

## 8. INCESTUOUS RELATIONSHIPS

Murdoch's interest in what is usually rather euphemistically referred to as Freudian themes is indisputable and apparent in almost each one of her novels. She has expressed great admiration for Freud's thought, nevertheless she is at variance with his theories in two essential aspects, besides others. The first concerns the ego and the will and here her argument is similar to that against Sartre's existentialism. The second, on the other hand, parallels her arguments against Plato in his attitude to art and artists. Murdoch's generally sceptical stance regarding psychoanalysis results from the former.

The myth of Oedipus or Freud's interpretation of it in the omnipresent Oedipus complex and its wider implications are not the only focus of Murdoch's attention. Often it is incest between siblings, or relationships which through family ties acquire incestuous overtones. If we look at what Freud has to say about incest, there is little Murdoch can disagree with.

Incest was already one of the taboos in primitive societies, in what Freud calls the animistic system of thought. Reasoning on why it was necessary to forbid incest by making it taboo, he argues that 'the experiences of psychoanalysis make the assumption of an innate aversion to incestuous relations altogether impossible. They have taught, on the contrary, that the first sexual impulses of the young are regularly of an incestuous nature ...'<sup>1</sup> He however goes on to say that 'we do not know the origin of incest dread and do not even know how to guess at it. None of the solutions of the riddle thus far advanced seems satisfactory to us.'<sup>2</sup> It is the unanswered questions of the phenomena of incestuous relationships as well as the labyrinthine nature of the human subconscious with regard to sex that Murdoch tries to deal with.

In her early novels the theme is hinted at where twins fall in love or have sexual relations with one and the same person. *A Severed Head* is the first novel where incest is handled openly with more or less scandalised reaction on the part of some critics. In full agreement with Freud the incest dread is still palpable both outside the book as critical reactions have proved and inside it as shown by the author. When Martin Lynch-Gibbon finds Honor Klein in bed with her half-brother his shock is profound despite his attempt to reassure Palmer, who knows better.

"Please," I said, "in one way at least don't misconstrue me. I don't disapprove of incest. I don't think that you're committing any sin by embracing your sister."

"You are being frivolous as usual," said Palmer. "You don't disapprove of it. You feel total horror of it. You are trembling with horror at this very minute."<sup>3</sup>

Murdoch uses strong words to express the intensity of Martin's revulsion. He believes that this 'monstrous knowledge' would be too much for Antonia, that for Honor 'this dark love could not but be something of colossal dimensions' and himself feels 'cursed for life, like men who have slept with temple prostitutes and, visited by a goddess, cannot touch a woman after.'<sup>4</sup> Murdoch does not stop here at Martin's predictable reaction but probes further into the unpredictable, complex labyrinth of the human psyche. The horror of the revelation not only does not destroy Honor's attraction for him but on the contrary increases it. It does change the relationship between Martin and Palmer, but only as any kind of emotional muddle that would take Palmer down from his pedestal of the omniscient psychoanalyst. In fact psychoanalysis and what it can do for individuals or their relationships comes out as a parody, particularly when Antonia leaves Martin to live with Palmer, their friend and analyst, and together with him wants to discuss Martin's infidelity and 'help him'.

"You misunderstand us, Martin," said Palmer. "There is no question of a court-martial. Who are we to be your judges? On the contrary, we should like to help you. But you must realise two things: first, that we both love you very much, and second, that you have deceived us on a matter of very great importance."<sup>5</sup>

Such tightly knit relationships with all feelings in the 'open', endlessly discussed and analysed, are a parody in themselves. The participants, far from gaining control over their ego and id become more muddled and irrational and often do the opposite of what they have resolved. The effect is enhanced by the all too frequent exchanging of partners. Mistrust of psychoanalysts and the power they can gain over their patients is voiced several times. Martin, despite his friendship with Palmer, refers to them as 'that fashionable kind of modern magician'<sup>6</sup> and Georgie does not 'trust these professional liberators. Anyone who is good at setting people free is also good at enslaving them.'<sup>7</sup>

The following explanation which Martin intended to send to Honor after his physical assault on her makes the Oedipal nightmare complete. 'A more profound and plausible explanation may however be found in the particular role which Palmer and Antonia have played towards me, and with which I have so readily cooperated. I mean of course the role of parents. It was I fear, not by chance that I married a woman considerably older than myself; and when that woman turned her affections toward a yet older man, to whom I was already related in a quasi-filial manner, the stage was set for my regression to the situation of a child.'<sup>8</sup> The psychological insight is shown to have little impact on the actions of the characters and their new attachments. The brother-sister incest remains a mystery undiscussed and unclarified, but already passed over like so many puzzling things in life.

