The satiric element in the novels of Muriel Spark.

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THE SATIRIC ELEMENT
IN THE NOVELS OF MURIEL SPARK

BY
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ABSTRACT

Muriel Spark has received great acclaim from both American and British critics for her wit, humour and use of the macabre. To my knowledge, no critic has examined her work wholly for the element of satire found in it. Analysis of her novels shows that she has satirized many segments of society from the young who are still at school to the near-centenarians. Setting her novels in the period between the wars and just after the second world war, she has stressed the loss of moral values and has portrayed both the lost young generation who seek substitutes for faith, and the aged who refuse to face the idea of death. Although she treats her subjects in a comic vein her themes are fundamentally serious. Much of her success lies in the juxtaposition of the absurd and the fantastic with a realistic view of life. In all her novels she shows her skill as a craftsman, for with crisp dialogue and an economy of words she moves backwards and forwards in time with perfect ease, and her characters are quickly portrayed with deft descriptive phrases. She balances wit with wisdom, and after enjoying the comedy, the reader is left with the feeling that all is not well with the world.
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INTRODUCTION

Between 1957 and 1963 Muriel Spark published seven novels, two books of short stories, and one play; she also collaborated with Derek Stanford in a critical study of the life work of Emily Bronte. As poet, critic, and novelist she has won acclaim in Britain and the United States. In view of the widespread interest in her achievement there seems to be good reason to examine certain aspects of her work in order to ascertain the cause for the rapid and favourable recognition of her fiction.

Muriel Spark was born in Edinburgh in 1918 of a Jewish father and a Protestant mother. She spent several years in Africa, returning to England in 1944 to work in the Intelligence Ministry. With the coming of peace she became a journalist on the staff of the trade magazine Argentor. In 1947 as General-Secretary of the Poetry Society, she interviewed and corresponded with many writers and from close study of their writings she became familiar with contemporary literary trends. Opportunity for a wider sphere of activity induced her to work with a publisher's publicity agent until she became associated with Derek Stanford as editor and publisher of the Forum. They collaborated also in a number of biographical and critical studies until 1956. When Mrs. Spark entered the Catholic Church in 1954 she retired to the country to write her first novel, The Comforters (1957). Perhaps its success

1 These details of the life and career of the author are taken from Derek Stanford, Muriel Spark (Fontwell, Sussex, 1963).

In reviewing Mrs. Spark's fictional output the critical consensus notes in particular her unique gift of comic invention. She is "one of our most entertaining comic novelists",\(^4\) "one of the very best comic writers",\(^5\) and "our most chilling comic writer since Evelyn Waugh".\(^6\) Some critics have referred to her style and subject matter:

Always unpredictable in her subject matter, she is, for the most part, altogether predictable in her ability to captivate, to entertain and to impart that additional quality which raises her at least a step above so many of her contemporaries.\(^7\)

\(^2\) In Voices at Play (London, 1961).
\(^4\) Granville Hicks, "Life Began in the Forties", Saturday Review (September 14, 1963), p. 34.
\(^5\) Brian Wilkie, "From Comedy to Disaster and Grace", The Common-wealth (October 11, 1963), p. 80.
\(^7\) Catherine Hughes, in a review of The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, The Catholic World (March, 1962), p. 374
The critics alert us also to her "creative power, dialogue, tart humour, and an odd conglomeration of characters,"\(^8\) and to her "deadly ear for the banalities of daily chatter and a tender sense of human hesitancy".\(^9\) One of Mrs. Spark's compatriots notes that she enjoys evident advantages: "wit, a capacity to communicate human oddity and solitude."\(^10\)

An American critic, alluding to her powers of construction, and imaginative insight remarks:

Her work is distinguished by wit and pungency and alarming sharpness of observation, all controlled by instinct, with a religious (in fact, a Catholic) sensibility. Working with the oddest materials, she manages a kind of grisly comedy of doom; with exquisite tact and deftness she delivers a terrible judgment upon her emblematic London, her blighted contemporary city. The enabling emotion is loathing, and the atmosphere evoked is close, oppressive, suffocating.\(^\)\(^{11}\)

In this chorus of acclaim, a dissonant voice is occasionally heard. In assessing her work Frederick R. Karl says,

Miss Spark's novels are a sport, light to the point of froth. She can write about murder, betrayal, deception, and adultery as thought these were the norms of a crazy-quilt society.\(^\)\(^{12}\)

In a review of The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie a writer states that:

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9 Paul West, in a review of The Bachelors, New Statesman (March 5, 1960), p. 341.


"The flaw is a thinness of texture; no single outline is untrue, but details are indefinite, as in a photographic positive taken too soon from the developer."  

As I hope to make clear in the chapters to follow, such assessment of Mrs. Spark's work as "froth", and "thinness of texture" is completely misleading. Her moral vision centres on the lack of norms in contemporary society, and the distortion of values which shows that modern life has neither the pattern nor the homely appeal of a "crazy-quilt" design. The two reviewers just quoted have failed to perceive the deeper level of significance to be found in all the author's fiction. They have apparently misunderstood or disregarded her ironic intent.

Most of the critical comments on her work deal with one particular novel; the reviewer compares it unfavourably with one or other of her novels which he in turn praises. However, she has one very bitter critic, in Brigid Brophy whose deflation of the acclaim given to the writings of Muriel Spark is actually an attack on the intelligence, perception and integrity of the other critics. In her opening sentences Brigid Brophy's contemptuous tone implies that she considers Muriel Spark to be merely a sensationalistic writer:

Mrs. Spark is probably the best low-brow novelist to appear since Margery Sharp ...  
Mrs. Spark is nothing like the inspired clown Miss Nancy Mitford is or the inspired tattler Roger Peyrefitte is.  

Brigid Brophy taking in turn the comments of several well-known critics, attempts to disprove them:

No more is she, as she has been called in The Observer, 'one of those rare artists whose work never needs pruning'. Neither is she (still The Observer) 'an

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assured technician', with (Sunday Times) 'absolute author-
ity over her material'. Still less is she a 'pure-
languaged writer' (New Statesman). Least of all is she
(New Statesman again) 'a poet-novelist of formidable
power.' I agree with 'The Observer's' 'critic that 'her
touch is light but her themes are big': I would add,
however, that she treats her big themes pretentiously.15

It is interesting to note that Brigid Brophy has also expressed
bitter criticism of other English writers. In a spirited and caustic
article, a novelist and critic has analyzed the motives and techniques
of such unwarranted animadversion16- Miss Brophy's recent novel has had
unfavourable notice in some English reviews.17

In this study, my purpose is to examine the fiction of Muriel
Spark in order to bring to light the satirical element. In view of the
many facets of Mrs. Spark's fictional art, I have examined her works
particularly for the purpose of ascertaining the type of satire she
employs and the targets at which she aims. With this in mind, I have
selected three areas where the author provides criticism of contempor-
ary life: education, social habits and morality. However, since there
is an element of social satire in all her writing, I discuss this aspect
in each of the novels in chronological order.

Although several critics have alluded to her as a satiric writer,
none to my knowledge, has examined her technique in detail. With re-
levance to this quality in her work one critic is, it seems to me,
unusually perceptive:

15 Brophy, op. cit., p. 77.

(March 6, 1964), pp. 691-692.

17 Brigid Brophy, The Snow Ball (London, 1963), reviewed in The
Times Literary Supplement (January 23, 1964), p. 61; The Listener
Dryden says somewhere that the purpose of satire is "the amendment of vices by correction". Stern words, and a far cry, one might think, from the inventive sparkle and sympathy with which Miss Spark surveys the human ant-hill. But Dryden - also a Roman Catholic - believed that the satirist could and should see the object of his ridicule against the pattern of the Christian ideal, ludicrous not by society's standards but by God's. And it is Miss Spark's peculiar distinction, among the countless novelists who cast a sardonic eye over the materialistic world to remind us, without priggishness that we may be laughed at, all of us, by a supernatural creator.18

Another reviewer made the following statement:

Mrs. Spark does, however, satirize humanity's foibles and incongruities from a decidedly Catholic orientation. One is conscious that she is a writer working within the framework of some of Christianity's greatest truths; that her perspective, which takes full cognizance of eternal values, is never burdened by a painful attempt to inflict them upon others.19

In the light of these statements, I shall try to show that our author's social criticism has a serious purpose and a compassionate quality, that she views human nature against the "pattern of the Christian ideal" as a writer within the framework of Christian culture. Moreover, I believe that Mrs. Spark meets the requirements set forth by Professor Frye:

Two things, then, are essential to satire; one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack.20

With two exceptions,21 her novels are set in England between the two world wars or shortly after the end of the second World War. Dealing

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21. In Robinson the setting is a volcanic island; in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie the scene is Edinburgh. See post, Chapter V.
with the 1930's, the period known as the "age of anxiety" or the 1940's, the "age of austerity", she finds many human types and forms of behaviour to attack: self-righteous "comforters", young business women, unattached males in a large city, old people who refuse to face death, teaching methods, and spiritualism.

In each case there is an attack, potential or actual, on the way of life of small social groups. The satiric element depends largely upon Muriel Spark's ability to present fantastic situations by antithesis; the malignant influence of a few characters in each story is finally revealed by the heroic nature of one or two others in whom the character and personality develop in the course of the story. The comedy consists in the juxtaposition of hilarious and bizarre actions of certain characters with the conscientious but unobtrusive wholesomeness of one or two others. Part of her success seems to be in the style, a light ironical touch and direct and unequivocal statements where moral issues are involved. In this way her work illustrates a theory of comedy as stated by a critic:

... comedy means much more than laughter ... its cause is much wider in scope than the game called comedy of manners. It is deeper than this, more real, more in touch with human experience; it explores much more than the ridiculous ... it tells us a great deal about ourselves that tragedy, in its larger-than-life aspirations, must leave unsaid.22

Muriel Spark's work belongs to this category of higher comedy. In her humorous portrayal of eccentric types, we can see the weakness of Everyman.

In dealing with this subject I have chosen for discussion the seven

novels of Muriel Spark. In each chapter I have included a summary of the story and excerpts to illustrate the satirical element. These quotations are from the Penguin editions of the novels of Muriel Spark unless otherwise stated. Double quotation marks indicate my direct references to the text; single quotation marks are in accord with the author's usage in dialogue.
CHAPTER ONE

The Comforters (1957), an amusing story of intrigue touched with fantasy, was Muriel Spark's first novel. In the first chapter we learn that Laurence Manders, a B.B.C. commentator, has an abnormal desire to pry into the affairs of others. This characteristic is an important factor in the structure of the book, for Laurence provides the clues we need to unravel the plot. He is the link between two groups: his parents, his friend Caroline Rose, their London associates, and the characters of a picaresque sub-plot about smuggling in which his half-gipsy grandmother is involved.

While visiting his grandmother Louisa Jepp in her country cottage, Laurence finds diamonds mysteriously hidden in a loaf of bread. He suspects that she and three others, a Mr. Webster who delivers the bread, Mervyn Hogarth and his young crippled son Andrew, are engaged in some illegal transaction. He writes to Caroline in London an account of the evidence he has gathered. When this letter is found and opened by the meddlesome Georgina Hogg it becomes a trump card in her blackmail scheme. She uses it to threaten Caroline and Lady Helena Manders, Laurence's mother.

Though Mrs. Jepp spins the bizarre plot of the diamonds-in-bread story, Caroline's crisis of faith is really the issue on which the novel centres. A recent convert, she is striving to be zealous in her religious duties. She and Laurence had once lived together, but on becoming a Catholic she had left him. They are still friends, and his
mother has persuaded her to go to St. Philumena's retreat house, where she could recover from nervous exhaustion and also find spiritual 'comfort'. Here she meets Georgina Hogg, an apparently pious but extremely repugnant and presumptuous woman who had, years before, worked for Lady Helena. At first amused by Georgina's tales of the "miracles" which Our Lady has worked for her and the "great number of Crosses" she has to bear, Caroline, after three days, is almost hysterical:

...Caroline's mood had changed again. Her sophisticated forbearance departed and constriction took its place; a pinching irritated sense of being with something abominable, not to be tolerated. She had a sudden intense desire to clean her teeth. ...These scatty women with their miracles. Caroline thought, 'I hate all women and of all women Mrs. Hogg. My nerves are starting up again. The next few eternal minutes are important. I must mind what I say. Keep aloof. Watch my manners at all costs.'

Georgina's list of 'miracles' seemed to be interminable; her patronizing tone became unbearable as she explained how 'Our Lady always speaks to me. I ask a question and she answers! ...but of course you won't know about that. You have to be experienced in the spiritual life.'

When Caroline persisted in asking a few questions about the nature and the authenticity of the "miracles", the woman "moved her upper lip into an indecent smile, condescended to supply details, and gave Caroline some advice: 'You want to speak to a priest. You haven't really got the hang of the Catholic Faith...'

The irony of the situation, the impertinence of the woman, and the realization that "St. Philumena's was a dead loss" made her decide to leave. In a negative sense she had learned something:


2 Ibid., p. 34.
Caroline told herself: 'For one who demands much of life, there is always a certain amount of experience to be discarded as soon as one discovers its fruitlessness.'

On the train to London, her mind dwelt alternately on the 'pilgrims' at St. Philumena's, gathered round the fireplace, "exchanging anecdotes about the treatment of Catholics in England by non-Catholics. It was their favourite theme." When "the atrocities mounted up" she would leave the earnest group, aware of their suppressed hostility towards her, the recent convert, and therefore "suspect". As she thought of them,

...Caroline recalled too a similar fireside pattern, her family on the Jewish side with their friends, so long ago left behind her. She saw them again, nursing themselves in a half-circle as they indulged in their debauch of unreal suffering; 'Prejudice!' '...an outright insult!' Caroline thought, Catholics and Jews; the Chosen, infatuated with a tragic image of themselves. They are tragic only because they are so comical. But the thought of those fireside martyrs, Jews and Catholics, revolted Caroline with their funniness.

The retreatants continued to haunt her when she was in the dining-car, and "Mrs. Hogg stuck in her mind like a lump of food on the chest...". She recalled the incongruity of the situation in the refectory when the "mock martyrs" were wholly unconscious of the import of the spiritual reading:

...the memory of mealtimes at St. Philumena's returned, with the sight of Mrs. Hogg chewing in rhythm with the reading from the Scriptures delivered in the sister's refined modulations: 'Beloved, let us love one another, love springs from God...If a man boasts of loving God, while he hates his own brother, he is a liar...the man who loves God must be one who loves his brother.'

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3 Spark, op. cit., pp. 35-36.
4 Ibid., p. 37.
5 Ibid., p. 38.
6 Ibid., p. 39.
We glimpse here the besetting problem of Caroline's infant faith: how to implement in daily life this fundamental doctrine of love. We shall see that on three occasions she makes a firm decision in attempting to live according to this pattern of perfection. What she has seen and heard at the retreat centre occupies her mind while on the train:

Caroline thought, 'The demands of the Christian religion are exorbitant, they are outrageous. Christians who don't realize that from the start are not faithful. They are dishonest; their teachers are talking in their sleep. "Love one another...brethren, beloved...your brother, neighbours, love, love, love" - do they know what they are saying?'

In this mood of vexation about the benighted people she encountered in her first experience with a Catholic group, Caroline arrives at her London flat in a state of nervous collapse. The condition is aggravated by the nocturnal occurrence of mysterious voices and the tapping of typewriter keys. Distraught when she cannot discover the source of these sounds, she decides to stay with Willi Stock, known as the "Baron", one of her pre-conversion Bohemian friends. Complicated circumstances have led him to associate again with his former mistress, Eleanor, the dancing partner of Ernest Manders, Laurence's uncle. She had previously been the wife, in name only, of Mervyn Hogarth, for he had not been divorced from Georgina Hogg, the mother of the crippled boy Andrew.

Meanwhile, Laurence tries in vain to resume his affair with Caroline. He is also concerned about his grandmother's activities with Mr. Webster, Mr. Hogarth and Andrew; he has evidence that all four are engaged in smuggling diamonds into England. He persuades Caroline to return with him to Mrs. Jepp's cottage, where she can regain her health.

