

# The Absent Satirist: The Strange Case of Muriel Spark

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## ABSTRACT

Based on her early novels, Muriel Spark was pigeonholed by her contemporaries<sup>1</sup> as a Catholic satirist committed to eternal truths. However, Spark took an increasing delight in elusiveness in her later novels, refusing to confer value on her texts or insert an easily recognizable moral preoccupation. This paper is an attempt to discuss whether Spark's cool, unengaged quality and ostentatious lack of interest in upholding moral values may or may not enable satire within the confines of its traditional predicament. Since Spark came very close to contradicting many of her previous claims and findings during her dynamic development, I am obliged to utilize novels from different periods, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), along with *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974), to find out whether any method can be derived from her apparent inconsistency.

## KEYWORDS

Muriel Spark, Scottish literature, twentieth-century British literature, satire, parody, duality, devil worship

Muriel Spark always resisted classification of any kind. Half-Jewish, half-Anglican by birth, Presbyterian by schooling and finally a Catholic by choice, Spark stated her native Edinburgh “bred a condition of exiledom in her” and decided to live out her life in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Until her conversion to Catholicism, she never conceived the idea of writing a novel; afterwards, as if she had finally found her niche, voice and purpose, she published *The Comforters* (1957) and would produce a continual stream of novels until her death. Her debut, *The Comforters*, strikes the reader with its graceful, high-handed perfection, given the fact Spark lacked previous experience. The only training at writing fiction she would admit to referred to the time during WWII when she worked for the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office, teaming up with prisoners of war to concoct plausible lies mixed with facts to mislead the enemy.<sup>3</sup>

It is hard to find a place for Spark among her contemporaries, given how idiosyncratic, ambivalent and cryptic she turned out to be as a writer. Most authors (and all satirists) tend to embed a clearly distinguishable pattern into their fiction that – once decoded – boils down to a rather predictable, homogeneous attitude. Spark's development is by no means that straightforward; it does not continue to flow on in the same direction. Suddenly, there comes a sharp bend amounting to a reversal of her former priorities. Spark gives an impression of someone engaged in a continual and a dynamic conversation with herself that transcends each and any of her separate novels. These are therefore not to be handled as independent entities as Spark's “debate” entails constant revisions of approaches. Starting off as “a Catholic satirist”, she went on probing the possibilities of the *nouveau roman*, progressing to postmodernism in the late 1960s, only to return to the realistic novel with all its trappings (including the notion of an omniscient narrator) when postmodernism held sway in the literature of the last three decades. Apparently, no “quintessential Spark” exists.

1 First and foremost, by Frank Kermode. See Frank Kermode, *Modern Essays* (London: Fontana, 1971), 268.

2 Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae: An Autobiography* (London: Constable and Robinson, 1992), 98.

3 Spark gave this part of her life fictional treatment in *The Hothouse by the Eastern River* (1973).

Bernard Harrison even ventured so far as to observe that Spark's narrative technique was based on "permanent dislocation."<sup>4</sup>

Whether she can or cannot be claimed as a satirist remains a question. First of all, would satire answer Spark's needs as a novelist? The very nature of satire has been based on speculation since the beginning. Traditionally, there has been a tendency to elaborate on (a false but still revealing) etymology, where the satirist is related to a mythological creature – a *satyr*; a rampant creature, half-god, half-beast. Later on, the term "satire" was disengaged from its mythological origin and came to be associated with *saturna lanx*, a well-filled platter, or a medley (of forms and trends).<sup>5</sup> With both possibilities taken into account, satire's true origin remains opaque and still resists classification.

Its role in English literature was first properly defined by John Dryden as early as 1606: "The true end of satire is the amendment of vice by correction."<sup>6</sup> A "moral police" of literature, we might add. Satire was construed as the most optimistic genre, assuming that humanity is both capable and worthy of correction by laughter, ridicule or contempt. Ideally, the smug, self-confident and detached satirist was to look down on the vices and follies of society from his high horse of absolute moral certainty. However, the best satires ever written, such as Swift's, Waugh's or Butler's, are rife in ambivalence since the satirists did not write from a confident position, feeling too baffled by life's complexity and human depravity.