Oedipal interpretation has also been suggested of Miranda's love for her father and Felix Meecham in *An Unofficial Rose*. But then most childhood and early teenage loves could be traced to Freud's Oedipus complex no doubt. Miranda's

affection for her father is neither passionate nor obsessive in spite of her capricious and intense nature. She even puts on a brave face for the farewell scene and thoughtfully if poignantly brings her father his childhood toys to make his departure from home complete. Nothing suggests her being in love with her father. Her long childhood love for Felix Meecham lost its innocence when she became aware of his interest in her mother. The ensuing conflict is then intensified by the presence of Miranda's slightly older cousin Penn, who falls in love with her and pursues her.

Miranda is not portrayed as a likeable child at the best of times, her only positive features being her cleverness and the halo of flaming red hair. But the hateful violence with which she deals with both of her love relationships is staggering. When the child Miranda manipulates her unsuspecting mother into rejecting Felix and destroys her own collection of photographs and mementos of him, this is where Murdoch probes deep into the dark Freudian cave of passions where we do not know ourselves. Nevertheless, in conclusion Murdoch neutralises the dark Freudian image of human nature by Ann's reaction when she finds the remains of Miranda's carnage. 'So Miranda had loved Felix. Why had she not seen it? But she could not have seen what she could not have conceived of. And yet why was it so inconceivable? Miranda had loved him and had, Ann could now work it out in detail, acted accordingly. Ann felt no resentment; she felt infinitely sorry for her daughter and in a strange way impressed. And she blamed herself for being insensitive and blind.'<sup>9</sup>

*The Italian Girl*, *The Red and the Green* and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* have one aspect in common, namely they are all concerned with uncle-niece or aunt-nephew relationships as extensions of the Oedipal conflict.

Amidst the sexual adventures of all the members of *The Italian Girl*, Edmund's momentous desire for his niece Flora looks innocent and harmless. But the saintly and chaste Edmund, who wanted to stay away from the curious muddle of his brother's family, is perturbed. He shrinks with horror from his incestuous impulse and feels some truth in the mocking words of David Levkin: 'You are a buffoon just like your brother, but you don't even know it! He at least, he knows that he is a perfectly ludicrous animal!'<sup>10</sup>

There is no such innocence in Millie Kinnard, who seduces her nephews without compunction. In *The Red and the Green* the attitudes towards sex are in stark contrast to all the other books, which are set in the permissive decades since the war. Murdoch describes sex in the early twentieth century as somehow more significant and as more clandestine, also more brutal. For both Pat and Andrew, both still virgins, sex with Millie is to be therapeutic. In Andrew's case to cure his broken heart after France's refusal, in Pat's a release from the disappointment of the failed rising. Pat despises Millie for offering herself – his aunt – to him and wants to degrade himself by having her to punish himself for being attracted to her. Millie, unlike any of the female characters in Murdoch's contemporary novels, uses

her body like a courtesan to gain power, never even stopping at incest or blackmail. The fact of incest at least of this kind means little to her and the young men in question are not horrified at it either. Murdoch as elsewhere reserves her judgement.

In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* Peter's attraction to his maternal Aunt Morgan may be regarded as an expression of the Oedipal complex. Peter in his late teens, having recently dropped out from Cambridge, unable to communicate with his father, transfers his love for his mother, which he now finds embarrassing, onto her sister. Morgan's motives are less easy to divine, because she is the one to have given impetus to this entanglement. She did not really intend to seduce Peter so she cannot be accused of incest, only of reckless frivolity and self-delusion where men are concerned. Morgan wants it to be innocent love, not the kind of machine that absorbed her in the other cases. 'She thought, *this* is happiness, *this*. I'd forgotten what it felt like. Happiness is free innocent love.'<sup>11</sup>

Peter's infatuation with Morgan is common knowledge and even his mother takes it calmly as something natural. 'I think poor Peter has really fallen a bit in love with his Aunt Morgan. But it's just calf love and I know Morgan will deal with it sensibly.'<sup>12</sup> Only common sense is not something that can be relied on as Julius muses when the curtain has fallen on the tragedy that he helped to set under way. 'Human beings set each other off so. Put three emotional fairly clever people in a fix and instead of trying quietly to communicate with each other they'll dream up a piece of communal violence.'<sup>13</sup>