7 See post, p. 28.
8 Spark, op. cit., p. 39.
She insists upon going by train because his old car is too much of a risk, but yields to the motor trip when she remembers that she must go to Mass on the feast of All Saints. En route to the country they are involved in an accident, and Caroline is seriously injured. When the Baron visits her in the hospital, she tells him more about the uncanny voices and typing sounds. He has a relish for the weird, enjoys telling his friends about her eerie experiences, and confides to her that Mervyn Hogarth practises black magic.

We learn, not from Laurence but from his grandmother, the solution of the diamonds-in-bread mystery. The bread had been a secure hiding place for the smuggled jewels. At the appropriate time they were taken out, concealed in a tin of herring-roe, and taken by Mervyn to London for Baron Willi Stock to sell. The smuggling business ended when young Andrew was "miraculously" cured of paralysis. He and his father had no longer a plausible reason for trips to the continent, ostensibly as pilgrims to shrines of the Blessed Virgin. As a final irony, the Hogarths had brought the diamonds to England secreted in statues or rosary beads. Unfortunately, we are not told of Caroline's reaction to this "miracle"; for Louisa, it meant only an end to her "sport". Helena began to hope that the Hogarths, at least the younger one, would become Catholics.

The story of Laurence and Caroline provides a significant counterpoint to the fantasy of the smuggling "pilgrims". Her loyalty to the faith is the undertow of the whole novel. We have already seen that she made attendance at Mass on a holy-day of obligation a pre-requisite to the trip to the country. On another occasion, when he asked why they could not resume their life together, she replied: 'Because I love God
more than I love you.' With this answer he has to be content; their friendship remains on this level.

One summer day Laurence and Caroline plan a picnic to which they invite his mother who, much to the young couple's consternation, brings along Mrs. Hogg and Willi Stock. The latter was interested in a local abbey on an island across the river. Lady Helena's invitation, as she explained to Caroline and Laurence, was an act of charity to Georgina. Actually, the malicious Mrs. Hogg, by opening Laurence's letter to Caroline in the latter's absence, discovered that Louisa Jepp was implicated in the smuggling affair and was threatening to make this a public scandal. She had also spied on the Baron and was determined to spread gossip about him and Caroline. While the woman follows the Baron to the abbey, a storm arises. She is stranded on the island, for the Baron had left before she arrived. When the others, sheltered in the car from the driving rain, see Georgina waving frantically from the opposite shore, they discuss the possibility of reaching her by boat. Caroline decides that she can take the risk, and hears Helena commending her for being so "charitable":

Caroline gave her an amiable smile, for she was too proud to reveal her neurotic dread. Her dread was on account of a very small thing. She knew she would have to give Mrs. Hogg a hand into the boat. The anticipation of this physical contact, her hand in Mrs. Hogg's only for a moment, horrified Caroline. It was a very small thing, but it was what she constitutionally dreaded.  

She manages to overcome the "neurotic dread", takes the woman's hand, warning her to be careful not to slip on the muddy bank, "the

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9 Spark, op. cit., pp. 67-68.

10 Ibid., p. 196.
river's deep here." In spite of the precaution, Mrs. Hogg slips, her "rubber-soled shoes...had picked up a good deal of mud." With Caroline's hand still gripped in hers, Georgina is in the water, screaming, 'I can't swim!' When Caroline frees herself in order to swim, telling the woman to hold on to her shoulders, she feels "one of Mrs. Hogg's great hands clawing across her eyes, the other hand tightening on her throat."12

The underwater contest lasts a few moments before Caroline manages to free herself from the throat-grip:

It was not until Mrs. Hogg opened her mouth finally to the inrush of water that her grip slackened and Caroline was free, her lungs aching for the breath of life. Mrs. Hogg subsided away from her. God knows where she went.13

Rescued by a man in a houseboat, as if "landed with a thud like a gaping fish," and taken care of by a woman, "Caroline had a sense of childhood, and she closed her eyes."14

As the story draws to an end, we hear of Sir Edwin Manders, "making his autumn retreat, October 24th, the Feast of St. Raphael the Archangel."15 We learn of his love of the contemplative life, "the legend of his 'certain sanctity,' his attraction to ascetism, and his realization that with his kind of spirituality, "he never would have made a religious."16 He reviews his family affairs and ponders the items which

11 Spark, op. cit.
12 Ibid., pp. 196-97.
13 Ibid., p. 197
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 198.
16 Ibid., p. 199.
he found in the newspapers: Louisa Jepp's involvement with smugglers and the death of Georgina Hogg, "now lodged, it was believed, in the mud of the Medway, for her body was never recovered."17

The other characters are accounted for in a conversation between Sir Edwin and his wife: Caroline might marry if Laurence returned to the Church is Helena's idea. Sir Edwin thinks that the girl is "an odd sort of Catholic, very little heart for it, all mind."18 Caroline herself tells Helena that she will take "a holiday of obligation" and write a novel. Laurence, at the end as in the beginning, is busy prying; this time, the snooping occurs in Caroline's empty flat. The Baron enters a mental home; and in her seventy-ninth year, Mrs. Jepp marries seventy-seven-year-old Mr. Webster. Sir Edwin and Lady Helena continue their routine observance of the amenities of life and of religious duties, hoping to make converts who will be "comforters" according to the Manders' ideals of gracious living, a way of life that is more reminiscent of Victorian than of mid-twentieth century England.

In The Comforters, Muriel Spark presents a view of several levels of society. One group, the upper gentry, live an established way of life: they are socially secure, conventionally proper, and conscientious about the formalities of religion. They react to external stimuli emotionally or superficially. Sir Edwin Manders and his wife Helena are typical of this group. With deft Chaucerian humour Muriel Spark shows us an admirable couple with many desirable qualities, but the reader is

17 Spark, op., cit., p. 200.
soon aware of the author's light ironical tone, which rarely breaks out into open laughter. It is clear early in the first chapter that Lady Helena, "a Catholic since her marriage", is concerned about startling news which her son Laurence has relayed as a result of his ubiquitous meddling in the affairs of every one in the household; she had repeatedly warned him not to enter the maids' rooms, for "they are entitled to their privacy." The boy's prying habits, however, are usually successful in bringing to light what the author wishes us to know about the other characters and in providing the clues for our unravelling of the plot. When he tells his mother, "Eileen is going to baby," her shocked protest is a refusal to believe that this could happen, "She's a good Catholic girl." The maid, having admitted the truth, refuses to give the father's name, whereupon Laurence, with evident glee, supplies the information and congratulates his mother, and incidentally himself, upon the outcome:

"Well, you've got them married, my dear. A good Catholic marriage. That's the happy result of my shocking perusal of Eileen's letters."23

In this short dialogue between mother and son, the author has revealed Helena as a self-assured, complacent parent, concerned about her son's misdemeanours because, "It's illegal, I believe, to read letters

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19 Spark, op. cit., p. 11
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
addressed to others,"24 and shocked that "a good Catholic"25 should do so. Yet, the authorial comment follows immediately to assure us that Helena's attitude derives from conformity to what she considers proper to her role as "a good Catholic" rather than from principle and conviction. It gratified her that she had arranged the right kind of marriage for Eileen, while she disapproved of the way her son had helped her in the matter, for, "The end doesn't justify the means."26 Helena's moral ambivalence is noted by her son and implied by the author's ironic reference to her habitual inertia:

Pat it came out just as he had expected. An answer to everything. All the same, incidents like this helped to deaden the blow when she realized that Laurence was abandoning, and finally had abandoned religion.27

The Manders, husband and wife, are depicted as pious Catholics, interested in converting others, helping the less fortunate, quite satisfied that their own way of life leaves nothing to be desired. When problems arise within the household or are thrust upon them from outside, Sir Edwin, who had inherited the family business known as "Manders' Figs in Syrup," forthwith decides to make a retreat. Self-protection from life's vicissitudes seems to motivate these religious exercises; what he, or anyone connected with him, gained from his isolation from the world, is not apparent. He seemed, indeed, to have some misgivings about his own spiritual state when he remarked to the retreat master that he might have been a better man had he never made a retreat, and was told: "You

24 Spark, op. cit., p. 11.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., p. 12.
might have done worse."\textsuperscript{28} This laconic retort illustrates the low-keyed irony that is the weapon which Muriel Spark often uses to hit the target of her satire.

The author leaves us in no doubt about the pseudo-mysticism to which Edwin aspires; one of her rare moralizing comments occurs at a critical moment in the story when the smuggling activities of Louisa Jepp have become known to the malicious Mrs. Hogg; family scandal may result and all are perturbed except Sir Edwin. Mrs. Spark throws some light on the psychology of the spiritual aesthete:

\begin{quote}
It is possible for a man matured in religion by half a century of punctilious observance, having advanced himself in devotion the slow and exquisite way, trustfully ascending his winding stair, and, to make assurance doubly sure, supplementing his meditations by deep-breathing exercises twice daily, to go into a flat spin when faced with some trouble which does not come within a familiar category. Should this occur, it causes dismay in others. To anyone accustomed to respect the wisdom and control of a contemplative creature, the evidence of his failure to cope with a normal emergency is distressing. Only the spiritual extremists rejoice - the Devil on account of his crude triumph, and the very holy souls because they discern in such behaviour a testimony to the truth that human nature is apt to fail in spite of regular prayer and deep breathing.
\end{quote}

But fortunately that situation rarely happens. The common instinct knows how to gauge the limits of a man's sanctity, and anyone who has earned a reputation for piety by prayer, deep breathing and one or two acceptable good works has gained this much for his trouble, that few people bring him any extraordinary problem.

\begin{quote}
That is why hardly anyone asked Sir Edwin Manders for a peculiar favour or said weird things to him.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

This long passage is quoted in order to convey the author's spiritual insight and her capacity for simple statements on a profound subject. It reveals the egoism that motivated Sir Edwin's self-indulgence in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[28] Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 198.
\item[29] \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 113-114.
\end{footnotes}
religion— a form of escape from the perplexities of family life.

His wife, we are told, was aware that Sir Edwin

...might have managed to do something suave and comforting about Helena's other worry— her mother's suspected criminal activities. He might have turned this upset of his social tranquillity to some personal and spiritual advantage, but then he might not. Helena instinctively did not try him with this problem. She did not know what Louisa was up to, but she understood that the difficulty was not one which the Manders' cheque book could solve. Helena would not have liked to see her husband in a state of bewilderment. He went to Mass every morning, confession once a week, entertained Cardinals. He would sit, contemplating deeply, for a full hour in a silence so still you could hear a moth breathe. And Helena thought 'No, simply no' when she tried to envisage the same Edwin grappling also with the knowledge that his mother-in-law ran a gang, kept diamonds in the bread—stolen diamonds possibly. Helena took her troubles to his brother Ernest who sailed through life wherever the fairest wind should waft him, and for whom she had always prayed so hard.30

In presenting Sir Edwin through his wife's eyes, Mrs. Spark seems to provide a clue to one meaning of the ironic title of the book: handling problems through his cheque book was Edwin's way of bringing comfort to those who needed his help. These included his convert wife, his irreligious son engaged in an irregular love affair, his pathetically abnormal brother in need of sound counsel and moral rehabilitation. Helena realizes without bitterness that her husband's "stout character" would be "in a state of bewilderment"31 were he involved in any kind of crisis, and she is too complacent to be aware of the necessity of a rational basis for her own actions.

The essence of the satire in Mrs. Spark's Comforters is captured too in her portrait of a woman who placidly side-steps unpleasant

30 Spark, op. cit., p. 114.
31 Ibid.
obstacles; "... the mildness of her distaste", when Ernest indulged his effeminate nature by dressing up in Caroline’s clothes and posing before the mirror, sums up her contribution to the "comfort" of Ernest. As with other problems she meets, Lady Helena has done nothing at all about Ernest’s.

Helena’s undeveloped mind and heart seem to make her a statue rather than a real woman; a wife and mother who cannot communicate with any one of her family; a Catholic who gives liberally to the church and yet shows not the slightest inclination to bring her son back to the practice of his faith; a daughter who wonders how her pensioned mother lives but fails to take a step towards bettering her situation—such is Lady Helena Manders. She is also smug and snobbish about her social and spiritual advantages:

‘How exhilarating it is to be myself’, and the whole advantage of her personality flashed into her thoughts as if they were someone else’s—her good manners and property, her good health, her niceness and her modest sense and charity; and she felt an excitement to encounter Mrs. Hogg. She felt her strength; a fine disregard, freedom to take sides with her mother absolutely if necessary.

By interior monologue Mrs. Spark can frequently achieve an ironic effect. In this case, Helena confronts a social inferior with superb equanimity, for she knows that she can handle any unpleasant matter that Georgina might bring up. But her armour of virtue was a futile preparation; the author deflates her bland arrogance: "It was hardly necessary. Mrs. Hogg was docile."

In the portrait of Helena the author satirizes the pious person whose mind and heart are never involved in the practice of religion.

32 Spark, op. cit., p. 118.
33 Ibid., p. 152.
While her husband's spirituality is a matter of "deep breathing and regular prayer", hers is a protective colouring of naive optimism and self-congratulation. Her easy conscience cannot feel a prick. It is significant that the author provides no description of Helena's physical appearance. This fact suggests either that she is a faceless creature, a nonentity, or that her type is all too common in an age of conformity to require delineation of features.

In contrast to the image of the pious snob, there is the full-blown treatment of the religious hypocrite. Georgina Hogg's portrait is limned from several points of view -- Helena, Caroline, Laurence, Mrs. Jepp and Georgina's husband Mervyn Hogarth provide details which amount to caricature. Caroline meets her for the first time in the refectory of the retreat house:

... an angular face, cropped white hair, no eyelashes, rimless glasses, a small fat nose of which the tip was twitching as she ate, very thin neck, a colossal bosom.\footnote{Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 31.}

Mrs. Spark's technique in this instance concurs with the statement of a modern critic:

The faces peering out at us from the crowded satiric scene seldom have normal features but are grotesquely distorted by the vices they mirror.\footnote{Alvin B. Kernan, "A Theory of Satire", in \textit{Modern Satire} (New York, 1962), p. 169.}

The comment of G. K. Chesterton is also relevant:

You may have the dullest possible intelligence and be a portrait painter; but a man must have a serious intellect to be a caricaturist.\footnote{G. K. Chesterton, \textit{Criticisms and Appreciations} (London, 1927), p. 93.}
The author stresses at several points in the story the abnormal bosom, an embarrassment to Mrs. Hogg who "throughout those years since her marriage ..." had sought in vain for an effectual garment to harness her tremendous and increasing bosom."37 We are told that in their early married life, her husband discovered that "her morals were as flat-chested as her form was sensuous."38 A reviewer remarks that Mrs. Hogg is "a comic image of evil in its familiar, slatternly, intramural guise."39

A word should now be said about the irony concealed in the proper names. The stately, rigid, somewhat pompous Sir Edwin and the sentimental, gracious, gentle Lady Helena are emblematic of tradition and aristocratic origin. He is, however, in business, and the self-interpretive name of the family firm - 'Manders' Figs in Syrup' - is a revealing item in the general satiric treatment. In the Old Testament narratives "fig" and "fig-tree" occur frequently, often with symbolic significance; for example, "every man under his fig-tree."40 became a proverb among the Jews for peace and prosperity. The 'Figs in Syrup' appellation conveys the impression of a securely placed, well-protected, ingratiatingly sweet couple.