Apparently, satire flourishes in order-minded cultures of people unified by general agreement on what is considered good. Yet some scholars believe satire can exist only in a world of "manageable misfortunes", and that contemporary society is beyond remedy and therefore devoid of satire.<sup>7</sup> I am convinced satire does exist, oscillating between hope and despair, harnessing the power of both sources.

Muriel Spark's oeuvre draws on a number of different influences. Her religion of choice counts among the most dominant ones. In Spark's work, however, the author's Catholicism never serves as a didactic device. Quite the contrary, Spark often explores the complex and intriguing nature of faith and acknowledges the discrepancies and tensions present in it. After all, one of her most memorable novels, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) – whose successful film version (1969) significantly helped Spark to reach a wider public – deals with the inherent contradictions of Scottish Calvinism and its key point of unconditional election. According to this doctrine, God has elected a handful of believers who will be saved, no matter what their actions might be, while the rest will be damned. The concept of predestination clearly clashes with the viability of individual free will. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* revolves around a charismatic schoolteacher who exercises her will on a group of selected students like the Calvinist God, only to be ultimately betrayed by her favourite girl, who, in the final ingenious twist of the novel, not only reports Miss Brodie's dubious teaching techniques to the school principal, but also enters a convent as a Roman Catholic nun.

4 Bernard Harrison, "Muriel Spark and Jane Austen," in *The Modern English Novel: The Reader, the Writer and the Work*, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (London: Open Books, 1976), 228.

5 See John Peck and Martin Cole, *Literary Terms and Criticism: A Student's Guide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), 170.

6 John Dryden, "A Discourse on Satire," in *Essays*, ed. W. P. Kerr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900), 105.

7 David Dooley, *Contemporary Satire* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 14.

Although Spark spent all of her adult life in exile and although only one of her novels, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, is set in Scotland, Scottish influences underlie much of her writing. These include, besides her fascination with the Scottish heritage of Calvinism, above all her inspiration by traditional ballads and folk tales of demonism. Spark's deceptively simple style is deliberately stripped of emotion, which points to the influence of the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poets. Like John Donne or George Herbert before her, Spark creates multifaceted texts rife with complex metaphors, texts which aim to appeal to the intellect rather than the emotions of the reader. Spark herself dismissed emotion as a tool of the fiction writer in her theoretical essay "The Desegregation of Art" (1971), where she asserts:

The art and literature of sentiment and emotion, however beautiful in itself, however striking in its depiction of actuality, has to go. It cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity. In its place I advocate the arts of satire and ridicule. And I see no other living art form in the future.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Spark does not allow any explicit expression of sentiment to enter her art; she is the mistress of a detached, clinically cool tone. As for her self-proclaimed preference for satire as the form of art most appropriate to dealing with the complexities of the changing world, it must be noted that Spark made this statement only later in her career and, furthermore, the body of her writing does not offer a unitary, coherent vision; instead, with each new novel, her voice was constantly shifting and evolving. Her claim to satire, therefore, does not mean that Spark can easily be compartmentalized as an obvious satirist.

Speaking of satire's ambivalence and Spark's relationship to it, we must not forget the ambivalence rooted in the tradition of Scottish literature and culture, the so-called Caledonian antiszygy. This term was coined by G. Gregory Smith and popularized by Hugh MacDiarmid, who defined it as the conjunction of opposites, a reflection of contrasts that may be applied to Scottish life and culture in general.<sup>9</sup> Apparently, only Scots can boast such a large capacity for containing in themselves and their art elements that contradict each other.

Should Spark, an Edinburgh-born writer, be considered a satirist, two influential individuals are to be taken into account; the poor, deluded murderer and suicide Wringhim from James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and an inhabitant of Edinburgh whose name is practically synonymous with duality, Deacon Brodie; a respectable cabinet maker and councillor by day and a fearsome gang leader at night. While readers of Hogg's novel feel partly repulsed, partly horrified by Wringhim's falling prey to evil and darkness and his eventual death, they might not feel deeply touched by Brodie's much-deserved end. Rumour has it that Brodie faced his execution quite amused by the twists and turns of fate; the gibbet he was going to die on was the one he had – as a member of the City Council – personally installed. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is Spark's novel that combines the influences of James Hogg and Deacon Brodie most obviously. It is no coincidence that Spark's fascinating and devious teacher is called Brodie—Spark even has her character in the novel claim descent from the infamous Deacon Brodie.