Violence, evil and dark gods are the rather appropriate setting for Carel's incest with his daughter Elisabeth (*The Time of the Angels*). Muriel had already suspected her father's growing insanity when she discovered the crime through a crack in the wall of the dark little linen room so symbolic of the secret dark compartments of the mind. She is paralysed with horror and the silence that covers it. 'No new communication came to lessen or make bearable the shock which she had received. She remained shocked, like someone who holds a live electric wire and cannot let go.'<sup>14</sup>

Sex plays the most important part in the power that Carel wields over their servant Pattie and is now also part of the spell that Elisabeth seems to be under. Theirs are probably the weirdest and most frightening sexual relationships Murdoch has conceived of. The ancient incest dread comes with the force of a thunderbolt and smashes everything to pieces. Carel's incestuous relationship with Elisabeth is what Pattie's slavish love and loyalty stops at. 'In all her imagination of what she might suffer for Carel she had not conceived of this. This was the one thing in the world which she could not bear.'<sup>15</sup> Because only she knows what nobody else has suspected, namely that Elisabeth is Carel's daughter.

The heinousness of this final revelation arrests Muriel's impulse to save her father when she finds him in a comatose sleep after an overdose of sleeping pills. 'She would not wake him to a consciousness which he had judged unbearable. She

would not wake him like Lazarus from a dream of hell to hell itself, a place where love was powerless to redeem and save.<sup>16</sup> Muriel's relationship to Elisabeth also changes fundamentally irrespective of Elisabeth's knowing to be Carel's daughter or believing to be his niece. Muriel blames her and foresees their past and their future together forever marked by the knowledge. 'There would be no parting from Elisabeth now. Carel had riveted them together each to be the damnation of the other until the end of the world.'<sup>17</sup>

Oedipal motives may be traced in *The Black Prince*, where the people are tied up in various relationships which are half dark to them. The postscripts to Bradley's story by several of the characters, all claiming that it was them Bradley was really in love with, shed little light on their complexity. The references to *Hamlet* with the implications of Oedipal interpretation of the play further complicate the matter. The relationship between Julian and her parents is undefined and consequently it cannot be clear to what extent Bradley might have been her father's substitute, as is later suggested by both herself and her mother. Nor does Rachel's insistence that Julian was for Bradley her substitute untie the knot. The fact that Bradley had an affair with both mother and daughter in close succession has the same incestuous overtones already encountered in *The Italian Girl* and elsewhere in the earlier novels.

The very close and unnaturally intense brother-sister relationship in *A Word Child* invites a closer scrutiny. The dominant elements of power and submission were described in the previous chapter. Hilary is not the bad enchanter and his motives for dominating his sister are very complex in their rational irrationality. They are closely connected with their miserable lonely childhood and the bond is reinforced by the Oxford tragedy of which Crystal is now the only witness. Their relationship sounds very incongruous with the times, the growing feminism and when the myth of an individual's freedom has become an idol. And yet, and not exceptionally so, Crystal is happy, as Clifford puts it, to be Hilary's property. Although Hilary does not want Crystal to marry, he is sure there is nothing physical in his relation with her. 'I did not want to go to bed with her or kiss her or caress her or even touch her more than minimally ...I did not "find her attractive". I simply was her.'<sup>18</sup>

It is only when Crystal at last confides in Hilary the whole story of her night vigil at Gunnar's house after the fatal accident that the Oedipal overtones of their relationship become more poignant. For Hilary the picture of his sister giving her virginity to Gunnar is one of horror that he is unable to control or understand. In the shock of the revelation he feels sure he will never be able to forgive her. Later on he does forgive both Gunnar and Crystal, that is when the equation 'forgiving equals being forgiven' seems to work. But when 'in sober daylight it seemed just a piece of verbal nonsense'<sup>19</sup>, nothing of the impenetrable web of love, sex and jealousy and guilt appears to be solved.

Murdoch returns to the theme of the unacceptability and dread of incest in *The Philosopher's Pupil*. The philosopher, John Robert Rozanov, returns to Enninstone with his granddaughter Hattie in order to marry her to a suitable young man. The suitor of his choice at first bungles his approaches to Hattie and is rejected by her and banished by Rozanov from her presence. After a crazy drunken party outside Slipper House, where the girl was staying with her maid, Rozanov takes Hattie to his house and reveals to her the true reason for wanting to arrange her marriage: he is passionately in love with her. They are both horrified by his passion and Rozanov commits suicide. The violence of his act is paralleled with and multiplied by George's obsession with Rozanov and his murderous act of drowning Rozanov in his room in the Baths when he is in fact already dead by his own hand.

