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**For chapter of book:**

***Handbook of Love in Cultural and Transcultural Contexts***

**Author:** Thomas Ryan

Key words: Care; Commitment; Concern; Love; Loyalty

**DEVOTION: ‘BEING SHORE TO THE OCEAN’**

**Thomas Ryan[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Abstract** Building on Robert Frost’s phrase, this chapter examines devotion in terms of ‘loyalty and love or care for someone or something’ (Cambridge Dictionary). The first half explores foundational considerations about love as devotion through clarifying a) language and b) various understandings of love. Devotion is viewed, first, in the context of love as a universal phenomenon that finds expression across cultures, within committed relationships, families and between parents and children. Second, devotion is discussed in relation to agape, eros and philia. ‘Robust concern’ (carefully understood) is suggested as a possible description for devotion. On that basis, devotion can also function in social life as a deeply held loyalty to a cause or organization. It can also denote a bond between animals and humans. The chapter’s second half illustrates devotion in daily life expressed in works of art using the framework of power-based relationships as in master-servant, kinship systems and social class. Such settings, found in selected modern films and literary texts (both ancient and contemporary), enable us to investigate the life-giving, ambiguous, and, finally, life-denying aspects of devotion. In the process, the various forms, benefits (and limits) of devotion emerge together with its necessary relationship to the guidance of moral wisdom.

**1** **Introduction**

In his poem ‘Devotion’, Robert Frost draws on the image of the seashore as the steady, reliable presence that borders, even, embraces, the ocean (Frost, 1928). Building on that insight, this chapter focusses on love as devotion. The abstract above serves as our guide in the two phases of the discussion. After clarifying language, we outline foundational considerations. Devotion (its forms and outcomes) is, then, seen ‘at work’ in everyday life through examining selected literary texts and modern films.

**2 Love as Devotion: Foundational Considerations**

In approaching this topic, we need, first, to clarify language and, second, explain relevant understandings of love in order to situate any discussion of ‘devotion’.

**2.1 *Clarifying Language***

‘Devotion’ has its roots in Latin ‘devovere’ = to dedicate by vow or solemn promise and is associated with loyalty, allegiance, fealty and setting apart.[[2]](#footnote-2) Variants of ‘devotion’ such as the plural ‘devotions’ and ‘devout’ tend, in common usage, to be found in a religious context, namely, an habitual set of spiritual practices in a way of life or regular prayer directed to a higher being or an exemplar in some form, e.g., a saint. Words such as ‘devotion’, ‘devoted’ or ‘devotee’ have a connotation found in both a secular and a religious context and also towards persons or things. For the purposes of the discussion here, devotion can be defined as ‘loyalty and love or care for someone or something’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017).[[3]](#footnote-3)

**2.2 *Clarifying Understandings of Love***

Consider one word in the working definition just noted. ‘Love’ is a universal phenomenon. The descriptions and meanings of love vary across cultures and in relation to their underlying experiences and expressions. Concepts of love are subject to development in the context of cultural change. Western approaches to love can range from love as romantic, platonic, emotional and spiritual. There is a better appreciation of those understandings of love found in cultures that are non-Western. For all that, whatever the context or meaning, love is essentially an analogical term.

For our purposes, love seen as eros, philia or agape, offers a helpful point of departure while acknowledging that these forms of love are culturally embedded. Importantly, the modulations of love extend beyond private and intimate relationships. They find expression across cultures, within families and between parents and children. Again, love as benevolence is captured in the Nguni Bantu term ‘ubuntu’ which denotes ‘humanity towards others.’ This entails virtues that maintain harmony and a spirit of sharing with a group or society. It forms a parallel with notions of Benevolence (a character trait as in virtue ethics of David Hume) and Beneficence (actions and rules to benefit others as in John Stuart Mill).