8 Muriel Spark, "The Desegregation of Art," in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, ed. Joseph Hynes (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 35.

9 Marshall Walker, *Scottish Literature since 1707* (London: Longman, 1996), 14.

Spark's influences illustrate her lifelong artistic preoccupation with the nature of evil and morality. Her novels are not usually read for their plots. This kind of linear reading is ultimately thwarted by her penchant for the technique of flashforwards, which as often as not reveals the resolution of the novel's conflict early on. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, for example, the reader follows the eponymous character's wondering who betrayed her, while this information is already provided to the reader near the beginning of the novel. What is there to read for, then? Gerard Carruthers argues that by removing the interest in the ending of the novel to start with, "the moral dynamic of the action rather than simply the action itself is placed in the foreground."<sup>10</sup> The reader knows what happens but it remains to be discovered why it happens. Again, Spark does not make it easy on her readers and rarely cares to offer a clear answer. Instead, she invites the reader to participate in the journey of discovery, focusing on the moral mechanics underlying the characters' actions.

Some recent criticism foregrounds Spark's subversive female characters and reinterprets them from the feminist perspective. James Bailey, for example, notices in Spark's writing the motif of "the plight of female subjects judged to be deviant by resisting inscription within oppressive cultural narratives."<sup>11</sup> As to the form, Bailey pays attention to Spark's experimental techniques and argues that they work to reinforce the content of her novels, serving "as devices used to interrogate and undermine institutions and social practices that sanction and support violence and oppression."<sup>12</sup> Miss Jean Brodie, teacher at a conventional girls' school, counts among such deviant characters because her controversial teaching methods and learning contents defy the standards and policies of the educational institution. "To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul," Miss Brodie famously declares. "To Miss Mackay [the headmistress] it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion."<sup>13</sup>

Miss Brodie's seemingly enlightened approach, however, does not do away with the violation of the impressionable pupils' minds, instead, she replaces one form of oppression with another when she seeks to instil into her special girls her own peculiar worldview, including the promotion of fascism. It is Miss Brodie's favourite pupil, Sandy Stranger, who betrays her teacher and terminates her career by reporting her to the headmistress. Sandy, another candidate for emancipating herself from oppressive powers, reflects her strangeness in her very name—Stranger. As in the case of Miss Brodie, who liberates herself from the authorities at the expense of others, also Sandy's liberation remains dubious. Sandy revolts against her manipulative teacher, yet she fails to shake off Miss Brodie's enduring influence, and rejects her Calvinist heritage, but only to enter a Catholic convent as a nun, hence shunning one set of institutional strictures while embracing another. Although both Miss Brodie and Sandy qualify as what Bailey terms deviant female characters, their resistance against traditional values propagated by institutional authorities ultimately turns into a perversion rather than a subversion of the same.

10 Gerard Carruthers, "The Remarkable Fictions of Muriel Spark," in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 519.

11 James Bailey, "Salutary Scars: The 'Disorienting' Fictions of Muriel Spark," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 9, no. 1 (2015): 34.

12 Bailey, "Salutary Scars," 35.

13 Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 36.

Spark's attitude seems inspired by the above-mentioned case studies at the same time; attempting to correct, punish and set right in one novel, while only rippling the surface, unconcerned with the depths, in another. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) serves as an example of this dual, paradoxical vision. As in many of Spark's novels, two worlds, natural and supernatural, brush against each other. At the beginning, a scandal affects the small-town community of Peckham:

Here they were, kneeling at the altar. The vicar was reading from the prayer book. Dixie took a lacy handkerchief from her sleeve and gently patted her nose. Humphrey noticed the whiff of scent which came from the handkerchief. The vicar said to Humphrey, "Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?" "No," Humphrey said, "to be quite frank I won't." He got to his feet and walked straight up the aisle. The guests in the pews rustled as if they were all women. Humphrey got to the door, into his Fiat, and drove off by himself to Folkestone. It was there they had planned to spend their honeymoon.<sup>14</sup>