Caroline, the earnest Christian, is a foil to the spiritually inert Manders couple as well as to the light-weight Laurence, and the theatrical trio: Baron Willi Stock, unfortunate Ernest Manders and self-

37 Spark, op. cit., p. 139.
38 Ibid., p. 142.
dramatizing Eleanor Hogarth. These three

belonged to one of the half-worlds of Caroline's past, of
which she had gradually taken leave; it was a society
which she had half-forgotten, and of which she had come wholly
to disapprove.41

The author's sharp ironic tone, so obvious in her treatment of the
elder Manders, is muted in the portrayal of the younger people. They are
the victims of faulty education and parental isolation. Of their early
childhood we learn nothing, but it is improbable that Laurence had a
normal, wholesome boyhood, for there is total lack of communication be­
tween parents and son. Caroline undoubtedly had more solid character
training. These young intellectuals are emotionally immature, as the
author makes clear by mingling fantasy with the serious episodes in
which Caroline is involved. Laurence appears reluctant to marry Caroline,
no doubt because marriage would involve a return to the practice of his
faith; yet he does not want to lose her: "His wish is to keep her as
his girl - the love-relationship of the eternal student."42

Mrs. Spark's biographer points out that

Caroline Rose's 'carry-on' with her voices and Laurence's
spying on his grandmother's diamond-running are symptoms of
their emotional adolescence. Caroline's typing ghost, though
highly unpleasant, is part of a game, just as Laurence's
detection work on his own family is a game likewise. Both
Laurence and Caroline have, finally, an irresponsible attitude
to life, regarding it as a potential entertainment - a new
game, one with fresh rules to be worked out.43

In view of Caroline's heroic efforts to meet the demands of her new-

41 Spark, op. cit., p. 48.
42 Stanford, op. cit., p. 125.
43 Ibid., p. 124.
found faith, she should not be considered "irresponsible" and wholly immature. She breaks with the past in refusing to live with Laurence; against his wishes she insists upon going to Mass on the Feast of All Saints; she makes a heroic effort to do good to one who hates her and whom she loathes. She strives to be one of the "doers of the word, and not hearers only". By Caroline's moral choices the author transcends fantasy and realism; her moral imagination gives to the comic novel, The Comforters, a new dimension.

44 James I, 23.
CHAPTER TWO

In Memento Mori (1959) and The Ballad of Peckham Rye (1960) Muriel Spark unfolds her stories with brevity and considerable wit. Gerontology is the subject of the former work; at a time when people are living longer than ever before, she has chosen a modern social problem, the care of the aged. The dramatic tension in this novel arises from the interaction of two groups: the wealthy, independent, upper-middle class are counterpoised by the destitute women in the public ward of a general hospital. From the twofold angle of vision, the author satirizes the hollow lives of the idle rich and depicts with compassion the problems of the unwanted poor. In both modes of the human situation, she reveals that the very old are often preoccupied with the mundane and the trivial, with food, gossip, bygone affairs of love, money or fame. Hence, the title is doubly ironic: in their own comfortable homes or in the ward, the aged show concern for everything but the thought of imminent death. They are far from the state of mind of the Scottish poet, whose poem, "Quhen He Wes Sek" has the refrain, "Timor mortis conturbat me." 1

Memento Mori opens with a device similar to that found in The Comforters; in this case a voice on the telephone warns many of the old people, "Remember you must die." Among the wealthy group of octogenarians to hear this voice are Dame Lettie Colston, her brother Godfrey and his wife Charmian, in early life a well-known novelist, Dr. Alex Warner, an amateur sociologist, Janet Sidebottom, Guy Leet a critic, Percy

Mannering a poet, Henry Mortimer, a retired Chief Inspector and Mrs. Pettigrew, formerly Lisa Brook's companion and now Charmian's. To all but Henry Mortimer the voice is that of a man, but for each it has a different quality. To some the speaker seems to be a young man, to others an old man; however, all hear the same message.

The patients in the Maude Long Medical Ward are linked to the first group by Jean Taylor, the former maid and companion to Charmian Colston. From conversations between Jean and her visitors, Lettie Colston and Alex Warner, we learn much about the well-to-do social set.

Later, several other old women are brought into the ward; in the last stages of senility, their behaviour is truly pathological; their pitiable eccentricity is that of dotage rather than 'second childhood'.

Most of the aged poor are concerned with reliving events of the past and coping with daily irritations. The idiosyncrasies of each patient appear in tones of voice, gestures, and whims about food and medicine. Only Jean Taylor thinks of death and of the life after death; she never hears the voice on the telephone.

While the theme of mortality is usually found in tragedy, the old people in this novel for the most part refuse to think of death as a fact of human existence; their only concern is for the present. One of the three epigraphs to the novel refers to the aged as worthy of respect:

O what Venerable and Reverend Creatures did the Aged seem! Immortal Cherubims!

Thomas Traherne.
Mrs. Spark's biographer notes that this "must be read ironically, for the 'grannies' in the geriatric ward are far from being 'Reverend' and 'Immortal Cherubims.'" Each of these old women, who come from various backgrounds, has the same sobriquet: Granny Roberts, Granny Duncan, Granny Taylor and so on. Although they have no material possessions, they spend much time writing their wills and amusing themselves in different ways. Every morning Granny Valvona reads the horoscope of each of the others. All very outspoken, they think nothing of annoying the nurses with their frequent demands and complaints. When Sister Burstead replaces a younger nurse, the patients realize that she fears them and they in turn fear her, for they dread that she will allow them to die during the winter. In Granny Barnacle's idiom, "Come the winter them that's made nuisances of theirselves don't last long under that sort." One day when Granny Duncan threatens to complain to her solicitor, Sister Burstead loses her temper and screams at the old woman. She is relieved of duty when her charges become intractable and replaced by a supervisor with more self-control who, if not wholly sympathetic, is at least aware that patience and a quiet voice are part of professional equipment. The well-to-do group, immune from the vicissitudes of the immobilized poor, lack understanding of hard routine. When Jean Taylor tries to tell her former employer about the patient's feud with Miss Burstead, Dame Lettie finds the situation too complex and remarks irrelevantly:

2 Stanford, op. cit., p. 129.

In the Balkan countries, the peasants turn their aged parents out of doors every summer to beg their keep for the winter. 4

The satire here is directed towards a complacent society that believes its duty is merely to keep people alive in public wards for the aged. Muriel Spark's view seems to be that old people do not always change; they often retain, sometimes to an abnormal degree, their former weaknesses and vices; many are demanding and loud in their complaints. The author is not and could not be indifferent to the problem of the poverty-stricken elderly sick. She does not point or posture or underscore. She allows the wise and perceptive Jean Taylor to remark to Dame Lettie:

"Being over seventy is like being engaged in a war. All our friends are going or gone and we survive amongst the dead and dying as on a battlefield. 5"

While much that happens in the ward is made to appear comical, there is beneath the surface objectivity a current of deep pathos. Muriel Spark uses as "persona" the character of Jean Taylor, whom she describes as

... a woman practised in restraint; she never displayed her resentment. The lacerating familiarity of the nurses' treatment merged in with her arthritis, and she bore them both as long as she could without complaint...

After the first year she resolved to make her suffering a voluntary affair. If this is God's will then it is mine... She reflected that everything could be worse, and was sorry for the youngest generation now being born into the world, who in their old age, whether of good family or no, educated or no, would be forced by law into Chronic Wards; she dared say every citizen in the Kingdom would take it for granted; and the time would surely come for everyone to be government granny or grandpa, unless they were mercifully laid to rest

4 Spark, op. cit., p. 39.
5 Ibid., p. 37.
in their prime.  

This oblique reference to the state of affairs in Socialist England seems to reflect the author's pessimistic attitude towards national affairs. In this novel the primary dramatic impact is achieved through irony rather than through direct attack on the political and economic situation. By the confrontation of two groups, the author can depict the absurdity of senile folly in the eccentric, wealthy, snobbish characters, but she presents the eccentricities of the sick poor with gentle humour and deep compassion. This book reveals her awareness that many in England bore a triple burden--illness, poverty, old age--during the post-war age of austerity.

Another epigraph with ironical import is taken from The Penny Catechism:

Q. What are the four last things to be ever remembered?

A. The four last things to be ever remembered are Death, Judgement, Hell, and Heaven.

With the exception of Miss Jean Taylor, the ailing aged remember everything but these four things. They tend to ignore their own physical infirmities but watch avidly for signs of feebleness in others. They are still, as they were in youth and in their 'prime', concerned with the ephemera of daily existence, particularly with petty criticism. A reviewer, in commenting on Muriel Spark's style, refers to the technique in satirizing the ambulating worldlings. Her method is


to introduce her characters as they appear in public and then to reveal what lurks behind the facade. Godfrey, eightish and in arrogant possession of what he calls his "faculties" turns on closer acquaintance into a veritable walnut tree with a nuttiness compounded of the greed, cowardice, and lechery that have distinguished him all his life.\footnote{Phoebe Adams, "The Reader's Choice", \textit{The Atlantic Monthly} (August, 1959) p. 81.}

The author gives Godfrey Colston a name that designates his type; the combination of harsh syllables symbolizes his wooden, spiritless nature. He had been responsible for a business scandal at Colston Breweries which was hushed up. In middle age he became the lover of Lisa Brooke, and now at eighty-seven is being blackmailed by Mrs. Pettigrew. He still finds enjoyment in visiting Olive Mannering, a young woman of twenty-four whom he pays to allow him to indulge his obsession: a long, steady gaze at her stocking tops.

In depicting Godfrey's antics the author reveals her unique skill in grotesquerie. In the crematorium chapel the relatives, friends and the enemies of Lisa Brooke gather to pay their last respects to one who had been a blackmailer and a bigamist. The so-called mourners pay little heed to the deceased; their interest centres on gossip, tea and floral tributes. The author provides the required obituary in a paragraph:

\begin{quote}
Lisa Brooke died in her seventy-third year, after her second stroke. She had taken nine months to die, and in fact it was only a year before her death that, feeling rather ill, she had decided to reform her life, and reminding herself how attractive she still was, offered up the new idea, her celibacy, to the Lord to whom no gift whatsoever is unacceptable.\footnote{Muriel Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 21. Chapter Three of \textit{Memento Mori} suggests comparison with Evelyn Waugh's \textit{The Loved One}.}
\end{quote}
A less obnoxious but more quixotic person is Dr. Alec Warner, who began at the age of seventy to specialize in gerontology. His early love affairs with Jean Taylor and Lettie Colston had been brief romances. As an old bachelor he became mildly interested in the well-preserved Mrs. Mabel Pettigrew whose "social manner" fascinated him:

He thought about Mabel Pettigrew all the way home across two parks ... And he reflected upon himself, amazed, since he was nearly eighty and Mrs. Pettigrew a good, he supposed, sixty-five. 'Oh,' he said to himself, 'these erotic throes that come like thieves in the night to steal my High Churchmanship!' Only, he was not a High Churchman -- it was no more than a manner of speaking to himself.10

The incongruity of senile sensuality in terms of a recurrent biblical metaphor is typical of the author's wry humour.

This portrait of the fact-finding "scientist", addicted to the accumulation of data, shows a man interested in case-histories rather than human suffering. The ironic intent appears in a superb climax to the career of this medical statistician; after a visit to the ward, where he had gained valuable information from the near-centenarians, he is driving home in a taxi:

... he ruminated on the question why scientific observation differed from humane observation, and how the same people, observed in these respective senses, actually seemed to be different people.11

He arrives at his flat to find the building in flames. The police prevent him from entering to rescue his "papers ... a cat ... a beauti-

10 Ibid., p. 58. "His 'High Churchmanship' was a figure of speech he had adopted from Jean Taylor when ... she had applied it to him, merely on account of the two occasions when he had darkened the doors of a church." Ibid., p. 166.

11 Ibid., p. 214.
ful husky from a polar expedition."¹² In the months that follow, Alec
"felt that he was really dead, since his records had ceased to exist."¹³
In a nursing home, after "a paralytic stroke following a cerebral haemor­
rhage,"

He ... frequently searched through his mind, as through a
card-index, for the case-histories of his friends, both
dead and dying.¹⁴

Fittingly, the book ends in this low-keyed irony. True to type,
the doctor "recited to himself" how death came to each one. As he
mentally signs the death certificates, we are told that the "grannies"
went inconspicuously to their eternal rest. In counterpoint to the
doctor's statistics, we learn that

Jean Taylor lingered for a time, employing her pain to
magnify the Lord, and meditating sometimes confidingly
upon Death, the first of the four last things to be
ever remembered.¹⁵

As a pseudo-intellectual, Alec Warner is not unlike the snooping
Laurence Manders of The Comforters and the "research" agent Dougal
Douglas, in The Ballad of Peckham Rye. In each case, the focus of
satire is the combination of perpetual self-satisfaction and picayunish
habits. Mrs. Spark's method illustrates the theory of a critic:

While madness is the dominant image of satire, the im­
mediate target in society is the alazon, the impostor, the
universal race of quacks and humbugs... The satire target
is the madman on the loose, the local mayor or the bishop,
or the female social worker, the respectable, dignified
pillars of the community with their bland smooth faces, fat

¹³ Ibid., p. 217.
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 220.
¹⁵ Ibid., p. 220.
with their own importance, who cover their crimes, their madness, with the pomp of office. It is the evil that is accepted as the way of the world, or connived at by society, or concealed or ignored until the satirist reveals it. It is the evil that puts on the clothes of innocence.16

In the case of Tempest Sidebottome we have indeed an image of the "pomp of office" and her symbolic name indicates what the hospital committee had to put up with for years "lest they should get someone worse." The author’s narrative technique serves to support the dialogue and delineation of character "to the point of parody"17 We see, hear and feel the impact of this formidable woman. The paragraph in which she is described is almost a non-stop performance; it explains adequately why she was feared and why she was tolerated. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, syntax and punctuation subsume this caricature of the type so often mentioned in the press as "an active member." The committee had good reason to fear her:

Her voice in committee had been strangely terrifying to many an eminent though small-boned specialist, even the bossy young well-qualified women had sometimes failed to outstare the little pale pebble-eyes of the great unself-questioning matriarch, Mrs. Sidebottom. 'Terrible woman,' everyone always agreed when she had left.18

Other less preposterous but equally hilarious characters of the social set are Guy Leet and Percy Mannering, who still keep up a feud about the merits of a decadent poet, Ernest Dowson. Mrs. Pettigrew, an evil person, is guilty of lying, petty burglary and blackmail, while she pretends to be concerned about her employer’s welfare. The latter,


17 Spark, op. cit., p. 110.

18 Ibid., p. 111.
Charmian Colston, had to endure her husband's envy of her literary career. As parents, they had conspicuously failed; their only child, Eric, is ignorant, spiteful and unprincipled. At fifty-seven, he spends his time and their money wandering in Europe, blaming their leniency and self-preoccupation for his failure to be a man. When we see Eric in action, conniving with the housekeeper Mrs. Pettigrew to blackmail his father, we realize that he is a cad and are inclined to charge the insensitive, philandering Godfrey and the romantic mother with parental delinquency.

In reference to Muriel Spark's ability to depict the characters so vividly, a critic says:

She is lavish with unexpected but vivid comparisons. She can pin down exactly what is wrong with Mannering's poetry in two lines of neo-Georgian pastiche, followed by a revision which makes them worse. She preserves an air of kindly, unflustered drawing-room politeness while describing the most alarming events--Charmian's housekeeper doing a spot of burglary and Godfrey pocketing cakes at a funeral tea are treated in precisely the same tone. A similar incongruity makes the actions of Miss Spark's characters laughable. Most of them are in their own view, as capable intellectually as they ever were and only mildly limited physically; the reader sees them beleaguered by arthritis, high blood pressure, outmoded tastes and erratic judgment.

The "erratic judgment" of the characters referred to in this comment appears in their reaction to the recurrent telephone message. Most of the critics, even those who consider Memento Mori to be Mrs. Spark's best novel, either refrain from mentioning this ambiguous feature or refer to it briefly as a forewarning of death. It is, of course, like the title, part of the stark irony that pervades the book. It is an

19 Spark, op. cit., p. 196.
20 Phoebe Adams, op. cit., p. 81.
insistent, prophetic note and like the warnings of Cassandra in the Agamemnon, it is unheeded. Coming at intervals to each of the worldlings, except the obtuse Mrs. Pettigrew who is only sixty-nine, it is a unifying device, a thematic development of the third epigraph, "the four last things to be ever remembered." The ambulatory characters have in common only social status; their hollowness is underscored by the way they flaunt the message, by their indifference to the imminence of death as the main fact of life. None of the group thinks of self as the one "for whom the bell tolls." Each is in the state described by Donne:

... perchance I may think myself so much better than I am as that they who are about me and see my state may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that.21

We shall see later in this chapter that the author uses a similar device in The Ballad of Peckham Rye, where the sad crone goes through the streets chanting scriptural texts. The poor and the pathetic, sick old people, need no warning about death; the women in the ward have a common life and form a homogeneous group. Awaiting death, they devise little schemes to keep the spectre from haunting them. They are quietly attentive when the priest administers the last rites to one of their number.

Apart from both groups is the solid, sane and responsible Chief Inspector who is aware of what the telephone message means. Henry Morton is Mrs. Spark's Everyman who hears the voice of God in his conscience: 'And considering the evidence ... in my opinion the offender is Death himself.',22 he says to his wife, while they await the visit of the mystified and irate group who demand police enquiry and protection.

