (Meyers 2). She was one of those writers who was strikingly involved with the theme of love by "using multiple genres" (Tierney 3), and usually involved the profound closeness amongst people, their emotions, and devotions even their private erotic or religious love.

Murdoch herself had many love stories in her personal life with men and also women, including Michael Foot, Asa Briggs, David Hicks, Elias Canetti, Tom Balogh, and of course, John Bayley. Few critics have focused on her love affairs. One is Peter Conradi who "is good on her older lovers who generally ended up hurting her" (Cohen 22). Murdoch married Baley, who was six years younger, which was not extraordinary for Murdoch as she had such affairs with younger fellows. She also had many love affairs during her married life. One was with twenty-four year old David Morgan, her student at Cambridge, when she was forty-four. Allegedly, she was experiencing, and somewhat in need of, both kinds of love—erotic and platonic. Conradi wrote, "she was to make of the relations of Eros and intelligence a whole philosophy" (Cohen 22).



Discussion

In Murdoch's novels, love is one of the central themes—marriage, as an institution of love, more often binds than frees. Murdoch simply calls it a cage from which lovers struggle to escape. But marriage can be even more. It can be a machine of mutual hatred. Murdoch stresses so much on love and art because she believed they are energy systems addressed to the outside. For her, art is the vision of love. As such, she adopts platonic terminology and concepts of love in order to get a better and real manifestation of them for the readers. That is the aim and main object of every artist in the art world like Murdoch.

Murdoch also experienced lost loves in her stories, as Thompson states, “she lost two lovers to death and was jilted by a third” (40). Needless to say, these affairs launched Murdoch's writing career and makes readers question whether Murdoch's fictional world and fictitious characters are really similar to her life and, subsequently, ours. Is that how people really are, living as tortuous and wrenching lives as those of these characters? Is that the truth of people's love, emotions, and souls? Murdoch's characters are mainly ego-centric people who struggle to love and are often overwhelmed by the factors of self-obsession, jealousy, ambition, fascination with suffering and charismatic power. They are fastened on the commonplace ups and downs, crises and compensations of life and infidelities, family problems, suicides, disease and death that took their toll. There is human loss that is irretrievable and there are human problems that are inherently insoluble, and then there is no consolation. They are absolutely ordinary people with a consuming demand for love, and mental and physical exile.

Murdoch was inspired by Plato's ideas in many ways. Love is another subject Murdoch deciphered as platonic. Like art, here again Plato's idea on love is more skeptical than Murdoch's, whereas Murdoch kept it only as a way to the Good, creation and happiness. There are many interpretations of love and lots of scholars write and talk on love, however what is exactly the meaning of love? Plato argued, “Love is energy. The soul is a huge vast place, and lots of it is dark, and it's full of energy and power, and this can be bad, but it can be good, and that's the work, to change bad into good” (Hooks 196). Murdoch and Plato saw love more as a Freudian concept, the Eros—the word that comes from the name of the first Greek god of love. Eros is considered the most ego centric, focusing on care of self. It is conceived as sensual love or bodily sex drive. It “perennially and ubiquitously causes irrational behavior; the reason why beautiful Helen took up with handsome Paris, leaving family, child, and husband, and the reason why Murdoch's Pearson, although not tongue-tied by Eros, fell to his knees, kissing the rug upon which his young angel had recently stood” (Soble 106).

Both the philosophers, Plato and Murdoch, believed that this erotic longing and desires revived by Eros can lead to a new direction, a way toward virtue and truth. Sulaiman, in his paper centering on the Platonic meaning of love, referred to Plato's dialogues, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

Phaedrus presents an explanation of being in love in accordance with the origin of love: there was chaos and then the first god, Eros—the first-light, was born. Eros (lust, love and sex) organizes everything in the universe according to his own nature. Phaedrus' notion of love suggests a conqueror of chaos, and that love is something good and honorable. If there were no love among human beings, we would live in a state of chaos. Harmony is insured by love among people which naturally lead to procreation. (79)

Socrates, using a beautiful simile, explained the creation and reincarnation of the soul. He drew an abstract picture of the soul like a charioteer with a pair of winged horses to show how the soul moves. The horses are in two black and white colors. The white is a noble breed, obedient and looking for beauty, wisdom and goodness, and the black is ignoble, dishonorable and disobeys the charioteer's whip, seeking for earthly and physical pleasure. The white horse is considered as a pilot for the soul; it can only love beauty and goodness. The black one, Plato believed as a flattering love and being in love for mortal pleasures. As such, the white horse can suffer the consequences of the black horse by making the soul descend and forcing it to live in a lower level (Sulaiman 78).

For Plato, the lovers, whose vision of the good is dim, respond obtusely to Eros and their sexual arousal. It gives them pleasure to seek only the physical gratification of procreation or of superficial sexual release focusing on the surface of the bodily form and failing to reach the divine beauty within (Nussbaum 693). But in those who remain closer to the other world, the sight of sexual love pierces deeper, catching glimpses of the soul's beauty



in the form and features of the body. For such people, sexual arousal is a seismic upheaval of the entire soul, whose terrifying disruption of habitual order brings with it a turning toward the good (Nussbaum 693).

Plato divided Eros into two kinds: crude or vulgar, and heavenly and spiritual (Soble 106). Murdoch's positive attention to Eros is heavier. It seems Murdoch was attracted by the second group. She mainly emphasized the white horse in her novels, and followed the theme of love mingling the role of art to create a new concept of creation, and pilgrimage to the Good. She entwined some Greek myth like flayed Marsyas to underscore this salvation. Although the force of black horse should not be ignored, Murdoch attempts to depict white love through her character's lives. However, considering how her characters were enmeshed with erotic love (or in Platonic terms, the black horse's desires), the results show the white horse is somehow the winner as her style is comic realism.