Eros and philia presume an inter-personal relationship. Agape, however, includes such a setting but goes beyond it to embrace the social, communal and, even, transpersonal realms. Vacek suggests that the difference between these three ‘traditional’ forms of love is sharpened by asking the question ‘for the sake of whom’ we are loving. With eros, we love the beloved for our own sake, i.e., happiness through union with the beloved. Philia means that we love our beloved for the sake of the friendship we share with them. Agape entails love for the beloved for the sake of the beloved (Vacek, 1994, xv).

***2.2.1 Devotion as Robust Concern***

A variation of agape is love understood as ‘robust concern’ (Helm, 2017). Central to this view of love is not the creation of a ‘we’ as in union. It is a concern for the person for their own sake in so far as they are appreciated as a centre of value. Frankfurt considers that robust concern as a form of love is neither affective nor cognitive but, rather, volitional. ‘That a person cares about or that he loves something has less to do with how things make him feel, or with his opinions about them, than with the more or less stable motivational structures that shape his preferences and that guide and limit his conduct’ ((Frankfurt 1999, 129). This appears to be the language of character traits and of virtue.

Robust concern, understood thus, seems an apt description for devotion. Nevertheless, devotion can have its grounding in the relationship of union and of friends (eros or philia). Further, ‘volitional’ used in terms of the will is not confined to its capacity to choose. The will is an operation of consciousness whose object is the good or value. The will is drawn to what is valuable and good through desire (an affective movement). In that light, devotion’s enduring foundation is, in fact, volitional (in that specific understanding of ‘affective’).

Desire, then, underlies and guides the will’s intentionality and choice about ‘caring’, namely, wanting to nourish another’s well-being or to promote a particular value or values. It will entail personal investment at a deeper affective level that persists in the face of passing feelings of impatience or anger in, for instance, caring for a disabled family member. To give in to such feelings and, even, to cease, even temporarily, in providing needed care can prompt a sense of guilt and shame – in failing the other person (and oneself).

The word ‘robust’ as applied to devotion seems, perhaps, to denote not so much intensity as, more typically, steady perseverance and the associated repeated choices that refine, deepen and strengthen concern. At times it involves courage, a determination not to be derailed from one’s aims when things get difficult or, even, when one’s efforts appear to futile. In other words, persistence, commitment and loyalty are part of the ‘stable motivational structures’ guiding one’s behavior, noted earlier.

A word on ‘loyalty’ from the working definition of devotion used earlier. To consider loyalty as an option in life such that a person has no loyalties suggests a very deficient view of character and moral worth. Alternatively, loyalty can be attached to objects that are unworthy, e.g., a loyal Nazi or a sincere terrorist or rapist. Central, here, is the role of practical wisdom or *phronesis* as applied the virtues so that they ‘would not be deficient, excessive or misplaced’ (Kleinig, 2017). Loyalty (and devotion) are subject to the appraisal and guidance of practical wisdom.

***2.2.2 Devotion’s Many Faces***

In the light of the discussion so far and the working definition (suggested above), devotion’s scope can expand to include not only other persons but also ‘things’ (such as organizations, causes, clubs, faith communities).

Further, it can denote a bond between animals and humans. The aphorism of dogs as our ‘best friends’ is only too evident in television programs about the day to day life in veterinary practices. The mutual affection between the animals and its owners is perhaps part of the appeal for the viewers. It is found in novels such as *White Fang* by Jack London. The mutual bond and the loyalty of animals such as a dog can be viewed as an expression of affection if not a form of love. This reminds us that we must be careful in drawing a sharp line between human and animal behavior. Turner notes that ‘there is some evidence that some animals use tools for purposes, intentionally.’ In other words, they ‘act for a reason.’ Perhaps the boundary line between rational and nonrational animals is ‘something more like a graded continuum of rationalities’ (Turner, 2013, 272 n. 6). One can properly apply the term ‘rational’ to such purposeful or affectional behavior in animals even if it is only an incipient or partial mode of rationality.