21 John Donne, "Meditation 17": Now this bell, tolling softly for another, says to me, "Thou must die."

22 Spark, op. cit., p. 142.
Having heard their complaints, he makes a statement:

If I had my life over again I should form the habit of nightly composing myself to thoughts of death. I would practise, as it were, the remembrance of death. There is no other practice which so intensifies life. Death, when it approaches, ought not to take one by surprise. It should be part of the full expectancy of life. Without an ever-present sense of death life is insipid. You might as well live on the whites of eggs.23

Reactions to his solution of the problem are typical: Godfrey Colston insists that the culprit must be found; Janet Sidebottome congratulates the Inspector on his "religious point of view", Charmian Colston feels that the caller is lonely and rings up for a friendly talk, Dame Lettie decries the inefficient police.

One reviewer points out the medieval aspect of the book:

Death, for the author, is a grinning morality-play specter with his arm familiarly draped around Everyman, and this theory is the most tenable one that she leaves. Some readers may object that such mysticism is too woolly, but few of them will complain that Author Spark's funerary satire lacks bite. Any reader over 25--the age at which, as Scott Fitzgerald might have said, a man realizes that he must die--will have an uneasy time forgetting this memento.24

The device of the telephone calls, an elegiac note in this social comedy, provides the moral focus to be found in all of Mrs. Spark's work. Just as the medieval Christian was given the grace to prepare for death, so the modern worldlings are warned to turn from arrogant flaunting of senescence to childlike humility and repentance. Only Charmian Colston takes a step in this direction; when she leaves Godfrey to enter a nursing-home, she breaks with the past and finds peace of soul. The mysterious caller is the modern equivalent of the "mighty messenger"

23 Spark, op. cit., p. 150.
whom God sends to summon Everyman to his final reckoning.25

In The Ballad of Peckham Rye Dougal Douglas arrives in Peckham Rye, a district in South London, with obvious intent to influence the lives of the workers in a nylon textiles factory. Mr. Druce of the firm of Meadows, Meade and Grindley engages him to "bring vision into the lives of the workers. Wonderful people. But they need vision."26 A Cambridge expert had "speeded up our output thirty per cent", but - for Personnel, the firm wanted an Arts man. In the first interview Dougal exerted his charm with the same ease as when he

... in the University Dramatics had taken the part of Rizzio in a play about Mary, Queen of Scots, leaned forward and put all his energy into his own appearance; he dwelt with a dark glow on Mr. Druce, he raised his right shoulder, which was already highly crooked by nature, and leaned on his elbow with a becoming twist of the body. Dougal put Mr. Druce through the process of his smile, which was wide and full of white young teeth; he made movements with the alarming bones of his hands. Mr. Druce could not keep his eyes off Dougal, as Dougal perceived.27

Since absenteeism was a problem, Douglas made clear the need for time away from office routine in order to "do research. ... Research into the real Peckham. ... to discover the spiritual well-being, the glorious history of the place".28

In a second interview Dougal was appointed and found lodging in the


27 Ibid., p. 15.

28 Ibid., p. 17.
home of Miss Frierne. Here he met Humphrey Place, a plumber, who introduced him to other young people. He was soon a member of the community, using his dramatic talent to fascinate each one with whom he came in contact. Only seventeen-year-old Dixie Morse disliked Dougal, and argued frequently with her fiance Humphrey Place about his friendship with the newcomer. Once, apparently as a joke, Dougal had said that if he were Humphrey he would never marry Dixie; so, at the wedding ceremony, Humphrey stalked out of the church, after a blunt "No" to the minister's question, "Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?" Two months later, when Dougal had left Peckham Rye, Dixie and Humphrey were married.

Merle Coverdale, head of the firm's typing pool, was also the mistress of Mr. Druce. He was no longer on speaking terms with his wife although he still lived with her. Merle's friendship with Dougal involved long walks when he would question her about her affair with her employer and the latter's habits. When Mr. Druce heard of Merle's friendship with Dougal he stabbed her with a corkscrew and returned to his wife.

Dougal also took a position at Drover Willis's textile factory, again on the condition that he be allowed time off for research. Another source of income was the information he got about the private lives of Peckham Rye people; he used it to enliven the life of Miss Cheeseman, a retired actress, whose autobiography he was writing.

Dougal's frequent entanglements with Trevor Lomas, an electrician, were not merely verbal encounters. On one occasion when Trevor tried to slash Dougal with a broken bottle, it was Humphrey who was injured. Trevor had two teen-age allies, Collie Gould, unfit for National Service, and Leslie Crewe, the step-brother of Dixie. Determined to get even with Dougal, they stole Dougal's notebook and then blackmailed him about
holding two jobs. When Dougal spread the rumour that he was working for the police, the lads soon made this known throughout Peckham Rye. By this time Dougal realized that he was persona non grata in Peckham Rye. Escaping through a new tunnel where Trevor was working on the lights, Dougal knocked the youth unconscious and walked out of Peckham Rye never to return.

The social satire in this novel is aimed at the moral depravity found in a small industrial town in the years after the second world war. As a reviewer points out:

Unlike the scheming septuagenarians of her earlier novel, Memento Mori, the inhabitants of Peckham Rye are so determinedly average that they lack even the capacity to sin grandly.29

While the population is typically lower-middle class, there is a certain amount of social distinction. On one occasion when Dougal states that Dixie could tell him about the youth clubs, Humphrey replies:

'No, she won't. She doesn't have anything to do with youth clubs. There are classes within classes in Peckham.'30

Dougal, suggesting that Dixie would be upper-working, is told:

'Well, I'd say middle-class. It's not a snob business, it's a question of your type.'31

Dixie at seventeen has decided that money is the key to success; so, she holds two jobs, irritating Humphrey by her mania for saving. As a typist at Meadows, Meade and Grindley, she is inefficient, objects to being given orders, and is determined to have her rights. She is

30 Spark, op. cit., p. 29.
31 Ibid.
impertinent when the head secretary gives her some estimates to type:

"Do you realize how long these estimates take? I'm not going without my tea-break if that's what you're thinking, Miss Coverdale?"32

Even at home, Dixie is pert and, in her superior way, she constantly corrects her parents' errors in grammar.

In social contacts she is supercilious, playing up to Dougal and Humphrey at a café dinner:

'I've felt tired all day,' ... She addressed the men, ignoring Elaine as she had done all evening, because Elaine was factory, even though Elaine was high up in process-control.33

In satirizing the lower-middle class social distinctions in a small town, Muriel Spark's irony appears in the portrait of Dixie Morse. The girl seems at times to be rather admirable, the proud, ambitious, industrious, efficient business type. Yet the real Dixie is incapable of love for her fiancé Humphrey Place, and is not above fighting with Elaine and Beauty on the street, kicking and scratching until the police arrive when she and the others pretend nothing has happened.

The low moral standards of these young people are revealed by the contrast between their norms of conduct at work and in private life. Humphrey Place, on the surface a rather simple individual, has no scruples about pre-marital intimacy with Dixie; yet as a great union man he gives business efficiency the priority over all other values. His father was a fitter, but Humphrey, doing the same kind of work, is "a refrigerator engineer," for how he describes himself "makes a difference to the unions." He knows all the legislation dealing with arbitration in trade

32 Spark, op. cit., p. 35.
33 Ibid., p. 43.
disputes and asserts that unions have done a great deal for the working man. When Dougal says that because Dixie is looking rather tired he had advised her to take time off, Humphrey is horrified:

'Now I don't agree to that. ... It's immoral. Once you start absenting yourself you lose your self-respect. And you lose the support of your unions; they won't back you. ... it's a question of principle.'

The irony of this speech derives from the juxtaposition with Humphrey's earlier talk with Dougal. He relates that he had to carry Dixie up the stairs of his boarding-house to the clothes closet instead of taking her to his room, lest Miss Frierne should find them in bed. He sees nothing immoral in this kind of situation. Like Dixie, his "principles" apply to business, not to personal affairs.

Merle Coverdale, the typing-pool chief has the same attitude. She feels it is wrong of Mr. Druce to go on living with his wife because, she tells Dougal, 'There's no feeling between them. It's immoral.' However, she sees nothing wrong in her adulterous affair with her boss, Mr. Druce, even when she no longer loves him. This moral ambivalence is typical of the behaviour of the characters. Muriel Spark satirizes this hypocrisy by showing their private lives realistically; the romances are totally lacking in affection, idealism or glamour.

A typical situation is the arrival of Mr. Druce at Miss Coverdale's flat in the early evening. The prosaic accumulation of details is an adequate commentary on the nature of the affair:

He took off his hat and hung it on a peg in her entrance hall, which was the shape and size of a small kitchen table, and from the ceiling of which hung a

34 Spark, op. cit., p. 49.
35 Ibid., p. 31.
crystal chandelier. Mr. Druce followed Merle into the sitting-room. So far he had not spoken, and still without a word, while Merle took up her knitting by the two-bar electric heater, he opened the door of a small sideboard and extracted a bottle of whisky which he lifted up to the light. Opening another compartment of the sideboard he took out a glass. He poured some whisky into it and from a syphon which stood on a tray on the sideboard splashed soda-water into his drink. Then, 'Want some?' he said. 'No, thanks.'

After looking at television while she got supper—usually peas, brussel sprouts, and a chop—he would set the table, making sure to put out his stomach tablets. They would eat in silence. From the scullery door, he would watch her wash the dishes and after another television session they would go to the bedroom, for an hour, and finally he would return to his wife.

The word 'immoral' is repeated frequently by one or another of the characters always in connection with absenteeism or the relationship between Mr. Druce and his wife. This linguistic device and the situations in which it occurs seem to be symbolic of the author's image of a society which condones ambiguity in ethical and moral behaviour. In business, to shirk or be shiftless on one's job would mean dismissal, unemployment, material loss, social failure. One would be a pariah. On the contrary, adultery or any other kind of sexual perversity, connivance against the welfare of others, backbiting, lies, slander and personal abuse involve no economic hardship, no stigma or social reflection. There is, Muriel Spark implies, a double standard for personal and professional 'morality'. In case the reader should miss the importance of this 'message', it is succinctly spelled out by Dougal Douglas as part of his 'Research' project for the firm of Meadows, Meade and Grindley.

36 Spark, op. cit., p. 51.
Dougal, the observant outsider, sums up the whole situation when he reports to Mr. Willis on the morals of the inhabitants of Peckham Rye:

'There are four types of morality observable in Peckham . . . One, emotional. Two, functional. Three, puritanical. Four, Christian. . . . Take the first category. Emotional. Here, for example, it is considered immoral for a man to live with a wife who no longer appeals to him. Take the second, Functional, in which the principal factor is class solidarity such as, in some periods and places, has also existed amongst the aristocracy, and of which the main manifestation these days is the trade union movement. Three, Puritanical, of which there are several modern variants, monetary advancement being the most prevalent gauge of the moral life in this category. Four, Traditional, which accounts for about one per cent of the Peckham population, and which in its simplest form is Christian. All moral categories are of course intermingled. Sometimes all are to be found in the beliefs and behaviour of one individual.'

Even the adolescents in this town show the effect of moral laxity. Mrs. Drewe, Dixie's mother, divorced from her first husband, has now remarried and stays at home to look after her family. Neither she nor her husband has any influence on the children. Leslie Crewe, Dixie's young step-brother, chums with adult Trevor Lomas and eighteen-year-old Collie Gould. They frequently hang out in a room behind Hollis's Hamburgers. The author describes the "cheerful interior", cosy and appealing in red and grey furnishing, with television set, electric gramophone and tape recorder. The boys sit on the sofa with Trevor Lomas between them. Their up-to-date clothes are carefully described, and then we learn how little life has to offer them:

All smoked American cigarettes. All looked miserable, not as an expression of their feelings, but as if by an instinctive prearrangement, to convey a decision on all affairs whatsoever.38

37 Spark, op. cit., p. 83.

38 Ibid., p. 90.
At thirteen Leslie had been guilty of slashing tires, theft, blackmail, and attacks on old Nellie Mahone. When he is on the streets until midnight, his father says that he is "money-mad", to which his mother merely replies, "There's nothing wrong with Leslie. He's no different from the rest." 39 Nothing can ruffle Mrs. Crewe's placid unconcern about her child.

We know from allusions to Mrs. Crewe's first husband, an American soldier in the second world war, that the events in the story are realistically pictured as inherent in the mid-century social chaos. In England the period was known as the 'Age of Austerity'; to get and to keep a decent job was the most important thing in the lives of youth particularly. Those who were unable to get jobs because of age or inefficiency had to resort to devious methods in order to support themselves. By cool, objective understatement the author reveals compassion for these victims of the post-war milieu.

At intervals throughout the story a poor mad old woman suddenly interjects in her cracked voice portions of scripture to which no one pays heed. Once as Dougal entered the Morning Star Saloon,

..., Nelly Mahone crossed the road in her rags crying, 'Praise be to the Lord, almighty and eternal, wonderful in the dispensation of all his works, the glory of the faithful and the life of the just.' 40

In this story of characters completely obsessed with Mammon — food, clothing, money, amusements, illicit sex — the author accentuates their folly and vice by the discordant chanting of a beggar woman. This dissonant note uttered at significant moments in the course of the story

39 Spark, op. cit., p. 124.
40 Ibid., p. 24.
is a chorus-like commentary on the futility of life without ethical and spiritual values; but it is the voice in the wilderness - the wasteland that is Peckham Rye.

In Memento Mori and The Ballad of Peckham Rye Mrs. Spark has satirized two different age-groups and social levels, yet in many ways her style is similar in both. In a review of The Ballad this comment occurs:

Although her latest contribution is more in the nature of an "entertainment", the virtuosity of pattern, plot and dialogue is commensurate with the depth of her previous Memento Mori.41

John Hollander also finds points of similarity. He remarks about The Ballad:

This book, despite an utterly different setting, is reminiscent in structure and style of Memento Mori. A glittering economical, rapid-shifting way of writing scenes almost completely in dialogue is, of course, squarely in a British tradition including Firbank, Waugh and Henry Green. Here, however, the device is more extreme than in the previous book. Miss Spark's great skill with a kind of running gag (in Memento Mori for example, the constant question of old Godfrey Colston "Does he have all his faculties?") is also in evidence here, where the universally used phrase that substitutes in Peckham Rye, for the fruits of introspection ("I was living a lie") functions in much the same way. But in every way, this book is a stylistic triumph.42

While the critics' penetrating comments bring out the skill of the author in depicting the same kind of situation during a period of economic chaos and moral upheaval, her insight in being able to convey so realistically two entirely different age groups is remarkably astute;


in both books she is aware of and can vividly present the pathetic existence of the unwanted poor and the lack of moral fibre in the economically secure. In Memento Mori we see that money is the mainstay of life for the gay and feckless men and women whose old age is more like wanton youth. Godfrey's habit of reckless driving is a symbol of their way of the world, and their lives are "a chronicle of wasted time." In The Ballad, the young people are equally bent on acquisitiveness and entertainment, but with them it is an urge to acquire economic security, an obsession inherent in the contemporary social crisis. In excluding all other values, their plight is a symptom of moral infection that became epidemic as a consequence of war. In Peckham Rye no person seems to be virtuous; there is no Caroline as in The Comforters and no Jean Taylor as in Memento Mori; rather the element of contrast so prominent in the construction of Mrs. Spark's other books is embodied in the scriptural messages declaimed by the withered old woman. Nelly Mahone seems to "belong to the company not of the living characters in the story but to the melodramatic crew that people the Neo-Gothic novel ..." The reference is to the gypsy Meg Merrilies in Guy Manners, whose speech Dr. Tillyard describes as that of a "stagey character, not issuing from the mouth of a real and suffering woman." Her utterances are effective in stressing, by antithesis, the hapless life of youth in an environment that offers no incentives, other than earning enough money to keep them alive and eager for pastimes no matter how sordid or unre-

43 Shakespeare, Sonnet 106.


45 Ibid.
warding these may be. To quote Shakespeare again, the story reveals that "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame/ Is lust in action."  

46 Sonnet 129.
CHAPTER THREE

The plot of The Bachelors centres on the connection of a group of Londoners with the trial of Patrick Seton, medium of a spiritualist circle.