Murdoch takes a darker view of incest here, though uncommitted, than in *The Severed Head*. The mysterious steamy Baths and the obsessions and aberrations of the protagonists, attempted murders and death evoke the sombre atmosphere of *The Time of the Angels*, where incest looms over all the relationships as a symbol of doom. And similarly to *The Time of the Angels* and *Carel*, Rozanov's suicide does not have one single reason just like there is no explanation for his incestuous passion. He has arrived at an impasse in his life – a multiplicity of contingent events have conspired that he has failed as a philosopher, grandfather, a human being.

The Oedipus complex in its manifold guises governs the relationships between Harry Cuno and his two sons, one natural, the other adopted, in *The Good Apprentice*. Now Harry finds himself in the same predicament as other parents of grown-up children – he cannot communicate with them. The generation gap works as well as ever, possibly even better with young people being more independent and with parental authority generally collapsing. Both boys are motherless. Stuart, the elder and Harry's natural son, never knew his mother, who died soon after his birth. Edward, the preferred stepson, has a few hazy memories of his mother from his early childhood. Yet, Stuart's mother 'had indeed figured in his child mind, and even still, more dimly, as an angel. He could scarcely remember her, his images of her hovered between memory and dream. Her mystic form had been a refuge from a thoughtless stepmother and a neglectful father and a brother preferred by both. *She* knew about love, about how he lacked it.'<sup>20</sup> Maybe thanks to his disposition Stuart has not grown up resentful as the self-scrutiny of his own conscience concludes: 'Did he love Edward? Of course: Stuart did not propose to stumble over that question, any more than over the question whether some twinge of old jealous resentment might not even now make him the tiniest bit glad that his popular brother was in trouble. His connection with Edward was absolute.'<sup>21</sup> But then Stuart wants to be good, to help people, to spread goodness without God as his vocation. It is perhaps then not surprising that the above verdict comes from Stuart even after Edward's hateful outburst against him

when he has offered him well-meaning advice how to fight his terrible guilt after having caused his friend's death.

The boys' separate and qualitatively different relationship to Harry comes under severe strain with Oedipal resonances in both cases. In his quest for redemption from his guilt Edward receives a mysterious call at a seance to go to his natural father Jesse Baltram. Sanctioned by Edward's uncle and attending psychiatrist the encounter results in a powerful experience for Edward, which obliterates Harry's role as his father. Less shattering but nevertheless painful is Stuart's discovery that his father is having an affair with his stepmother's sister Midge. After Midge's vicious outburst against him for having been an involuntary witness of her infidelity, her sudden change of heart and throwing herself at Stuart, who she has never even liked, makes his relations with his father unbearable. None of them can face a situation that involves them together in an emotional drama.

Murdoch pits all the powerful forces that make up human relationships into one huge cauldron where the loves, hates, passions, complexes, morality and common sense simmer down and again letters of ordinary family news are written and glasses are raised. She does not offer a dramatic denouement as she believes that 'ordinary life is not dramatic... Ordinary life is comic and absurd. It may be terrible, but it is absurd and shapeless ...'<sup>22</sup>

Whether Murdoch writes about incest or milder forms of Oedipal variations she lays them before us as part of life and although she does not eschew the puzzlement or horror of witnesses, she does not analyse or judge.

Peter Conradi describes Murdoch as an 'anti-puritan puritan' (using her own term which she used to describe Eliot in her essay 'T.S. Eliot as a Moralist'), but he adds that her puritanism is by no means sexual.<sup>23</sup> Sex does pervade Murdoch's novels, but on the whole it does not have the prominence and Freudian superimportance one might expect. Murdoch certainly does not evade the dark side to sex, including incest and occultism involving sex, she writes about homosexuality, but she does not pander to today's reader's appetite for a lot of sex in books. Eroticism is played down and the psychological and moral issues involved are given prominence. Murdoch shows the complexity of sexual relationships that no scientific theories of psychoanalysis can reduce to manageable patterns of pairs of rational egos. Conradi points out one of Murdoch's objections to psychoanalysis: 'Murdoch makes quite clear how fruitless she considers the examination of one's motives to be, and also how undesirable and how little possible it is to "see oneself clearly"'<sup>24</sup> Murdoch therefore never adduces an explanation or solution, never a simple thread of causes and effects. She always makes the reader bow to the inevitability of the impenetrable tangle of accidental events, experiences and emotions that are in constant flux.

Incest came to be more frequently and more openly discussed in 1980s fiction, including the detective novel, by Margaret Drabble, Beryl Bainbridge and P.D. James, to name but a few. However, their point of concern differs from Murdoch's considerably by being much more definite, reflecting the current child-abuse debate. They mostly describe father-daughter incest and the effect of the traumatic experience on the psyche of the girl and its repercussions throughout her adult life.