There is a range of literature that explores the variations within devotion. For instance, we find studies on devotion in Christian religious practice (de Sales, 2002); on mindfulness and centering prayer (Frederick & White, 2015); on Vipassana meditation, love, devotion and surrender and their relation to illness and well-being (Parks, 2011); on devotion *(bhakti*) in Indian religions as a path to draw closer to the highest God, especially in meditation (Brokhurst, 2011).

Alternatively, devotion can be found in misguided and, even, harmful forms. Loyalty to a belief system in the form of religious fanaticism can have profoundly destructive outcomes – as contemporary experience testifies. Distorted devotion in a Christian context, for instance, can take the form of the vice of religious hypocrisy, as in François Mauriac’s *The Woman of the Pharisees.* This novel explores the impaired moral vision of a ‘good’ person of faith who is, nevertheless, a self-righteous zealot.

In a secular context, we find recent research on the impact of ‘competing devotions to work and family’ in academic scientists (Damaske, Ecklund, Lincoln, White, 2014). In the market place, there are studies on the relationship between loyalty to certain ‘brands’ and ‘consumer fanaticism’ (Chung, Farrelly & Beverland, 2017). Devotion expressed as an habitual and harmful attachment can take the form of an addiction, such as to pornography (Hilton & Watts, 2011).

It is beyond the scope of this discussion to investigate such a broad spectrum of academic research. Our focus from here is more practical. We have outlined some theoretical considerations about the nature of devotion and its characteristics and, then, indicated representative research. The most helpful step now may be to consider devotion ‘at work’ or ‘in the flesh’ through recourse to the arts, specifically, literature and films.

**3. Devotion ‘At Work’**

Our discussion moves on to explore various ‘faces’ of devotion and how they are embodied in personal and inter-personal life. We will approach this with a limited focus, namely, within social, familial, class or cultural settings where there a form of master-servant relationship which, simultaneously, involves a mutual dependence. In so doing, we pick up the theme of love (as devotion) across cultures and as articulated in religious and secular forms.

Such a theme is explored in novels, plays and films. We will use four artistic ‘case-studies’ to illustrate the life-giving and life-denying aspects of devotion and how, at times, these are intertwined. In so doing, an effort to situate these artistic works within the categories of tragedy and comedy (and their respective ‘modes’) will be helpful.

For the positive side of devotion, we draw, first, on a biblical source, namely, *The Book of Ruth,* from the period of the monarchy in Israel c. 880 BCE [[4]](#footnote-4) and, secondly, the 1989 film, *Driving Miss Daisy.* The twentieth century also offers two literary works where the interplay of the luminous and dark sides of devotion at are work. The first is the film version from 1983 of Ronald Harwood’s play, *The Dresser.* The second is [Kazuo Ishiguro](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazuo_Ishiguro)’s Booker Prize winning novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989).

***3.1 Devotion as Life-giving***

*The Book of Ruth,* the shortest ‘book’ in the Hebrew Scriptures, is an historical short story. Living in a foreign country (Moab), Ruth, Orpah (her sister) and Naomi (their mother-in-law) have all lost their husbands and are, now, all childless. In a shame/honor (and patriarchal) culture, without father, husband or sons, all three widows are powerless and economically vulnerable. Naomi encourages the two sisters to remain in their homeland (Moab). Initially, they both indicate their desire to accompany her to Bethlehem. Orpah finally accedes to Naomi’s urgings and returns to her homeland (1:14). Naomi and Ruth travel to Bethlehem where they find protection with Boaz, a well-to-do ‘kinsman’ of Naomi’s deceased husband Elimelech.

The axis of this devotion story is in Ruth’s reply after Naomi urges the two sisters to stay with their own people. Ruth replies by assuring Naomi that she will accompany her wherever she goes, will live where she lives, will die where Naomi dies and, gentile ‘outsider’ though Ruth is, identifies herself with the Naomi’s ‘people’ and their God (Ruth 1:16-17).