Patrick Seton has been accused of forging a letter from Mrs. Freda Flower, a member of the 'Wider Infinity'. In the letter she is supposed to have offered her life savings to Seton to further his psychic and spiritualistic work. Patrick's mistress, Alice Dawes, works in a coffee shop. Although she is expecting his child, he refuses to marry on the pretext that his divorce case is not settled. Actually he has no wife; he says he loves Alice, but really does not want her or her child. He has frequently been a police informer and is sure he will never be brought to trial.

Mrs. Flower, impressed by Patrick's ability to commune with the spirits, hesitates to prosecute him in spite of his rival, Mike Garland's pleading. Convinced that she is the only woman for Patrick, she contends that there is no proof that the letter was a forgery. All this time Patrick is planning to get rid of Alice as soon as the matter is settled.

Another bachelor, Ronald Bridges, a graphologist is given the letter to try and prove forgery. He casually tells Matthew Finch about it, who tells Elsie, a friend of Alice. Elsie steals it, planning to give it to 'Father' Socket, Mike Garland's partner in the spiritualist racket. When she arrives at the minister's flat and finds Mike with a dressing-gown over his suit, she realizes that he is one of the cleric's friends,
all of whom are perverts. In consternation she leaves and returns the letter to Ronald.

At the trial of Patrick Seton, Freda Flower is very much upset, for she feels that she might have written the letter while in a trance. The graphologist, when testifying the letter to be a forgery, has an epileptic seizure but Elsie's testimony convinces the court of Patrick's guilt and he is sentenced for five years. Four months later Matthew Finch, the misogynist, marries Alice just before her baby is born.

In this novel Muriel Spark satirizes the misogynists who appear to form small groups in cities such as London. They are well-educated, often professional men. We see them on a Saturday shopping for their bacon and eggs, their week's supplies of breakfasts and occasional suppers ... (they) set out early before a quarter past ten, in order to avoid being jostled by the women, the legitimate shoppers.1

When they meet, their conversation is of bargains and recipes. As Ronald, aged thirty-seven, curator of a museum of handwriting, and Martin Bowles thirty-five and a barrister, chat in a cafe, it is clear that the author uses their clipped, fragmentary talk to show their petty attitude towards life:

'Where,' said Ronald, pointing to a package on the top of Martin's laden bag, 'did you get your frozen peas?'
'Clayton's.'
'How much?'
'One and six. That's for a small packet; does for two. A large is two and six; six helpings.'2

As they sit and sip their Expressos, Ronald suddenly says:

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2 Ibid., p. 7.
'I've forgotten Tide,'³

Even their movements and habits when alone suggest the trivial way in which they made existence comfortable and the trifles that irritated them. These aspects of bachelordom appear early in the story:

(On Sunday) Some bachelors went to church. Some kept open bed all morning and padded to and from it, with trays of eggs and coffee; and, however hard they tried, could not prevent some irritating crumbs of toast from falling on the sheets; they smoked a cigarette, slept, then rose at twelve.

Those who were conducting love affairs in service flats found it convenient that the maids did not come in with their vacuum cleaners on Sundays. They made coffee and toast on the little grill in the alcove behind the curtain.⁴

These unattached and apparently carefree men seem to represent extremes of behaviour; they have many weaknesses, few admirable qualities. The portraits include figures of fun, pathos and sexual perversion. As one reviewer comments:

With beautiful economy, she isolates ... a rather narrow range of contemporary types and pins them to the page quivering in their essential absurdity. Her victims this time are, as the title indicates, bachelors - barristers, museum keepers, schoolmasters, journalists, living in NW3, SW3, W11 and like places - and widows: in other words, the incomplete and deprived.⁵

Most of these characters have professions or occupations that keep them busy during the day; for the most part, their social life is unsatisfactory and they all fear marriage and responsibility. Some, like Martin Bowles, are tied to their mothers. He says of her, 'She isn't a possessive mother. But ... I've got to stay with her.'⁶ His mother and the old nurse live together and fight constantly, yet he can't leave:

³ Spark, op. cit., p. 8.
⁴ Ibid., p. 129.
⁶ Spark, op. cit., p. 136.
"They bored him, but when they went away from home he missed the boredom, and the feud between them which sometimes broke into it."  

Martin, Isabel's lover and business manager, declares that he will never marry; when she wants him to stay for supper he protests, 'I can't stay very long. My old Ma's expecting me for supper.'

Another type is Ewart Thornton, the grammar-school master, who uses his work as an excuse to avoid matrimonial responsibilities. He assures Freda Flower, a fellow spiritualist, 'I meant to write to say so to you, but I've got such mounds of homework. The mid-term examinations ...' He often visits Marlene Cooper, a leader of the spiritualists, because he "liked very much to see Marlene with her private means trying to win him over; and he knew already he was not a crank." Moreover he "liked putting an apron around his large body and he liked holding the cloth in his hands to dry the dishes one by one." He loves to gossip with women such as Freda Flower until they become serious or make demands on him. Then he remembers that he has papers to mark. However, Ewart forgets exams when Freda begins to tell him about relations between Father Socket and Mike Garland, and he says, 'My dear. Tell me more.'

The case of the Roman Catholic, Ronald Bridges, is different from the others. As Walter Allen comments, "Bridges has accepted the special

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7 Spark, op. cit., p. 138.
8 Ibid., p. 140.
9 Ibid., p. 28.
10 Ibid., p. 144.
11 Ibid., p. 145.
12 Ibid., p. 177.
curse laid upon him as the other bachelors have not." He feels that his epileptic attacks bar him from matrimony. He was once engaged to Hildegarde, but her motherly attitude forecast wifely domination. When Elsie tries to get him to visit her he refuses and when she accuses him of thinking himself too good for her, he replies 'I'm an epileptic. ... It rather puts one out of the reach of class.'

Tim Raymond and Matthew Finch seem to want marriage, but they fear it. While the latter, London correspondent for the Irish Echo, is lonely without a girl, he has a great conscience about sex. He feels he should get married but is not equal to all it would involve. When Elsie comes to see him he eats onions as "a mighty fortress against the devil and a means of avoiding an occasion of sin."

Tim, Marlene's nephew, has tried spiritualism to please his aunt. However, he is not sincere about it and refuses to give evidence in Patrick's trial. He even goes so far as to hide behind curtains or in the washroom when his aunt tries to talk to him at his club. Marlene tells him, 'You are weak ... like your father and his father before him.' For a time Tim lives with Hildegarde, Ronald's former girl friend, but she enters a convent.

Frequently, these bachelors get together and discuss marriage. They are all opposed to assuming its responsibilities but are evasive in their reasons.

13 Allen, op. cit., p. 580.
14 Spark, op. cit., p. 167.
15 Ibid., p. 51.
16 Ibid., p. 110.
Often their behaviour is very childish. The art critic, Walter Prett, aged forty-eight has frequent out-bursts of temper and sulks if he cannot get his own way. When he got a young girl in trouble, the family made a settlement and he was sent abroad to study art. He confides that at one time he did consider marrying Sybil, "a bourgeois little bitch with her savings in the post office." This is one of his pretensions; he had had no love affair or any success as an artist. When he finds out about Isabel's party to which he was not invited he shouts,

'I wouldn't have come ... A vulgar third-rate set. Journalists. British Council lecturers. School-masters. A typical divorcée's salon.' And so saying he rose, lifted the tray of tea-things, smashed it down into the fireplace, wormed his bulk into the ancient camel-hair coat which he had thrown on a chair, and left, banging both doors.

We learn from a long monologue why the medium Patrick Seton has never conformed to social convention:

There is a lot of nasty stuff in life which comes breaking up our ecstasy, our inheritance. I think, said Patrick, people should read more poetry and dream their dreams, and I do not recognize man-made laws and dogmas. There is always a fuss about some petty cash, or punctuality.

As he does not believe in the institution of marriage, he does not want to wed Alice; in fact he plans to kill her:

She is mine, he is thinking. The others were not mine but this one is mine. I have loved her, I still love her. I don't take anything from Alice. I give. And I will release her spirit from this gross body.

17 Spark, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
Thus we see these bachelors "of varying degrees of confirmation". Ronald considers that the question of a man's single state is an individual problem. He disagrees with Matthew's view that

'It's the duty of us all to marry ... There are two callings, Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony, and one must choose.

Must one? ... It seems evident to me that there's no compulsion to make a choice. You are talking about life. It isn't a play.'

According to Ronald, 'There's no moral law against being simply a bachelor,' and in further argument with Matthew he points out that the latter fails to distinguish between "sex" and "marriage".

Their conversation pinpoints the bachelor existence as Mrs. Spark sees it in the heterogeneous life of a large city. The justification for Ronald--'I'm a confirmed bachelor'--is that he can see 'infinite reasons why a man may remain celibate. He may be a scholar. Husbands don't make good scholars, in my opinion.'

From this exchange of views between the two bachelors, it is clear that Ronald's single state is based on conviction.

The others, in all their moral laxity and preoccupation with petty domestic problems, show neither a sense of responsibility nor sentiments of loyalty. For some of these benighted individuals, the author provides background information which evokes the reader's sympathy rather than scorn. Patrick Seton, for example, is shown to be addicted to learning by heart long passages of romantic poetry:

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21 Spark, op. cit., p. 19.
22 Ibid., p. 76.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 77.
He is a dreamy child: a dreamer of dreams, they say with pride, as he wanders back from walks in the botanical gardens, or looks up from his book. *Mary Rose* by J. M. Barrie is Patrick's favourite... As a young man he memorizes the early poems of W. B. Yeats and will never forget them.²⁵

His sentimental education, similar to that depicted in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, is an indication that Patrick's life could hardly be anything but that of a misfit.

For most of the others we can feel no sympathy; Ewart refuses to give evidence for Patrick, and Father Socket betrays his partner Mike Garland.

Although these bachelors have little in common except their aimless lives they do have one common bond,

... whether they acknowledge it or not, the bachelors all feel the kind of allegiance to one another that comes from standing outside society looking in.²⁶

However, in *The Bachelors* Muriel Spark satirizes not only the feckless, self-centered life of unattached men, but also the kind of mental and moral aberration into which they stray. She satirizes their rootless existence. In the vastness and loneliness of London, the single male reveals how unequipped he is to avoid the snares of illicit sex, pseudo-religious groups, excessive egoism and petty trickery in order to get on in life. In portraying realistically the type of individual who seeks help from spiritualism she presents two such groups: one, known as the 'Wider Infinity,' consists mainly of bachelors who shun responsibility, and widows or single women who are aimlessly searching for something different, or who are easily influenced by anyone who appears to have


something to offer them; the other is a rival group run by Father Socket and Mike Garland. The former is rent by petty jealousies; the members appear to show no loyalty to the group nor to one another. The latter is run by men who are perverts and criminals.

In satirizing the first group Muriel Spark has used subtle humour and wit to show up human weaknesses, and we are highly amused as we read of the meetings of the 'Wider Infinity' which are held at the home of Marlene Cooper whose husband

... had been buried three months when, convinced of his dynamic survival, she had had him dug up and cremated, since this, it seemed vague to her, was more in keeping with the life beyond. To see his ashes scattered in the Garden of Remembrance was to conceive Harry more nearly as thin air, and since she had come to believe so ardently in Harry the spirit, she simply could not let him lie in the grave and rot.27

After having tried several groups Marlene had joined the 'Wider Infinity' when the medium, Patrick Seton, was able to get through to her husband Harry, although she could never quite understand why Patrick always referred to him as Henry.

Before the seance, the members stood around drinking tea until Marlene proclaimed: 'The Circle will now enter the Sanctuary of Light.'28 Then the group, hand in hand, sat in a circle around Patrick during two minutes of silent prayer. Marlene suggested this preliminary rite as more appropriate to an 'intellectual' group than the usual romantic "We shall meet them all again by and by,"29 sung to the tune of 'She'll be coming round the mountain'. The preparation for the medium's performance is

27 Spark, op. cit., p. 29.
28 Ibid., p. 28.
29 Ibid., p. 35.
mimicked in the audio-visual technique of the following excerpt:

Patrick had been bound at the arms and calves of his legs by canvas strips to his chair. He let his head fall forward. He breathed deeply in and out several times. Soon, his body dropped in its bonds. His knees fell apart. His long hands hung, perpendicular, over the arms of the chair. Not only did the green-lit colour seem to leave his face but the flesh itself, so that it looked like a skin-covered skull up to his thin pale hair.

He breathed deeply in the still dim room, second after second. Then his eyes opened and turned upward in their sockets. Foam began to bubble at his mouth and faintly trickled down his chin. He opened his mouth and a noise like a clang issued from it. The Circle was familiar with this clang: it betokened the presence of the spirit-guide called Gabi.30

In the last decades spiritualism has spread over all countries of the world and has become for many a substitute religion. In her description of the seance held by the 'Wider Infinity' Mrs. Spark has shown us conditions similar to those which a theologian states are usually found in any seance. In reference to questionable media he says,

To understand these deceptions one must consider the circumstances under which the apparent relationship between this world and the next is represented: twilight or a soft red light, the sound of music machines, singing, excited conversation, prohibition to put the light on suddenly or to touch the medium.31

To this seance Mrs. Flower initiates a guest, Mike Garland, who claims to be clairvoyant and tries to prove that Patrick is a fraud. A riot ensues and the whole room is in turmoil as the seance ends with Freda Flower on the floor in a state of collapse. The comic finale of the meeting, which had opened in mock solemnity, is an apt illustration of the author's objective method of handling fraudulent and freakish

30 Spark, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

There is a vacuum in the lives of these immature adults. Marlene has put large sums of money into the training of mediums, in order to make Patrick the leader; Freda Flower is the wealthy patroness who signs over her money to Patrick. Some of the bachelors belong to the group, but are not too deeply concerned; Tim, who had no religion joined merely to please his aunt, and refuses to become involved in Patrick's trial. Ewart Thornton declares that he is with Freda; but he fails to attend the trial, because he has papers to mark. An inner secret group, the 'Interior Spiral,' consists of a few more docile members, for as Marlene says with ironic naïveté:

We must keep the ramifications pure ... we must exert a concealed influence on the less involved brethren and the crackpots and snobs who keep creeping in.  

Patrick Seton can not believe that anything will happen to him; he is sure that if the matter of the forged letter does come to a trial, he will be freed. Patrick seems to have a strange fascination over women, and even at the trial Freda Flower refuses to believe he has stolen her money.

Father Socket and his associates are even more unscrupulous. The author depicts these people with stark realism rather than hilarious comedy, employing an extreme example of rapacity to stress the satire. The people charge for horoscopes, collect information and then use it for blackmail; they take and sell photographs of the illicit behaviour of wealthy men during week-ends, and even run two obscene films, "The Truth About Nudism" and "Nature's Way". These are used as propaganda for their way of life. In these films they present three girls who

32 Muriel Spark, op. cit., p. 34.
appear on the stage in person afterwards. Father Socket, aged sixty-two, is a spiritualist with his headquarters at Ramsgate. Like Patrick, he can exercise a certain fascination over women, although he pretends to have no use for them; his chief disciple, Mike Garland, is a homosexual who has served time for soliciting in his role of clairvoyant. Having found "a religion and a Way of Life," he was a brilliant success:

... Father Socket's villa at Ramsgate was filled twice weekly with residential widows and retired military men - for it was widows and retired colonels who were the chief clients - come to receive clairvoyance from Mike.

The cleric hopes to have his rival medium, Patrick Seton, convicted of fraud so that he can take over the 'Wider Infinity'. He tries to convince Mike Garland, who is rather worried about the outcome of the trial, that all will be well; and with a suggestion of blasphemy, he assures his fellow-worker:

Patrick Seton will be brought to trial, the Wider Infinity will be brought to disrepute, the Temple will be cleansed, and we shall then take over the affairs of the Circle ourselves.

This does come to pass just before the trial when Father Socket agrees to provide an alibi for Patrick. Mike Garland has been arrested, but his superior saves his own reputation, "Fortunately there is no shred of evidence against me ... My name is clear."