Humphrey's apparently outrageous behaviour is generally ascribed to his acquaintance with Dougal Douglas (or Douglas Dougal, even Dougal-Douglas throughout the novel) an inscrutable, mysterious Scot. Dougal Douglas seems cast from the mould of ballad figures traditionally associated with violence and devil-worship. His gift of partial "shape-shifting" and very quizzical look<sup>15</sup> refer to James Hogg's Gil-Martin, a devilish parasite sucking out all aspects of individual identity to leave behind a mere shell and a puppet, helpless in the Devil's hands. What is more, Dougal Douglas proudly presents to anyone interested two lumps on his head (remainders of surgically removed horns, as he claims) and professes to be "one of the wicked spirits that wanders throughout the world for the ruin of souls."<sup>16</sup> During his residence in Peckham, Dougal takes jobs with two rival textile companies at the same time, whose owners hope Dougal's "human research" might help to reduce absenteeism among the workforce. Dougal, a skilled manipulator, actually prompts absenteeism instead, wreaks havoc anywhere he appears and seems capable of much more than that. Violence erupts where there was none before, and all the dormant evil in the community comes to light. But though Dougal may appear to mastermind violence, it becomes quite apparent that he only confronted the community, one by one, with their flawed nature lurking under a thin veneer of conventions.

This inspired Richard Kane to perceive Dougal Douglas as a "didactic demon", essentially a satirist drawing poison from the wound; an ostensibly evil presence in the service of some higher Good (or even God Himself).<sup>17</sup> Yet Spark insisted her readers perceive this narrative through the lens of balladic tradition. Although a brush with the supernatural world constitutes a major ingredient in the ballad, the ballad itself is hardly ever concerned with teaching anyone a moral lesson.<sup>18</sup> Dougal Douglas is not a pure, determined evil "without a fault"; he looks for companionship among people,

14 Muriel Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (London: Macmillan, 1960), 8.

15 "Douglas looked at him [Humphrey] as if he was a succubus, whose eyes are mouth" Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, 29.

16 Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, 55.

17 Richard Kane, *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark and John Fowles: Didactic Demons in Modern Fiction* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 66.

18 Least of all, the *Border Ballads* Spark was exposed to.

not being quite capable of living on his own and from his own resources of strength. He turns away with disgust from frailty, sickness and death, which is intriguing; a true demon would certainly rejoice at such a sight. Furthermore, Dougal Douglas works solely through mediators and does not engage in any dubious actions directly; he incites others to immoral and reckless behaviour, and when the characters comply, it is not because of force but by their own choice. Accordingly, Gerard Carruthers observes that “Dougal obeys the diabolic folk-rules. He can crank up badness or immorality where it already exists but cannot engender evil out of nothing.”<sup>19</sup>

Dougal Douglas might have been employed as a catalyst in this narrative, but his actions did not usher in any change for the better, any lasting impact, let alone a moral message delivered to Peckham. Humphrey’s behaviour at the altar, originally inspired by Dougal Douglas himself, testifies to this statement. Humphrey may have had an excellent reason for leaving his fiancée. During Dougal’s residence in Peckham, Dixie’s character was developing for the worse at a rapid speed, as if the presence of some kind of evil was speeding it up. During his wedding, something dreadful was made apparent to Humphrey, an epiphany that offered him an insight into Dixie’s personality once and for all. “To be frank, I won’t,” should be therefore read as a reaction of someone “taking a whiff” of true evil disguised as his bride Dixie, a human equivalent of a succubus – always greedy, never content, sucking the life and energy out of its prey.

Yet, Spark wraps up the story with having precarious peace restored in Peckham and even insists on providing the narrative with a belated “happy ending”; with Dixie and Humphrey exchanging their vows some time after Dougal’s disappearance. If Dougal Douglas, the satirist in the cloak of a troublemaker, was planted in Peckham to ignite a moral revolution, then this revolution left everything in its place. Peckham’s potential “demon”, Dougal Douglas, is not exorcized from this place by the powers of Good, but merely driven away by even greater, more practical and determined evil in the form of the local street gang of youngsters.