Ruth’s gesture of human faithfulness triggers the rest of the story - one of redemption. This particular theme unfolds through human actions. The story traces the steps by which Ruth is led to finding a husband (Boaz) and Naomi to being healed of her emptiness and bitterness.

This story is illuminating for a number of reasons. First, Ruth’s first gesture of loyalty (*hesed*) towards Naomi (noted above), which involves sacrifice and risk, is commended by Boaz (2:12). He later praises her for a second gesture of fidelity, namely, for ‘seeking not a young husband’ but rather ‘an appropriate one’ (Laffey, 557). Her action, in this instance, is out of respect for family claims and the social structure in which she lives. But it is also one in which she transcends the limits of her social role and cultural expectations as a woman. For this, Boaz invokes God’s blessing on Ruth ‘since this last act of kindness of yours is greater than the first’ (3: 10. The words ‘kindness’ and ‘covenant fidelity’ are other renditions of *hesed*. Faithfulness is associated with remembering; unfaithfulness with forgetting.

Ruth’s state of mind and heart (*hesed*)are captured by the words noted above. Again, *hesed* can be viewed as ‘devotion’ described earlier: ‘loyalty and love or care for someone or something’ but also in in ‘kindness’ and thoughtfulness. Such words suggest an underlying affection going beyond duty. They point to a deeper aspect of the will’s intentionality, namely, desire that animates and sustains the bond (‘covenant’) with another person.

Second, Ruth’s original sense of caring responsibility for Naomi is centrifugal. It triggers Naomi’s own concern for Ruth’s own welfare and the various strategies her mother-in-law suggests concerning Boaz to achieve that. Later, Ruth’s *hesed* prompts various shifts in Boaz: his concern for Ruth herself; his willingness to be her protector; his recognition (‘honoring’) of Ruth for her expressions of loyalty and care both towards Naomi and himself; his acknowledgement of Ruth by name (3:9-10), hence, as having an identity, a self, as a person (rather than, as culturally indicated, simply a possession, a part of his ‘property’).

Finally, as the story evolves, the ‘devoted’ Ruth, emerges as an instrument of healing for her ‘empty’ and ‘bitter’ mother-in-law (who, for that reason, had changed her name to Mara). In Naomi’s eyes, God has not been faithful or loyal (devoted). In an act of forgetting, God has allowed Naomi to experience suffering and loss - without food, homeland, children or protector. All of these, indirectly (through Ruth), are restored to her.

Central in all this is the final scene. Ruth’s mother-in-law receives new life and hope (is ‘redeemed’), especially through the child of Ruth and Boaz who will be Naomi’s ‘comfort’ ‘life-restorer’ and a ‘prop of’ her old age (4:15). These promises arise because the newborn son’s mother is Ruth, the one who loves Naomi. Consistent with the story line, Ruth is now more like a daughter. She means more to Naomi than the ideal number of ‘seven sons’ (4:16). Ruth’s loyal care and self-giving devotion have renewed, in Naomi, a sense of life, of love, of being blessed and of being honored - with an identity, a self.

Mention has been made above of Ruth (a foreigner and outsider) identifying herself with the God of Naomi (and of Israel). In what way, then, is the *Book of Ruth* religious? The plot is driven by the characters, in their actions and relationships with one another. This is a deliberate literary device suited to the author’s overall religious purpose. Campbell notes that divine activity in the story is ‘that of one in the shadows’ yet God still remains ‘the primary actor in the drama.’ The story-teller’s most ‘characteristic way of ‘making God manifest’ is through ‘working out a correspondence between the way God acts and the way the people in the story act.’ This is particularly realized in the way ‘people behave toward one another’ through ‘caring responsibility’ (Campbell, 1981, 29).