At the trial even Marlene deserts the cause of the 'Wider Infinity,' eager to escape to Scotland when danger threatens:

33 Muriel Spark, op. cit., p. 151.
34 Ibid., p. 150.
35 Ibid., p. 149.
36 Ibid., p. 180.
I'm very sorry, Patrick ... But on consideration I simply must safeguard my reputation for the sake of the Circle. Nothing has changed, my feelings are the same, but on consideration I can't give evidence ... You have Father Socket. I am no loss.\textsuperscript{37}

Thus we see the spiritualist fad as a menace to society and a means of preying upon the weak individuals who seek help in a chaotic world where moral and religious values are lost.

Social confusion has taken away all security; and those who have lost the true faith in God, grasp out for worthless substitutes.\textsuperscript{38}

Walter Allen comments on \textit{The Bachelors}, "It is certainly not to be missed, for, it goes without saying, it is very funny." In a comedy all things turn out all right in the end. True, Patrick Seton is convicted and sentenced, but Father Socket is still free. Alice marries Matthew, but the rest of the bachelors continue their aimless existence "thirty-eight thousand five hundred streets, and seventeen point one bachelors to a street."\textsuperscript{39} The situation in London remains basically the same. This is more than a comedy; beneath the surface objectivity, the author has a profound view of the emptiness of modern existence. The apparently carefree lives of the vast number of unattached men in large cities is tragic, but "They are tragic only because they are so comical."\textsuperscript{40} Muriel Spark shows how such lack of a rational attitude towards life can deform the human spirit and make men act absurdly and irrationally. She leaves it to the reader to appraise the situation and probe beneath the surface.

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\item \textsuperscript{37} Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 185.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Philipp Schmidt, \textit{S. J.}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 114.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 215.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Muriel Spark, \textit{The Comforters}, p. 38.
\end{itemize}
CHAPTER FOUR

The opening paragraph of Chapter I of *The Girls of Slender Means*, her seventh and latest story, suggests that the author intends to offer a novel with detailed description, and abundant atmosphere. The resemblance to *Bleak House* is apparent in the following passage:

Long ago in 1945 all the nice people in England were poor, allowing for exceptions. The streets of the cities were lined with buildings in bad repair or in no repair at all, bomb-sites piled with stony rubble, houses like giant teeth in which decay had been drilled out, leaving only the cavity. Some bomb-ripped buildings looked like the ruins of ancient castles ... with one wall missing ... most of all the staircases survived, like a new art-form ... All the nice people were poor; at least, that was a general axiom, the best of the rich being poor in spirit.¹

Instead of Dickens' fog, we have "decay" as the ominous note. The theme of poverty is announced as characteristic of "nice people", presumably those of slender means who, we learn in following pages, inhabit the May of Teck Club, "one of a row of tall houses which had endured, but barely."² As the nice young people of the story are not rich, we shall not expect them to be "poor in spirit." In the circumstances we should be surprised if they were.

The cool, crisp tone and the wry ironic humour of the last sentence of the passage quoted above, is characteristic of Mrs. Spark's prose. It suggests contradiction, and we are alerted to some kind of contrast between the nice, poor people and the rich, poor in spirit.


² Ibid., p. 2.
The story concerns the forty girls, "obliged to reside apart from their Families in order to follow an Occupation in London." All but three are under the age of thirty, have employment in London and spend their free time in contriving and conniving ways to get the essentials of life which young people need: extra food, clothes, entertainment. Some of the girls manage to have dates, one of them gives a fictional account of a boy-friend, but the only eligible young man who comes to the Club is Nicholas Farringdon, "an anarchist", "a former poet".

In Chapter I, Jane Wright, "the woman columnist" telephones a friend the news of his death. He was martyred in Haiti where he had gone as a missionary Brother. Dorothy Markham is incredulous: "But I've just been to Tahiti, it's marvellous, everyone's marvellous." The flashback technique in subsequent chapters reveals how the anarchist poet met Selina, the most beautiful and slender girl, how their brief romance ended tragically and how a single incident led to his renunciation of the world. Under a satiric veneer of post-war upheaval is the theme of spiritual quest.

As in most of Muriel Spark's books, dramatic tension arises from the interaction of groups. The exigencies of housing entail that the girls be allotted rooms according to age: the youngest members occupy the first floor, which has been converted into a dormitory; a more or less transient set are in double rooms on the second floor; above them are the three thirtyish women;

... By 1945 they had seen much coming of new girls and going of old, and were generally liked by the current

3 Spark, op. cit., p. 4.
4 Ibid., p. 5.
These last form the most attractive and sophisticated group and each has a room of her own.

Life in the May of Teck Club is on a "slender" scale; they return from work for dinner, occasionally entertain a guest for a small extra charge, use soap or egg coupons for barter or as a bribe for the loan of the Schiaparelli taffeta evening gown. This is the prized possession of Anne Baberton, a gift from her wealthy aunt who had worn it only once:

This marvellous dress, which caused a stir wherever it went, was shared by all the top floor on special occasions, excluding Jane whom it did not fit.

Jane Wright, "miserable about her fatness", tries to diet, but her mental work in a publisher's office required that "her brain ... be fed more than most people's."

Except for the famous dress, the girls have no shared interests, no aspirations beyond the hope of escape from the lonely, "slender" way of life forced on them by post-war austerity. It is a kind of exile, from normal happiness, from friends, and from the security of home life. They fill their free time as best they can: Greggie, one of the spinsters, enjoys gardening and guiding visitors through the grounds; Jane, too fat for physical exertion, is occupied with her "brain work"; and Joanna, a minister's daughter who studies elocution, practises aloud in the even-

5 Spark, op. cit., pp. 11-12.
6 Ibid., p. 39.
7 Ibid., p. 36.
ings, or gives lessons in speech to the less articulate girls. Thanks to her, the book has richness and depth, for her allusions to Coleridge, Wordsworth, Arnold, Tennyson, Hopkins and particularly to Scripture provide significant counterpoint to the essentially materialistic life which the girls must perforce lead.

One pastime is limited to the really "slender" girls. Fortunately, or unfortunately as matters turn out, the top-floor lavatory window gives access to the roof of an adjoining building, formerly a hotel, now owned by the American government. Upon this window, which has only a seven-inch opening, hangs the tale. One very slender figure can easily crawl through and enjoy sunbathing on the adjoining roof. A couple of the others with slightly larger hip measurement, by soaping themselves from head to foot can manage with some pushing from their hefty friends to squeeze through.

Selina, the slimmest and prettiest girl, can enjoy this relaxation without benefit of soap; she is also the luckiest competitor for the loan of the Schiaparelli dress.

The window, the roof and the dress require one more factor to set the plot in motion. Brainy Jane, who must forego all thought of acrobatics, invites young Nicholas Farringdon to dinner. His admiration for beautiful, slender and feline Selina adds zest to the drab club life. Her interest, awakened by Jane's description — 'He's thoughtful ... We think him brilliant but he's still feeling his way in the world of books.' — was quickened by his presence:

Selina's long unsurpassable legs arranged themselves diagonally from the deep chair where she lolled in the

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8 Spark, op. cit., p. 42.
distinct attitude of being the only woman present who could afford to loll. There was something about Selina's lolling which gave her a queenly eminence.\(^9\)

Jane, quite pleased that her guest enjoys the company of Judy and Anne, is aware too of Selina's designs.

Meanwhile, Joanna is teaching Nancy, another clergyman's daughter, how "to overcome her Midlands accent" and a stanza from Wordsworth\(^10\) interrupts the chatter in the drawing room. Judy would like Joanna to do The Wreck of the Deutschland: 'She's marvellous with Hopkins.'\(^11\)

From twenty-two-year-old Rudi Bitesch, with whom she worked in her spare time, Jane extracts some details about Nicholas. Following a stanza from Drinkwater's "Moonlit Apples" and another allusion to Joanna's success with Hopkins, the reference to the earlier life of Nicholas is striking. At thirty-three, reputedly an anarchist,

he looked quite normal; that is to say, he looked slightly dissipated, like the disappointing son of a good English family that he was.\(^12\)

Having left Cambridge in the 1930's, he had alternating movements of preference for England and France as suitable in environment for the work he thought of doing. His decisions about most matters were in suspension:

... he could never make up his mind between suicide and an equally drastic course of action known as Father D'Arcy ... a Jesuit philosopher who had the monopoly for converting the English intellectuals.\(^13\)

\(^9\) Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 49.
\(^10\) \textit{Ibid.}, Joanna recites stanza 7 of \textit{Resolution and Independence}.
\(^11\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 50.
\(^12\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 62.
\(^13\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 63.
Rudi mentions that Nicholas, though at first a pacifist, had found peace while he was in uniform, was "psycho-analysed out of the army" and at present working for the Intelligence: 'The anarchists have given him up but he calls himself an anarchist by the way.'

Nicholas' manuscript, The Sabbath Notebooks, becomes even more important to Jane than the story of his life, especially when she hears some of it in Rudi's English: "She was convinced ... that Nicholas was the only presentable intellectual she had met." Reading more of the manuscript, while Joanna gives an elocution lesson to the cook and the girls chatter on the terrace "like a parliament of fowls", Rudi concludes that a genuine anarchist would never make a statement about "how far, and with what a pathetic thump, the world has fallen from grace ...", for the anarchists "would chuck him out when he talks like a son of the Pope."

This "portrait of the martyr as a young man" is a prelude to the story of his brief romance with slender Selina when they slept on the roof, "he gaining access from the American-occupied attic of the hotel next door, and she through the slit window" of the club lavatory. These nocturnal escapades continue through the summer, without human interference, but in post-war London there was danger beneath the surface and the club garden was the spot where it lurked. While Joanna's recitations of Dover Beach and Kubla Khan float from the upper room, Jane ponders why she has

14 Spark, op. cit., p. 64.
15 Ibid., p. 65.
16 Ibid., p. 68.
17 Ibid., p. 72.
18 Ibid., p. 73.
no attraction for Nicholas, unaware that "she might have gone further with Nicholas without her literary leanings ... it never really occurred to her that literary men, if they like women at all, do not want literary women but girls."19 Greggie, the gardening spinster, is showing off her rare plants to guests, pointing out where the bomb dropped, quite sure that there had been another bomb that did not explode, 'if there's a second it must have died a natural death by now. I'm talking about the year 1942.'20 Joanna, at the moment, having ended the recitation of Dover Beach, "... down the vast edges drear And naked shingles of the world, goes on to Kubla Khan." She and Nancy compare their respective fathers' Sunday services, Joanna recalling vividly the daily Matins and Evensong when she responded to the Psalms from her pew, or times when one of the curates took over the office, uttering as it seemed to the empty pews, but by faith to the congregations of the angels, the Englishly rendered intentions of the sweet singer of Israel.

During these recitations, reminiscences, arguments and chatter in July 1945, Nicholas woos Selina and muses about the Club:

He observed that at no point did poverty arrest the vitality of its members but rather nourished it. Poverty differs vastly from want, he thought.22

Simultaneously, Jane telephone Pauline the news of the death of Nicholas in Haiti, as she does at intervals to one or other of the girls, as if his life and theirs made up the real design or pattern, as warp and woof,

19 Spark, op. cit., p. 95.
20 Ibid., p. 100.
21 Ibid., pp. 104-105.
of mundane interests and heroic self-sacrifice. These interwoven themes
give the novel immediacy and perspective. As a character within the
story, Nicholas has reality, and together with Jane and Joanna, he is the
most clearly individualized. The message of his death shows the design
of Providence, his destiny to be converted by "a vision of evil". It is
possible to compare the technique in this novel with that of The Ancient
Mariner, where the tale of sin and suffering and repentance is interrupt-
ed by the remarks of the Wedding Guest. Just as the horror of the
Mariner's experience stuns the listener, so the intermittent telephone
message breaks in upon the gay and pointless lives of the girls, but
without making any emotional impact on them. Nicholas has been forgotten
or is remembered only as Selina's lover; in this way the theme of his
potential sainthood is adjoined ironically to her wantonness.

In her portrayal of the way of life of the single young women in
1945, the author uses wit and irony to show that they are on the surface
gay and reckless, but "with all their whimsical and zany ways, these
girls of slender means are rather lost young women."23 With a few deftly
placed adjectives Mrs. Spark can make us see the group as a whole:

As they realized themselves in varying degrees, few
people alive at the time were more delightful, more ingeni­
ous, moremovingly lovely, and as it might happen, more
savage than the girls of slender means.24

The notion of cruel, uncivilized young womanhood is found elsewhere
in the story. We learn that before the romance with Selina, Nicholas
had not yet witnessed that action of savagery so extreme
that it forced him involuntarily to make an entirely un-
accustomed gesture, the signing of the cross upon

23 Harold C. Gardiner, America (October 26, 1963), p. 48.
24 Spark, op. cit., p. 4.
himself. 25

He is also aware that Selina invariably becomes the centre of attraction when male visitors come to the Club, although they might seem to be fascinated by the whole group:

... Nicholas was enamoured of the entity in only one exceptional way, that it stirred his poetic sense to a point of exasperation, for at the same time he discerned with irony the process of his own thoughts, how he was imposing upon this little society an image incomprehensible to itself. 26

In stressing the thoughts of the one male character who is important in their lives, the author brings out the tension between the wholly materialistic existence of the girls and the deeper nature of Nicholas as spectator as well as participator. He and Joanna are apart from the others because they alone have an inner life.

This contrast is intended to point out the superior natures of Nicholas and Joanna. This is clear when we note the values which are important to the others. Selina's life was motivated by the "Two Sentences" which she recited faithfully morning and evening; according to the tenets of the Poise Course of a correspondence school, she must acquire "equanimity of body and mind, complete composure ... self-confidence." 27 To attain this ideal of social perfection, dress, grooming and "perfect deportment" were all important.

Dorothy's character comes out in her "waterfall of debutante chatter", her favourite epithets being "filthy", "gorgeous", "ghastly". Her coarse slang shocks when she refers to her pregnancy as 'Filthy luck. Come

to the wedding.\textsuperscript{28}

The remark of a critic is relevant to our author's technique in both dialogue and description:

Somewhere in his dense knots of ugly flesh the satiric author or painter usually inserts a hint of an ideal which is either threatened with imminent destruction or is already dead.\textsuperscript{29}

Joanna Childe, rector's daughter and elocutionist, is at the other end of the moral spectrum. She is serious, virtuous, attractive without make-up, well liked by all the girls. Her "stoical nature" appears when fire follows the explosion of the hidden bomb in the garden. She tries to maintain the morale of the group by chanting the Litany and texts prescribed in the \textit{Prayer Book} for that day. She is the last one to climb the ladder leading through the skylight to the next-door roof. While Nicholas, assisting the firemen in the rescue, shouts that she must escape, she "groped, partially blind, still intoning":

\begin{quote}
So that they who go by say not so much as, The Lord prosper you; we wish you good luck in the Name of the Lord.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Out of the deep have I called ... \textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

In hailing \textit{The Girls of Slender Means} as a "profoundly witty novel", a reviewer has implied that the reader is, or should be, aware of a deeper significance in this book than mere entertainment. This meaning is our discovery or recognition at the end of the story that the author's design is to portray Joanna as a figure of piety and virtue, and Nicholas as an image of conversion. Her name relates her not only to the Beloved Dis-

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{28} Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 51-52.
\textsuperscript{29} Kernan, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 166.
\textsuperscript{30} Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 166.
\end{flushright}
ciple and the Maid of Orleans, but also to the Three Children in the prophecy of Daniel. It is also significant that the recitation which the girls liked particularly was *The Wreck of the Deutschland*; we can see at once the parallel between Joanna in the catastrophe of the fire and the Franciscan nun praying and exhorting the victims of the storm to place their hope in God.

In the case of the other hero, Mrs. Spark has no doubt intended that Nicholas Farringdon should recall Nicholas Ferrar, the seventeenth-century chaplain of the Anglican community of Little Gidding. His thematic role as an image of conscience suggests that he sought to atone for his own sins and those of others by his life as a missionary Brother in Haiti, turning to "detachment/ From self and from things and from persons."  

Nicholas' moment of conversion seems to have occurred during the fire. Having watched Selina escape through the window onto the roof, he sees her return, but cannot find her with the girls who are struggling for the ladder. He sees later that she had returned to steal the Schiaparelli dress of Anne Baberton. He sent a letter of sympathy to Joanna's father, and when the Rector came to London for his daughter's funeral, Nicholas, angry that the tape-recording he had made of Joanna's recital of *The Wreck of the Deutschland* had been stolen from his office, told the distraught parent of his daughter's courage:

31 Daniel 3: 8-30.

32 Nicholas Ferrar (1592-1636) and his community are described in J. H. Shorthouse, *John Inglesant* (London, 1881).

She was reciting some sort of office before she went down. The other girls were with her, they were listening in a way. Some psalms.