The concluding chapter seems to lack a conclusion. Unlike Muriel Spark’s earlier “Catholic” novels, this one does not point to a dogma underpinning her writing. We may have been lulled into a false sense of security by identifying Dougal Douglas with the satirist.

Yet, to be able to trace the “moral police of literature” in Spark’s novels, we should compare the notion of a satirist with another example of an elusive satirist in her art, since all her art must ultimately be tied to the same roots.

*The Abbess of Crewe* (1974) has been reviewed many times as a fine piece of political satire (and a *roman à clef*). A religious scandal from a Catholic nunnery is skilfully manipulated to refer to practices in politics in general and the notorious Watergate affair in particular. The recently elected Abbess Alexandra appears to have bugged the whole convent and arranged a burglary to discredit her rival for the post, Sister Felicity, who was involved in a torrid love affair with a Jesuit – certainly something inconsistent with vows of chastity.

It is only natural to require an abbess to be a very strict guardian of values within the nunnery. One might understand Alexandra’s reasons for attempting to compromise a woman brazen enough to try to enjoy a healthy sex life and a top position in a Catholic Church institution at the

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19 Gerard Carruthers, *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 128.

same time. Surprisingly, Abbess Alexandra, an aristocratic, charismatic lady, holds no particular grudge against Felicity, apart from an abysmal disregard for her bad taste:

Why would they trouble themselves about a salacious nun and a Jesuit? I must say a Jesuit, or any priest for that matter, would be the last man I would myself elect to be laid by. A man who undresses, maybe; but one who unfrocks, no.<sup>20</sup>

The reason for vying for the post was simply Alexandra's "will to power", something she perceived as her birthright and which was never "tainted" by an idea of vocation or service. Sister Felicity's plans, on the other hand, revolved around turning the nunnery into a place nurturing love in the most carnal sense of the word. There follows a section of Alexandra's speech delivered to the congregation before the election:

Sisters, be vigilant, be sober. You will recall your good fortune, daughters as the majority of you are of dentists, doctors, lawyers, stockbrokers [...] that with the advance of the century this Congregation no longer requires you to present as postulants the *épreuves*, this is to say your proofs of nobility [...] Today the bourgeois mix indifferently with the noble. No longer do we have in our Abbey the separate entrances, the separate dormitories, the separate refectories and staircases for the *soeurs nobles* and *soeurs bourgeoises* [...]. We are left now only with our higher instincts to guide us in the matter of how our Order and our Abbey proceeds. Are we to decline into a community of the total bourgeois or are we to retain the characteristics of a society of ladies?<sup>21</sup>

One might point out it would take a great deal of artistry on Spark's side to persuade the reader to even consider something as far-fetched as the nuns of an English convent facing two evils to choose from, both appealing not so much to their "higher instincts" as to the base ones, either physical lust or its mental counterpart – snobbery. Snobbery wins and the post goes to Alexandra, who rounds off her election speech in a way truly unexpected in the head of a religious institution:

A Lady may secretly believe in nothing; but a Bourgeoise invariably proclaims her belief and believes in the wrong things. A Lady does not recognize the existence of a scandal which touches upon her own House; but a Bourgeoise broadcasts it *urbi et orbi*, which is to say, all over the place. A Lady is free; but a Bourgeoise is never free from the desire of freedom.<sup>22</sup>

However, artistry is there; many readers must be on their guard not to fall prey to the daring, devious but mesmerizing presence of Abbess Alexandra.

Spark's outrageously unconventional female characters have led some critics, namely, Maggie Tonkin, to explore links between Spark's fiction and the theories of R. D. Laing, psychiatrist appropriated by feminists in the late 1960s. Laing's preoccupation with mental illness, particularly schizophrenia, is most relevant to Spark's novel *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), whose schizophrenic female protagonist, in Tonkin's words, "literalizes Laing's notion that schizophrenia is a socially intelligible praxis by encoding it as a mode of resistance to, and ultimately triumph

20 Muriel Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 20.

21 Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe*, 73–74.