God’s action (and blessing), then, is mediated through human actions, namely, the determination to live a ‘righteous and responsible life’ as modelled in Ruth’s acts of loyal devotion. Like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-37), Ruth is from an ethnic group ‘despised and rejected by those who considered themselves to be the “people of God”’ (Farmer, 1998, 892). She is representative of ‘outsiders’ and ‘gentiles’ who are receptive to God’s call and included within the divine plan of salvation. Further, Ruth in her devotion is the instrument of the divine presence in the ‘steady resolution’ of Naomi’s complaint and of her suffering. In this, Naomi is led gently to be ‘the profound recipient’ (Campbell, 1981, 30, 32). Naomi is enticed slowly to open herself to the gift of a renewed self, to again being honored – in the eyes of others, herself and of God.

What is presented in the *Book of Ruth* in the form of a somewhat human and secular story is a carefully crafted *novella* with a religious aim in mind, namely, God’s saving desires and action working in unobtrusive mode. As commentator Kathleen Farmer points out ‘reversal is the essence of redemption. Within the story world Naomi is the primary object of redemption. It is Naomi whose life is turned around, whose feelings of bitterness, emptiness, and hopelessness are reversed. Ruth’s faithfulness is only the *instrument* God uses to accomplish Naomi’s redemption.’ We find here an encouragement to see ‘not just that we *ought* to be like Ruth but that we *are* like Naomi’ (Farmer, 1998, 892-3, italics in original).

The development of the plot in this novella clearly follows the comic curve in which the protagonist moves from low to high fortune, from unpleasant beginnings, through struggle, to a happy ending (Van Ghent, 1967, 66). This is true of both Ruth and Naomi. But it is also true of Boaz. Within his cultural context, to be childless (especially without a son) could be a source of profound shame for a man and a husband. It is through Ruth that Boaz’s honour is preserved in being her kin-protector and, importantly, through the birth of a son.

We move on, now, to consider a second study in devotion as life-giving.

***3.2 Mutual Devotion as Dismantling Barriers***

*Driving Miss Daisy* is a film where the story and two main characters take twenty - five years to unfold.[[5]](#footnote-5) One day in 1948, Daisy Werthan, a retired, wealthy, Southern Jewish widow (Miss Daisy) drives her car over the wall and finishes up in her neighbour’s backyard. Her son (Boolie) insists her driving days are over. He employs an African-American chauffeur (Hoke Colburn). Miss Daisy keeps resisting the prospect of being driven. Hoke has to win her round. Hoke handles the proud and wilful Miss Daisy with endless patience, and a certain measure of quiet guile until she finally succumbs to being driven by the chauffeur.

This battle of wills, of two stubborn people, sets the scene for the next twenty - five years. Around 1963, when her housekeeper dies, we find the multi-skilled Hoke helping Miss Daisy with household tasks and looking after the garden. In turn, the retired teacher Miss Daisy, with tact and sensitivity, teaches her chauffeur to read. Over the years of mutual dependence and time together, the ‘mistress’ and ‘servant’ slowly get to know each other.

*Driving Miss Daisy* explores racism and anti- Semitism through this evolving devotion. The two characters are both outsiders: he, from the colour of his skin; she, from being Jewish in a society that is predominantly WASP. She may take pride in being Southern Jewish and liberal, but also has blind spots, for instance, about prejudice. She sees no parallel between an attack on her local synagogue and those of the Klu Klux Klan on African-American churches. Again, Hoke drives her to a dinner where there is speech by Martin Luther King. She has an extra ticket but does consider directly asking him to accompany her. He is left outside, listening to the speech on the car radio.

*Driving Miss Daisy’*s ends in 1973 with two converging ‘movements’: the widow’s onset of dementia and the chauffeur’s approaching retirement from failing eyesight. In the overlapping of the fading shadows of their lives they come to recognize a bond, if not a mutual devotion. It is a shared moment where racial (and class) boundaries dissolve; she recognizes Hoke as her ‘best friend.’

Speaking of the film’s director Bruce Beresford, one reviewer captures the beauty of this moment: ‘He never steps wrong on his way to a luminous final scene in which we are invited to regard one of the most privileged mysteries of life, the moment when two people allow each other to see inside’ (Ebert, 1990).