Really? No-one else has mentioned it.34

As the Rector walks with Nicholas to see the ruins of the May of Teck Club, he tells of a visit from some of the girls, one of whom was upset because her ball dress had been stolen. The father's chief topic, however, is disgust with London and his regret that Joanna had ever gone there instead of settling down at the Rectory. Nicholas' search ends in finding Selina with a crooner, presumably married. In one of Jane's telephone calls, she mentions "a note in his manuscript that a vision of evil may be as effective to conversion as a vision of good."35 Jane wonders if Nicholas was converted at the time of the fire; Nancy thinks that he was influenced by Joanna's example. The author leaves us with the impression that both Selina's depravity and Joanna's saintly heroism were instruments of grace for Nicholas.

The Girls of Slender Means, like The Bachelors, illustrates the satirist's method of construction. A critic says:

"If we take the plot to mean, as it ordinarily does, "what happens", or to put it in a more useful way, a series of events which constitute a change, then the most striking quality of satire is the absence of plot. We seem at the conclusion of satire to be always at very nearly the same point where we began. The scenery and faces may have changed outwardly, but fundamentally we are looking at the same world, and the same fools, and the same satirist we met at the opening of the work. Whenever satire does have a plot which eventuates in a shift from the original condition, it is not a true change but simply intensification of the original"

34 Spark, op. cit., p. 171.
condition. 36

The theme of The Bachelors is the disorderliness of life after the second World War. This motif is developed in an apparently arbitrary rather than a strictly chronological narrative scheme. Construction of this kind makes an emotional impact which prevents the novel from being merely episodic. The book is a total symbol of fragmented existence.

In The Girls the pattern alters somewhat. While Nicholas Farringdon makes an important decision as a result of his "vision of evil", the shattering of club life by the explosion has not changed the inner lives of the surviving girls. Jane's telephone messages make no impact on any of the group; her own interest in the martyred missionary is merely commercial. Her shrewd business sense tells her that his manuscript and life story should have market value, and with this end in view, she bids Rudi search for The Sabbath Notebooks. The neurotic Pauline has found a new psychiatrist; Dorothy, still addicted to "Speech-ripples", has taken over a flourishing model agency. It is still the same world which we saw in the beginning. Even the crowds on V.J. night are almost identical with those of V.E. day.

Mrs. Spark pictures in these two novels the corrupt society into which these young people have been thrust. There are many funny episodes, yet there is nothing farcical or grotesque in her satiric method. Through structure and style she conveys the idea that the behaviour of these young men and women reveals "symptoms of a sinister world of chaos which the suffering individual is eager to shake off." 37

36 Kernan, op. cit., pp. 176-77.

As Professor Foss says:

The truly great comedy ... has a ... creative attitude to life. It is the continuity and meaningfulness of our existence which it cherishes, and because of that it turns accusingly against those distortions which the vulgar farce enjoys. What it wants, is to make us see the true values behind the masquerade of selfishness and stupidity ... It will be true to life and give us the complexity of human characters, where the good is close to the bad; it will not make us laugh, but smile ... It will not be funny but humorous ... Humour may be critical, but just ... it puts emphasis on the dark sides of life only in order to strengthen the belief in the light ones.38

There is much of the good side of life in the lives of the bachelors and the girls. They have the vitality and eagerness of youth and early adulthood; with a few exceptions, they are industrious and some have ideals beyond economic exigencies. All want something more than the 1940's can give them. Both Joanna Childe and Ronald Bridges would have sought happiness in marriage if war had not cut off her budding romance with a curate and his incurable malady had not pinned him to a desk in the museum. It seems that the author is asking us to see the shallow lives of youth against the sombre and unstable background of the times. Our laughter at their antics to find some small pleasures in the midst of disruption and decadence subsides when we become conscious of the pathos of their existence. In The Bachelors and The Girls of Slender Means, perhaps more than in her other books, the author demonstrates the validity of the statement: "Laughter will seldom spread where real deep interest is at stake."39

38 Foss, op. cit., pp. 143-144.
39 Ibid., p. 142.
CHAPTER FIVE

Only in *Robinson* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* has Muriel Spark given the stories character titles. The former, the narrative of a self-exiled apostate Catholic, is situated in a volcanic island somewhere near the Azores. Inheriting enough money to be independent, he became the owner of the island, lived a solitary life, except for the companionship of a small boy, a pomegranate worker's child whom he adopted when the father died. The narrator is a young widow January Marlow, one of three survivors of a plane crash. She spins the plot by describing in her journal the events between May and August, 1954. January is an English journalist, Tom Wells a magazine publisher, and Jimmie Waterford a distant relation of Robinson. Although Robinson is upset by the intrusion of people from the outside world, he shelters them and treats their injuries skillfully. The idea of recording the experiences occurred to January when Robinson told them that they were stranded on the island until the arrival of the pomegranate workers' boat in August. At home again in England she regards the misadventure as

... a time and landscape of the mind if I did not have the visible signs to summon its materiality: my journal, the cat, the newspaper cuttings, the curiosity of my friends; and my sisters - how they always look at me, I think, as one returned from the dead.¹

While writing the journal she had the idea that she "might later dress it up for a novel."² With this practical and realistic attitude, the

narrator maintains a balance between actuality and the haunting memories of her isolation from civilized life, an experience which she recalls as more like a dream than reality:

Sometimes I am a little vague about the details of the day before yesterday until some word or thing, almost a sacramental, touches my memory, and then the past comes walking over me as we say an angel is walking over our grave, and I stand in the past as in the beam of a searchlight.³

In some more lyrical passages, she records how she, a Christian and the only woman on the island, was affected by the primitive life and exotic atmosphere, "a sudden wanting to worship the moon" as if her "perceptions ... were touched with a pre-ancestral quality,".⁴

From this enchantment of the habitat, the survivors of the disaster are soon aroused by a series of events caused by the conflicts that arises between themselves and with Robinson. By dialogue and by Mrs. Marlow's journal entries we learn that she finds Tom Wells a disagreeable person, that Jimmie Waterford is a decent type, whose peculiar idiom ... had been acquired, first from a Swiss uncle, using Shakespeare and some seventeenth-century poets as text-books, and Fowler's Modern English Usage as a guide, and secondly from contact with the Allied forces during the war."⁵

It must be said, too, that Jimmie's elaborate speech contributes much to the variety of conversation in a story concerning only four articulate characters. The voice of nine-year-old Miguel enters towards the end when he appears as an indication of how "God writes straight with crooked lines".

The climax of the novel occurs when Robinson, the fairly amiable but

³ Spark, op. cit., p. 2.
⁴ Ibid., p. 3.
⁵ Ibid., pp. 21-22.
reluctant host, disappears suddenly. Bits of clothing, smattered with blood, point to murder. The survivors become suspicious of one another; Tom Wells, blustery and defiant, tries to force January and Jimmie into signing a statement that Robinson's death was accidental. Under threat of accusation of murder, he blackmails Jimmie, Robinson's only relative and heir, and he threatens to kill January when she refuses to sign the document. The ensuing days are a nightmare for January in particular; to protect herself from Tom, she searches in Robinson's room for a gun, finding at the same time his broken rosary. She makes good use of them, keeping the evil Tom at bay with the revolver, and secreting the rosary until she can teach little Miguel what he had never learned from his foster father.

In a carefully worded statement, January writes what she did not know would be her last entry in the journal: her opinion that Tom Wells murdered Robinson; that she had reason to believe that he was "a professional blackmailer ... that his luck-and-occult racket is a cover for trade in blackmail".  

Since all hope of finding the body has been abandoned, Jimmie erects a memorial to Robinson, a wooden cross, "inscribed in uneven lettering, In Memoriam / Miles Mary Robinson / 1903-1954".

... 'Is no further room for R.I.P.,' said Jimmie. 'Initially I did aim to insert R.I.P. but is not possible. The first letters I create too tall, and then, behold, is no more space.'

This concrete evidence that Robinson had gone out of their lives leads January to reflect on the man's character and way of life; he seemed a "kind of legendary figure ... he had assumed near-mythical dimensions."

6 Spark, op. cit., pp. 151-152.

7 Ibid., p. 136.
In retrospect

I saw him now as an austere sea-bound hero, a noble heretic who, to follow his mystical destiny, had hidden himself away from the world with only a child-disciple for company. I supposed he had recognised in Miguel a strong unformed religious potentiality. ... I vaguely thought of him as having no proper station in life like the rest of us. ... That he should have met his end at the hands of one of his beneficiaries seemed to me the essence of his tragedy. And in this interesting light he took on the heroic character of a pagan pre-Christian victim of expiation.®

This reverie induces her to recall conversations with Robinson in which he told of legends about the island; its pomegranate orchards planted by King Arthur; a half-demon who abducted a beautiful princess and imprisoned her beneath the volcanic mountain; the shepherd attracted by her screams who hurled himself into the Furnace to share her agony: "The lovers can only be released if a priest is prepared to bless them and die immediately afterwards."®

This remembrance of things past haunts January. As she was going through his rooms aware of the effect of his voice-- "rhythmical, almost a chant, which had a slightly mesmeric effect",® -- the island was shaken by an earthquake, causing damage to the house but only slight injuries to the occupants. January had just completed making a "presentable" rosary for Miguel: "I fixed to the chaplet a cross which I had made, with difficulty, from the smallest of the amber beads threaded with thin wire."®

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® Spark, op. cit., p. 137.
® Ibid., p. 138.
® Ibid., p. 139.
® Ibid., p. 142.
Miguel was magnetised by this new trinket, and when I showed him how to use it he was not content until he had mastered the technique, holding between his frail brown fingers and thumb glittering bead by bead, nodding his head in time to the repetitive prayers, completely under the spell. It crossed my mind how easily he was influenced.12

She proceeded to tell him that 'It ought to be blessed by a priest, but as there isn't a priest on the island I daresay you can gain all the indulgences without a blessing.' These words ... gave extra glamour to his rosary. He questioned me all afternoon.13

The whole matter was repugnant to Tom Wells, 'an R.C. item' of which Robinson would not have approved;

... 'He always said how easily anyone could corrupt the boy.'

'You speak too late,' I said, 'since I've already started to corrupt him.'

'It isn't a laughing matter.'

'Very true.'14

The denouement follows in short time. January's terrifying experience in searching in the tunnel on the shore of Pomegranate Bay to retrieve her journal stolen by Tom Wells, has a sequel in a violent tussle with the man who is prevented from killing January by Jimmie's intervention. Miguel appears at this moment with news that he has found Robinson alive, intent on reading the inscription on the memorial.

Without explaining the mystery of his absence, which we learn later was due to his irritation with so much enforced company, Robinson handles Tom Wells with contempt, demanding that the blackmailer return all the goods which he intended to take away. He accuses January of unfounded

12 Spark, op. cit., p. 142.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 143.

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suspicion about Tom Wells, assures her that Miguel will 'forget the
rosary ... in time', and that he himself will be glad to see the pome-
granate boat. He intends to take Miguel to a school in Lisbon and asks
January if she would accept the gift of his cat, Bluebell. A plane,
signalled by Robinson, lands to take the three victims of the first plane
to their homes in England. A year later, settled in Chelsea with her son
and near her sisters, January finds news of her former companions in the
papers. One item stated that Tom Wells had been convicted of blackmail
and the following spring she read that 'the tiny man-shaped Atlantic
island owned by the recluse Mr. M. M. Robinson, is sinking. Experts say:
'The event is explained by volcanic action.'

January's reaction to the news reports consists not of facts but of
impressions that fix in her mind:

It is now, indeed, an apocryphal island. It may be
a trick of the mind to sink one's past fear and exaspera-
tion in the waters of memory; it may be a truth of the
mind. ... Even while the journal brings before me the
events of which I have written, they are transformed, there
is undoubtedly a sea-change, so that the island resembles
a locality of childhood, both dangerous and lyrical.

No one individual in this story can be called a minor character, for
all are closely interrelated by means of contrast. However, the central
situation involves Robinson's problem of conscience. As a critic notes,
Mrs. Spark "writes within the framework of Catholic belief and brings to
it the skeptical regard for motives and manners that distinguish a Moral
imagination." Robinson is an individualist, whose extremely tenacious
disposition and morbid views about human nature make him adopt a solitary

15 Spark, op. cit., p. 185.
16 Ibid., pp. 185-186.
Having left an Irish seminary before ordination, and given up his faith because he was opposed to "an advancing wave of devotion to the Blessed Virgin", he began writing about "The Dangers of Marian Doctrine". His attitude reminded January of her brother-in-law, a Scottish doctor:

Again Robinson's anti-Marian fervour was far more interesting to me than Ian's, for with Robinson it was an obsession of such size that he had left the Church because of it; he had formed for himself a system bound by a simple chain of identities; Mariology was identified with Earth mythology, both were identified with superstition, and superstition with evil. Sterile notion as it seemed to me, still it was a system and he had written it up in his book. Ian Brodie, on the other hand, was dark with inarticulate emotions about religion, which his spasmodic rationalism failed to satisfy; he was mean by temperament, was a miserable minimist, and was forever demonstrating how far he could go against the Church without being excommunicated.

In the distinction between two individuals who reject dogma, the author scorns the one who rebels not on principle or through some misguided reasoning, but emotionally and childishly because he is defiant by nature. Robinson's error is intellectual pride; he has a warped outlook on life which prevents him from giving the child Miguel any chance of normal life. Ironically, the boy is eager for the loving interest of January, fascinated by the rosary and prayers, and wants to go to a Catholic school. While we are left to draw our own conclusions about his future, we have a hint that at school in Lisbon he will have advantages which will save him from becoming another Robinson. Through January's eyes we see what is basically wrong with the island-hero when she tells him: 'I chucked the antinomian pose when I was twenty. There's no such thing as a private morality.' 'Not for you. But for me ...', was

18 Spark, op. cit., p. 79.
19 Ibid., pp. 82-83.
20 Ibid., p. 171.
Robinson's answer.

In contrast to Robinson, his relation Jimmie Waterford is an easy-going, almost spineless individual. His foreign English and fatuous remarks about his luckless love affairs add some mild humour to the story. Surprisingly, he heightens the drama when he stands up to the despicable Tom Wells' threat to harm January.

A critic has suggested that this novel might be considered a parody of the modern thriller:

But it is first a detective story -- if you agree with me on that definition. At least Miss Spark's intention seems to be to write (or to satirize) a formal whodunit, along with variations on the desert-island theme suggested by the title. This is a quirkish, wilful look, not for readers who demand the reassurance of an established commercial formula.21

Mrs. Spark has reversed the detective formula, for there is no attempt to find the murderer. There is a clue to foul play in the blood-stained clothing, suspicion and doubts on the part of January and the two men, but after Robinson's disappearance, the situation centres on the mutual antagonism of the others rather than on a joint effort to find the culprit. Their reactions add a psychological intensity to the novel, creating powerful suspense until Robinson turns up and explains why and how he had vanished.

In addition to the detective element and the psychological interest, Robinson differs from Mrs. Spark's other novels in its outdoor setting. Raw and stark in the vicinity of the "Furnace", the locale is suitable for impending tragedy; yet the vegetation and colourful plants near the shore provide softer landscape features to mitigate the harshness. The

careful description of indoor scenes, particularly of Robinson's well-stocked library, reveal not so much primitive conditions as monastic simplicity.