22 Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe*, 75.

over, the rigid gender roles enforced by the nuclear family with the connivance of psychiatry.”<sup>23</sup> Schizophrenic features can also be found in the character of Abbess Alexandra in the discrepancy between her public image and her private aspirations as well as in her obvious hypocrisy, manifested, for instance, in her above-mentioned disapproval of Sister Felicity’s affair, not on moral grounds, but on the grounds of her poor choice of lover. More generally, Laing legitimised mental affliction as a condition that might not be rationally understood, yet is understandable, and may even allow the sufferer for a more acute insight: “Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough.”<sup>24</sup> It seems only appropriate that in her enquiry into the nature of flawed humanity, Spark would choose to utilise borderline psychotic characters in order to achieve greater depth and complexity of representation.

Once again, in *The Abbess of Crewe*, Spark the satirist seems nowhere to be found to correct any of the nefarious trespassers mentioned above. Alexandra, another “succubus” greedy for power and obedience, just like Dougal Douglas, casts off any semblance of disguise to show what she really is. Both Dougal Douglas and Alexandra are determined to make all conform to their will. What is more, Spark imbued their evil characters with a great deal of charm and charisma. Hence, two skilful Pipers are ready to lead those around them into the abyss, stopped in their tracks only by coincidence.

Apparently, when it comes to being a satirist, Spark would not answer to that name. But this does not mean that she did not write satires. We are certain Spark was fully aware of the new, ground-breaking development in literary criticism.

The 1960s deconstructed the apparatus of the traditional, realistic novel and made an attempt to “kill” the author in terms of stripping them of their traditional metaphysical status. It was even suggested<sup>25</sup> that authors merely form a crossroads of various interpretations and that the reader is therefore welcome to enter the text and ignore the author’s automatic leadership, since the reader has become a collaborator in the meaning of the text. In this vein, early in her career, Spark dismissed the notion of the author as the authority who decides on how the text should be read and speculated that there might be no place for the author in the text at all: “With a novel, you know the dialogue. It belongs to each character. But the narrative part – first or third person – belongs to a character as well. I have to decide what the author of the narrative is like. It’s not me, it’s a character.”<sup>26</sup> By leaving herself out of her texts and waiving any responsibility for her creations, Spark encouraged the reader to assume the responsibility for their reading of her fiction. As Isobel Murray and Bob Tait point out, “Muriel Spark’s refusal to judge for us does not remove the necessity for judgement, but transfers it to the reader as part of the required response.”<sup>27</sup> Arguably, Spark’s slyly evasive manner of teaching a moral lesson proves to be more effective than the traditional approach of expressing an explicit moral judgement for the reader to passively consume and accept.

23 Maggie Tonkin, “Psychosis, Alienation, and R. D. Laing in the Fictions of Muriel Spark and Angela Carter,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 9, no. 3 (2015): 381.

24 R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 110.

25 On Jauss and Izer’s reader-response criticism see Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, and Peter Brooker, *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 5th ed. (London: Longman, 2005), 50–55.

26 Muriel Spark, “My Conversion,” *Twentieth Century* 170 (Autumn 1961): 58.

27 Isobel Murray and Bob Tait, *Ten Modern Scottish Novels* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984), 102.



In a way, both texts presented here owe a great deal to the above-mentioned narrative experiment. Spark created fictional worlds where nothing is fully explained or given depth; she sprinkled her texts with notable silences in places crying for explanation. But this was always her particular narrative strategy; nothing ever disappears, but it grows even more intense since all hinges on the reader's horizon of expectation. The aspects of it that are conspicuous by their absence are the hardest ones to ignore. If the writer does not seem to care about the revolting state of her own fictional universe, then someone has to. It is the reader – unwilling to indulge the immoral, the intemperate and those committing errors of judgment – who is expected to resist the Piper's tune (Alexandra's and Douglas's alike), forget about all connections easily made and disambiguate facts from fiction in the tales of Dougal Douglas and Abbess Alexandra. Thus, we may conclude that Spark, after all, did provide a niche for satire by inspiring her readers to resume the role of guardians of values in her novels in her stead.

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