In our wider discussion, this film illustrates not only the mutual form that devotion can take. It is a study in the slow emergence of a sense of personal safety between two people separated through race and class. Within this secure space, transparency and recognition come to characterise their relationship. While the film has an underlying element of social criticism, it is through the growing relationship of these Miss Daisy and Hoke that there is a gradual dissolution of racial and class barriers. The key moment of insight at the end comes from a life-giving process rather than the pattern of tragic failure or flaw. The overall trajectory of this study of devotion, then, follows the same comic curve as that found in the story of Ruth – one that brings reassurance and hope.

We move on, now, to consider the life-denying and troublesome aspect of devotion.

***3.3 Devotion: Its Distortions and Deceptions***

We first consider a modern play.

***3.3.1 Devotion as Love Unacknowledged***

*The Dresser* is the story of the personal assistant (Norman) of an aging actor (‘Sir) and the assistant’s persevering efforts to maintain some sort of order in the ‘master’s’ life (professionally and personally).[[6]](#footnote-6) The assistant is constantly overlooked by ‘Sir’, despite his years of his persistent and loyal efforts. His dedication in carrying out his task (and to ‘Sir’) has come at a personal cost; Norman equivalently has sacrificed any personal life that addressed his own individual needs and desires. One way he copes with ‘Sir’s’ rants and whims is by taking the occasional nip of brandy from the small bottle kept in his back pocket.

After what will turn out to be his final performance, ‘Sir’ asks Norman to read from an autobiography he has just started. He reads aloud a list of ‘thank you’s – to audiences, other actors, stage hands. Nowhere does he acknowledge his dresser. Norman discovers ‘Sir’ has died while he was reading the list. The dresser, tipsy from the brandy, erupts with rage over the actor’s dead body for the years of being overlooked, despite his persistent care for ‘Sir.’ This surge of emotion prompts a moment of insight in Norman. He realizes his years of devotion are now over. But they are not lost. Even though never acknowledged by ‘Sir’, Norman now appreciates that the deceased ‘master’ is the only person he has ever loved.

Viewed in literary terms, this play is a tragicomedy in which devotion is portrayed in both its life-giving and distorted forms. The comic mode is present in that the elderly actor, by his own actions, is unmasked about his social and artistic pretentions. He is the recipient of his ‘servant’s’ loyal concern but is oblivious to the dresser as a person, with his own life and his own needs. The actor, effectively, is exposed in his true nature and its impact on others.

It is in the dresser that the tragic curve of the play is realized. Norman arrives at a moment of self-discovery, about himself and, implicitly, a more realistic appraisal of his relationship with his ‘master.’ In this interweaving of the tragic and the comic, we find expressed, through dramatic chiaroscuro, the more ambivalent sides of devotion (Van Ghent, 1967, 67).

This brings us to the next phase of the chapter.

***3.3.2 Devotion as Distorted Loyalty***

The second study in devotion’s darker side is the modern novel, *The Remains of the Day.* [[7]](#footnote-7)

It is summer 1956. A man is driving through the west of England. His name is Stevens. He has been a butler at Darlington Hall for most of his life. He is travelling to see a former housekeeper, hoping she will return and resume that role. This outer journey is the context for Stevens’ inner journey, namely, the meanderings of his memory and the evaluation of his life and of himself.

Our purpose here is not to engage in a full exegesis and interpretation of the novel. The aim here is very specific; to explore how the narrative illuminates our discussion of devotion. It needs to be noted that, in contrast with the film, the narrator in the novel is Stevens himself, hence, the action takes place predominantly in his mind. This gives the reader access to his efforts to rationalise and justify himself. Again, in contrast with the film’s more sober and dignified Stevens, the butler in the novel tells lies, is foolish and impulsive. Cumulatively, then, this brings to his character an artless transparency that engages the reader’s sympathy.