The same as Plato and the simile of two winged horses, Murdoch saw love a kind of temptation which can lead in two different directions. The first can lead toward the Good, create anew or transcend ideal thought; similarly an inspiration and a sort of wing to fly. For her, it is an erotic love that can be inclined toward a creation and making art; "a different kind of love from the ordinary messiness of passionate relationship which becomes enmeshed in the mechanism of the possessive ego" (Slaymaker 170). However the second one can be employed as a temptation to cause evil, and accordingly, bedevilment followed by demolishing love and lover by virtue of morality loss. Murdoch's fictional style is a pictures of the conflicts of these two forces. In the *Symposium*, Socrates' mentor, Diotima, described Plato's official view of love, which is the same as what Murdoch applied:

[Love] is a great spirit that is between mortal and immortal; it is neither beautiful nor good, but it desires good and beautiful things as its object. The origin of love comes about from the union between a god and a mortal, and human beings desire immortality which can be attained through love [...] love gives birth in beauty, and this can occur in two ways: though the soul and body. The former is the most efficient mean for acquiring immortality: love desires beautiful and good things and is attracted to beautiful bodies. The latter involves giving birth. Through reproduction, a mortal strives for immortality. (Sulaiman 80)

Considering human beings as a fallen nature, both Plato and Murdoch looked at love as a vehicle that could be used to flow upward to salvation and toward the Good. To Murdoch's watchful eyes, human beings can hardly face inner evil and cope with earthly desires. However, she saw this combat as a holy pilgrimage toward goodness. She wrote in her philosophical essay, *The Sovereignty of Good*, "Love is [...] the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good. It is a reflection of the warmth and the light of the sun" (Hooks 209). Murdoch, in her novels, frequently confronted the characters with human frailty in their journey of love, either resulting in their moral shortcomings or rather salvation in the shape of creation. For her, excessive attention to desire is bestial and degrading the power of love because desire belongs to humans: not qua rational being but qua animal (Soble 107). In *An Unofficial Rose* and *The Unicorn*, love loses the awakening power toward Good; Jake renouncing Anna but being prepared to return to Sadie because her un-endearing otherness is evidence of genuineness of contact. The prospective union of Jake with Sadie is Murdoch's norm of human intercourse. However, in *The Sea The Sea*, *A fairy honorable Defeat*, *The Sacred Profane Love Machine*, and *Italian Girl* love is just an erotic longing for power and control. Charles Arrowby, Morgan, Basil and Otto are kind of self-deceptive and love-obsessed people. They are egocentric characters for whom love is a means to obtain more power, or otherwise, pleasure, at times. "It is frequently suggested, both in Murdoch's philosophical works and in her novels that sexual desire and the bodily component in love are sins in the Dantean sense. That is, sources of egoistic self-delusion and self-immersion that persistently come between us and the reality of those we love" (Nussbaum 698). Murdoch wrote the lovers as blind, crippling, paralyzing, and ludicrous. She sketched forbidden love as Shakespeare's and delineated its nature with a clear eye what she had experienced in her private life too.

However, in *The Black Prince*, the most insightful of Murdoch's novels on love (Nussbaum 689), the erotic longing of Bradley Pearson (in his sixties) toward Julian Baffin (forty years junior) caused creation of art. That is a kind of erotic love in which the body's response to the sight of a beautiful body linked in mysterious ways to a deeper yearning for both the soul and the vision of the good (Nussbaum 693-4). This is exactly what Bradley Pearson thought—"love brings with it also a vision of selflessness" (216-17). Murdoch saw love a tool headed



for morality and goodness and for her redirection of erotic energy away from the self toward realities; it is the central activity of the moral life (Tierney 3).

Conclusion

Murdoch's philosophy of love has a central activity in moral life. Feelings of love linger in Murdoch's characters' lives. Her protagonist, or marginalized characters, are usually tackling it with either vulgarity or the heavenly that results in creation, art, or salvation. Murdoch tried to pursue and show the experiences of the lovers, the way they make contact with beautiful beloveds and keep company with them. She tries to conceive and give birth to what they have been carrying inside. Gradually she nourishes their souls and by doing this she gives a picture of how the lovers nurture their relationships without satisfying their carnal desires. Bradley Pearson, a retired writer and a self-centered narrator in *The Black Prince* (as mentioned above), was moved by the sexual love he felt toward Julian Baffin. That made him start to search for new and real goodness—the reality of the world. His erotic love prepared him to make art, *real* art. Here, Murdoch is at her best to make a fine relationship between an erotic love and artwork when she directed her novel from a love story to an art story. This supposes to be the climax of the novel. “And although there may be Platonism and Platonic vision in this love (or art) story, it is Bradley the artist who very artfully constructs his story as a Platonic story (Nussbaum 704). Creating Bradley Pearson and depicting his love affairs with tragicomic results, Murdoch demonstrates a challenge for the readers toward a better inclination of moral significance in literary works (Nussbaum 691). Similar to Plato's *Phadrus*, erotic love in this character (besides envy and self destruction) creates art. Nussbaum elucidates, “erotic love gives Bradley wings of joy, a sense of the blotting out of self, a turning away from customary fears” (702).

Murdoch believes that erotic love is a motivation. It can open the eyes of an artist to a new world and to the truth. It can be the greatest source of inspiration that many people keep in their egos. At the same time, she “grants that erotic love has a potential for violence and extreme selfishness” (Nussbaum 700), which appears through Bradley in this novel. Murdoch, as a major moral philosopher, usually grasped the chances to encapsulate her moral visions in her works, and created novels that should be counted as meditations on human love and goodness.

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