Steven’s devotion is anchored in his family ties with Lord Darlington and the country residence. His father was the previous butler. Stevens is very good at what he does. He brings polish, thoughtfulness and discretion to the task. He is dedicated to his calling as a servant and to his master, Lord Darlington. He is part of a class system on which he depends (for his livelihood, his status and sense of worth) and which depends on him (for his loyalty and day to day functioning). The novel is a social comedy; an unmasking of a social system around the English rural aristocracy and the various hierarchies – of the masters and of the servants.

Within this setting of a ‘master-servant’ relationship and his devotion in his task, there are repercussions for Stevens. When Lord Darlington is accused, and humiliated, as a Nazi sympathiser, his world collapses as also that of his butler (complicit by his silence). Stevens says, in tears, to a stranger in Weymouth near the end of the book that the Lord wasn’t a ‘bad man…he chose a path in life…it was a misguided one’

But, significantly, he then says: ‘As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I *trusted*. In his lordship’s wisdom.’ Through his service of the Lord Darlington, Stevens ‘trusted he was doing something worthwhile. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?’ (Ishiguro, 1989, 243).

What is significant for our purposes is how this trust was to the detriment, even neglect, of Stevens’ own personal emotional desires and his appreciation of the needs of others.

For example, when his father is dying after a stroke, Stevens gives priority to his public duty (a grand banquet). After the pleadings of Miss Kenton, he spares a moment and returns to his task.

Again, the most significant effect of his approach to devotion is found in his relationship with Miss Kenton during her time as housekeeper. She tells him of her feelings and senses he has similar feelings for her. This is a door to an ongoing relationship, even marriage. Stevens denies his feelings and puts priority on his job and his loyalty to Lord Darlington.

Again, Miss Kenton catches Stevens out reading a romantic novel (today’s Mills and Boone?) which suggests the lurking of desire. Stevens resents the invasion of his privacy and says he was reading the book to improve his vocabulary.

Finally, Miss Kenton leaves to marry someone else. It is a letter from her that has prompted Steven’s road trip and our share in his journey of memory into his life. But it is also an indicator that Stevens is hopeful of resuming the relationship with the former housekeeper. However, in the ensuing conversation between them, she (now Mrs. Benn) makes it clear that he had lost his opportunity many years ago. Further, married but separated, she has decided to return to her husband because of his need for her and to be near her pregnant daughter.

The book’s final section is particularly illuminating about how devotion is at work in Stevens and how it is handled in the novel. He does know his place, is the perfect butler but, in so doing, he exercises a restraint of desire that, in many ways, has led him to have a wasted life. Nevertheless, as noted above, Stevens’ tears while talking with the stranger on the pier at Weymouth bring a moment of insight and self-recognition. He acknowledges his self-deception but also what underlies it. His devotion was essentially a misplaced trust but also an abdication of any claim to being his own self. This entailed a blindness, if not a loss, with his own moral compass. His loyalty was not subject to the appraisal of practical wisdom. In arriving at this insight, the tragic side to Stevens is expressed.

Further, devotion in Stevens overrode his need for human warmth and intimacy. About that, there is a suggestion of the start of healing, even, of redemption. He has been encouraged by the stranger to look ahead and enjoy the remainder of his ‘days.’ Sitting on the bench, he observes the people shortly after the pier lights come on at twilight -a symbolic moment. He finds himself ‘curious’ about their behaviour. Stevens begins to ‘look more enthusiastically’ at how, through friendly banter and fun, strangers were able to, ‘build such warmth among themselves so swiftly.’ He even observes that ‘in bantering lies the key to human warmth’ (Ishiguro, 1989, 245).

It is difficult not to view this is a liminal moment for Stevens, even if a minimal one. The butler is far from his aristocratic cocoon, emotionally vulnerable, his ‘blind dignity’ exposed (Canby, 1993). It is now that he begins to actually see; he recognises and responds to the interactions of ordinary people. He starts to identify with common humanity. From this, he moves on to appreciate that such a gesture of human connection (banter) is a duty that is ‘not unreasonable’ in his professional role. He resolves to practice and develop his ‘bantering skills’ to pleasantly surprise his master (Ishiguro, 1989, 245). His defences are breaking down such that he is led to view his ‘servant’ role in a new light.

The novel’s tragic thrust is realised in Stevens’ acknowledgement of his distorted form of devotion but also in beginning to see people, and himself, differently. In so doing, he arrives at a regretful acceptance of loss, allied with a renewed (and healthier?) sense of purpose that is shaded, perhaps, with subdued contentment. The comic curve has found a level of resolution.

**4. Conclusion**

Our considerations of devotion have ranged from the theoretical through works of art illustrating its variations in daily life. We have spent time with people and texts that present the luminous, ambivalent but also the dark side of devotion. Devotion can be life-giving, can break down barriers, can override not being recognized, can be misguided and involve self-deception. In the process, certain qualities in devotion have emerged: desire, attachment, loyalty, perseverance and its momentum beyond the self. In devotion as robust concern, we find distilled love and care seasoned by thoughtfulness, strengthened by time, dependable through practice but always subject to the guidance of practical wisdom.

Devotion offers a contrary voice to consumerism and its throw-away mentality: where one ‘falls in’ and, therefore, ‘out of’ love; where life is a smorgasbord of choices making long -term commitment difficult; where we find the growing incidence of narcissism driven by ‘I’m entitled’; where the surge of self-esteem literature prompts author Stephen Dovey to observe, ‘you may be good but what are you good for?’ (quoted in Dowrick, 1997, 78).

By contrast, devotion appears as a steady, reliable beacon of light, a virtuous disposition with its own peculiar moral beauty both uplifting and inspiring. Or, to return to the metaphor of Robert Frost, devotion resembles the seashore in relation to the ocean in that it holds ‘the curve of one position.’

Devotion or devoted people are part of all our lives -amongst families, friends, colleagues. Perhaps it is better to say that, far from trying to describe or analyze devotion, we should say ‘I know it when I see it.’ But what does devotion ‘in full bloom’ look like? Is there something about this form of care and love that naturally seeks the shadows, that does not seek to be noticed, a flower ‘born to blush unseen’?

On that note, it is timely to mention a story that kept coming back to me while I was writing this chapter.

Without comment, I offer the story here by way of conclusion.

Some years ago, I was a chaplain at a residential care facility. There was one section set aside specifically for any residents who suffered from dementia and similar illnesses. There was a lady there (Mary) who was visited every day by her husband (Joe). He would come mid-morning, have a cup of tea, then take her out in her wheel-chair around the grounds, perhaps spending time in the sun. They would come back and have lunch together, perhaps a siesta in the easy chairs in the lounge. He might read to her, listen to music. Perhaps more time outside then afternoon tea and Joe would go home.

One day, one of the regular carers said to Joe ‘Joe, you are wonderful with Mary. You are here nearly every day. You are so devoted. You know, if you ever wanted a break, there is always someone here to look after Mary. And it must be very difficult. Most of the time, Mary does not recognize you.’

Joe listened.

Then quietly, with an understanding smile (and without reproach), Joe replied:

‘Yes – but I recognize her.’

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   Email: tryansm@bigpond.net.au [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Interestingly, ‘devotion’ is not amongst the contents of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* but ‘loyalty’ is listed as too, naturally, love. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These usages seem to be reflected in a word search in libraries covering books and journals. While not comprehensive and definitive, it suffices for our purposes here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is a film version *The Book of Ruth* released in 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This 1989 film was based on the play of Alfred Uhry and starred Jessica Tandy and Morgan Freeman in the main roles. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Dresser* (1983) is a film based on Ronald Harwood’s play of the same name starring Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The 1993 film of the same name (starring Emma Thompson and Anthony Hopkins) was based on this novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)