The satiric object is the self-exile, who wants neither companionship nor comprehension from others, who reveals his stoic nature in short, clipped speech and aloof attitude. The comic invention and wit, so prominent in the author's other works, are rarely present in this book. The characterization in depth, the exotic atmosphere and the impact of suspense have a Robinson Crusoe quality. It is possible that Mrs. Spark has intentionally worked out a correspondence with Defoe's hero. A comment by E. M. W. Tillyard would seem to apply also to Robinson:

There is a beautiful irony in Crusoe's setting himself ... to re-create in his desert that feeling for home and settlement which ... he had abandoned and despised.22

In her technique also we find similarity with that of Defoe when the same critic remarks:

... we have the least possible sense of the author's presence and personal opinions, and correspondingly strong dramatic sense of events happening to the narrator or seen through his eyes.23

The volcanic island in Robinson with its two sides, the terrifying crater of the "Furnace" and the lush side of the shore, seems to have moral significance. Facing the title page, the author has provided a map which shows the "man-shaped island". The hero's abode is closer to the austere and threatening side, while rescue for the plane survivors is expected to come from the shore. However, they depart in another plane to


23 Ibid., p. 44.
which Robinson signals, and they are winged to their real island home.

It might not be too fanciful to see a purgatorial element in this experience: in the ante-Purgatorio of The Divine Comedy, souls who have delayed repentance while on earth must stay with hope deferred before they are permitted to climb the Holy Mount of expiation. Dante portrays them in the first eight cantos of the Purgatorio as a dense throng who implore the poet to pray that their time of waiting be shortened. This is part of Dante's experience as a pilgrim, a warning to avoid habits of sin that would, but for the grace of God, cause the death of the soul.

When January records in her first entry that she looks back on the misadventure as part of her life, we feel that her moral rehabilitation had begun on the island when she taught Miguel the rudiments of Christianity. Having simultaneously strengthened her own faith, she could return to normal life a wiser woman and a more mature Christian, worthy to climb the mount of expiation. Just as Tillyard sees that "Crusoe is Everyman, abounding in Original Sin ... incriminated more and more through repeated opportunities granted him by God for amendment", so we can see that Mrs. Spark in depicting January as a pilgrim soul chastised by the harrowing life in exile has followed an old tradition.

In the second novel under discussion in this chapter the influence of adults on children is the theme.

Jean Brodie is a quixotic teacher in the Junior School of the Marcia Blaine School for Girls in Edinburgh during the 1930's. Miss Brodie contrives to bring one particular group under her baleful influence. They

24 Tillyard, op. cit., p. 34.
are: Monica Douglas, who has ability in Mathematics and a fiery temper; Rose Stanley, preoccupied with sex; Sandy Stranger noted for small eyes and her vowel sounds; Eunice Gardiner, a fine athlete; Jenny Gray, the beauty; and Mary MacGregor, the nobody of the group.

Miss Brodie's pedagogical motto, "Goodness, Truth and Beauty", is meant to impress upon the girls that when they shall have reached the prime of life they must live it to the full, as she, now in her prime, offers an example of the attainment of this noble ideal.

The ingenious teacher enjoys al fresco classes. Seated on the ground in front of her, the girls are bidden to keep books open in case someone should intrude. Instead of a history lesson, she told them of her holidays abroad. They would learn about the many men whom she met and the one man to whom she had been engaged. He had been killed the week before the Armistice. She recited poetry, taught the girls to cultivate an expression of composure, and occasionally took her very special girls home to tea or for walks through Edinburgh. Miss Brodie was a popular teacher.

With her colleagues, the situation was different; indeed, there were rumours about suggestions that she leave and find a post at a more progressive school. Miss Brodie, however, was conscious of her influence on girls who were on the brink of teenage, the impressionable, emotional, romantic period of life. She refused to resign.

When the girls left her class at the age of twelve to advance to Senior School, the headmistress found them "vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorized curriculum ... and useless to the school as a school."25

They continued to see Miss Brodie on Saturday afternoons, and told her of their experiences in the art class taught by Mr. Lloyd with whom Miss Brodie had once been in love. At a later period, she went to spend Saturdays with Mr. Lowther, the music teacher, and the Brodie group visited her two at a time. At the age of sixteen, in the fourth form, the girls had become adjusted to the discipline and routine of the school, but they were still unmistakably "Brodie".

Miss Brodie had reckoned on her prime lasting until she was sixty, but in 1939, a few years before the end of this psychological Utopia, she was forced to retire on the grounds that she had been teaching Fascism. She had been betrayed by Sandy Stranger, the girl whom she had trusted with intimate confidences. A few years later, Sandy, remarkable for small eyes and pure vowel sounds, has become a Catholic, is a member of a religious order, a doctor of philosophy and author of a book on psychology.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is much more closely knit than Robinson, and the relationship between Miss Brodie and the girls whose lives she is determined to mould is more intimate than that of the island-hero with his protege. In the latter story, humour, which appears rarely, is astringent, whereas the career of the Edinburgh teacher provides a witty and entertaining satire on education in the two decades after the first World War.

In this novel, as in others, Muriel Spark adapts the Chaucerian method of describing individuals: a specific talent or physical characteristic differentiates the girls, together with the particular way in which each wears her hat. The hats are identical, but by wearing her hat in a

26 The references to the Fascists has contemporary relevance. In 1931 Sir Oswald Moseley became the leader of the British Union of Fascists. See Encyclopedia Britannica, (14th edition), 15, 843.
slightly unorthodox manner, the individual can display her defiance of authority. The hat angles showed also their allegiance to Brodie principles. A few examples will show them as individuals and Brodie types: Monica Douglas, famous for mathematics and mad rages,

"... had a very red nose, winter and summer, long dark plaits, and fat, peg-like legs. Since she had turned sixteen, Monica wore her panama hat rather higher on her head than normal, perched as if it were too small and as if she knew she looked grotesque in any case."27

Rose Stanley "famous for sex" wore her hat "placed quite unobtrusively on her blonde short hair, but she dented in the crown on either side."28 Eunice Gardiner, agile in gymnasium and swimming-pool, "had the brim of her hat turned up at the front and down at the back,"29 while Sandy Stranger wore it "turned up all round and as far back on her head as it could possibly go"30; pretty Jenny Gray kept "the front brim bent sharply downward."31 Mary Macgregor, "a silent lump, a nobody whom everybody could blame",32 gave no distinguishing tilt to her hat.

Miss Brodie had some sound principles of education with which she blended her unique views:

The word "education" comes from the root e from ex, out, and duco, I lead. It means a leading out. To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul. To Miss Mackay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion, from the Latin root prefix

27 Spark, op. cit., p. 3.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 4.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 5.
32 Ibid.
in meaning in and the stem trudo, I trust. Miss Mackay's method is to thrust a lot of information into the pupil's head, mine is a leading out of knowledge, and that is true education as is proved by the root meaning.33

To impart culture and beauty she read poetry to the girls, narrated her experiences in European cities, and described an early love affair. To prepare them for examinations she had a formula: "I trust you girls to work hard and try and scrape through, even if you learn up the stuff and forget it next day."34 Occasionally, with obvious distaste she would refer to rules. Incomplete answers would elicit a mild rebuke:

Answer in complete sentences please ... This year I think you should all start answering in complete sentences. I must try to remember this rule.35

In satirizing the Brodie methods the author caricatures the self-taught, undisciplined women who, having lost hope of marriage in their youth during World War I, were obliged to find a means of support. Miss Brodie has some ideas of her own about social norms: In opening windows, 'Six inches is perfectly adequate. More is vulgar. One should have an innate sense of these things.'36 Some of her views were quite arbitrary: she praised Mussolini's fascism but objected to Girl Guides and Brownies. This caused Sandy to suspect that

... Miss Brodie's disapproval of the Girl Guides had jealousy in it, there was an inconsistency, a fault. Perhaps the Guides were too much a rival fascisti, and Miss Brodie could not bear it. Sandy thought she might see about joining the Brownies. Then ... it was necessary

33 Spark, op. cit., p. 45.
34 Ibid., p. 48.
35 Ibid., p. 57.
36 Ibid., p. 58.
to put the idea aside, because she loved Miss Brodie.\textsuperscript{37}

Her pupils were to be the "creme de la creme", but the ardent Fascist forgot that basically children are the same everywhere; in every group there are some very disagreeable youngsters with ideas of their own and no amount of mere exposure to Platonic "Goodness, Truth and Beauty" will change them. Without order, dogma and discipline, they will turn out to be Jean Brodies. Mrs. Spark ridicules these sentimental ideas about children in her brief comments on their present and future lives.\textsuperscript{38}

While in Junior School, Sandy and Jenny spend their spare time making up love stories about their beloved teacher and at times Sandy, who knew far more than Miss Brodie was aware of, came very close to giving her away to Miss Mackay, when the latter, questioning the class was told: "Music is an interest to her but art is a passion."\textsuperscript{39}

She asked no further questions, but made the following noteworthy speech:

"You are very fortunate in Miss Brodie. I could wish your arithmetic papers had been better. I am always impressed by Miss Brodie's girls in one way or another. You will have to work hard at ordinary humble subjects for the qualifying examinations. Miss Brodie is giving you an excellent preparation for the Senior school. Culture cannot compensate for lack of hard knowledge. I am happy to see you are devoted to Miss Brodie. Your loyalty is due to the school rather than to any one individual."\textsuperscript{40}

Mrs. Spark's wry humour functions in this double-talk as ridicule of both Brodie and the headmistress. However, "Not all of this conversation was reported back to Miss Brodie."\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{37} Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 38.

\textsuperscript{38} See Spark, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 41-44 and \textit{passim}.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 85-86.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 86.
When enforced retirement coincided with the onset of the Second World War, Miss Brodie could not believe that she had been accused of Fascist tendencies by one of her girls. By this time, Sandy "had entered the Catholic Church, in whose ranks she had found quite a number of Fascists much less agreeable than Miss Brodie." In a letter to Sandy, Miss Brodie wrote:

Of course ... this political question was only an excuse. They tried to prove personal immorality against me on many occasions and failed. My girls were always reticent on these matters. It was my educational policy they were up against which had reached its perfection in my prime. I was dedicated to my girls, as you know. But they used this political excuse as a weapon. What hurts and amazes me most of all is the fact, if Miss Mackay is to be believed, that it was one of my own set who betrayed me and put the enquiry in motion.

Although Mrs. Spark points out also the eccentricities of Jean Brodie's colleagues, she makes it clear that they, at least, followed accepted teaching methods and looked on Miss Brodie's antics with amusement or indifference.

The parents, as well, caused little trouble:

Miss Brodie had already selected her favourites, or rather those whose parents she could trust not to lodge complaints about the more advanced and seditious aspects of her educational policy, these parents being either too enlightened to complain or too unenlightened, or too awed by their good fortune in getting their girls' education at endowed rates, or too trusting to question the value of what their daughters were learning at this school of sound reputation.

A reviewer has suggested that after reading this novel,

One should go back and see how very good her psycholo-

42 Spark, op. cit., p. 168.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., p. 30.
gical portraiture has been, how her amusing zoo of types is a good deal more than merely that, how every flick of irony tells. 45

To sum up the educational satire in this novel the comment of an English critic is most apt:

And the wilder moods of the more earnest and militant city schools of Scotland have seldom been so well exposed. Scottish teachers are no more prone than the rest to form the occasional coven of mixed darlings to whom their prime is duly consecrated. But they are an obstinate lot, which is no doubt why their wage claims seem to prosper and very fond of the kind of clash between colleagues, and the consequent, chronic mutual sabotage, which are recounted in Mrs. Spark's novel. 46

In describing Miss Brodie, Muriel Spark's satire includes compassion for the lonely spinsters of the inter-war era. Here as in The Comforters she gives one of her rare direct comments on the social scene:

There were legions of her kind during the nineteen-thirties, women from the age of thirty and upward, who crowded their war-bereaved spinster-hood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion ... the vigorous daughters of dead or enfeebled merchants, of ministers of religion, University professors, doctors, big warehouse owners of the past, or the owners of fisheries who had endowed these daughters with shrewd wits, high-coloured cheeks, constitutions like horses, logical educations, hearty spirits and private means. They could be seen leaning over the democratic counters of Edinburgh grocers' shops arguing with the Manager at three in the afternoon on every subject from the authenticity of the Scriptures to the question what the word 'guaranteed' on a jam-jar really meant.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . .

They were not, however, committee women. They were not school-teachers. The committee spinsters were less enterprising and not at all rebellious, they were sober


churchgoers and quiet workers. The school-mistresses were of a still more orderly type, earning their keep, living with aged parents and taking walks on the hills and holidays at North Berwick.

But those of Miss Brodie's kind were great talkers and feminists and, like most feminists, talked to men as man-to-man.47

After the girls enter the Senior School they still retain a certain loyalty to Miss Brodie. As they became older, Miss Brodie concentrates on making one of the girls substitute for her as the mistress of Teddy Lloyd. She chooses Rose, noted for her beauty, but it is Sandy Stranger whom the art teacher prefers. Eventually, Sandy seeing that all Teddy's paintings resemble Miss Brodie, tires of this relationship, and leaves, but not before she has been influenced by his religion. When Miss Brodie hears that Sandy has become Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, her only comment is 'What a waste. This is not the sort of dedication I meant.'48

The author presents Miss Brodie as "a self-appointed member of the Elect whose excesses are those of that very important Scottish person, the justified sinner",49 but she is a frustrated and rather ridiculous woman who can never realize her own faults and who is completely bewildered that one of her girls should betray her.

This story is told, as are several of her others, in an unusual way. Muriel Spark moves backward and forward in time and we are aware within the first two chapters that Miss Brodie is to be betrayed. We never find out why Sandy was disloyal, although a reviewer offers a clue in the

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47 Spark, op. cit., pp. 52-54.
48 Ibid., p. 82.
49 Miller, op. cit., p. 62.
following passage:

But the motivation is more complicated than one at first assumes. As a mature woman, a nun, the author of a much discussed book of "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace", Sandy, talking with another member of the Brodie set says, "It's only possible to betray where loyalty is due!" "Well, wasn't it due to Miss Brodie?" the other asks, and Sandy replies, "only up to a point". That point, the point of disillusionment, is what one has to determine. Apparently Sandy has come to believe, in the period before the betrayal, that Miss Brodie is a kind of Calvinist in reverse; she has "elected herself to grace". "She thinks she is Providence, thought Sandy, she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end." All this is closely related to Sandy's conversion to Catholicism, which happens by way of her lover. ("She left the man and took his religion and became a nun in the course of time.")

The influence of Miss Brodie was ironically defeated when the girl became mature enough to see through her teacher's designs. Providentially, or as some might say, accidentally, the author shows that Sandy profited more by the singing master's religion than by his romantic overtures. It would seem that the one-armed man was able to give himself only half-heartedly to his religion as to his romance.

The same irony appears when Robinson's influence over little Miguel is offset by January's concern.

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50 Granville Hicks, "Life Began in the Forties", Saturday Review (September 14, 1963), p. 34.
CONCLUSION

Muriel Spark's novels are funny, but her themes are profound. She is highly versatile and uses many devices to make her work fascinating: the eerie tapping of a typewriter, voices on a telephone, diabolic characters and poetic symbolism are but a few. In this paper in discussing satire I have so far had no opportunity to mention this last device (poetic symbolism) which occurs most strongly in two novels dealing with the young. In The Ballad of Peckham Rye Mrs. Spark uses quotations from the Old Testament, a book she was probably very familiar with in her childhood; In The Girls of Slender Means the excerpts are from The Book of Common Prayer and the poets. These quotations appear to be an attack on contemporary life; they hint at some kind of moral vision which the young people should be seeking. We do not find this device used in her novels dealing with older people, for there is no hope for them; only the grace of God can help them.

The young people of this period are in constant danger of being swept off their feet by mass media. There is a constant appeal to the senses; sex and material success become predominant in their lives; the old moral standards are lost.

As a poet Muriel Spark is aware of the value of art in all forms. While all her work shows that she is essentially a poet, in these novels she uses poetry to lift us above mundane and even sordid affairs, and to infiltrate her work with something other than the surface lives of her characters.
In The Ballad of Peckham Rye we are constantly aware of the lack of moral values among the young, but frequently we are made conscious of something else, a vision of a better life, as Nelly Mahone chants from the Old Testament. On one occasion, as Dougal and Humphrey walk home after the girls have been fighting on the street, they hear Nelly commenting:

The meadows are open and the green herbs have appeared, and the hay is gathered out of the mountain. The wicked man fleeth when no man pursueth, but the just, bold as a lion, shall be without dread.¹

Later, feeling depressed after receiving a letter from Mrs. Willis to say that some boy had told her husband Dougal was a paid police informer, Dougal again hears Nelly outside the pub declaiming:

The words of the double-tongued are as if they were harmless, but they reached even to the inner part of the bowels. Praise be to the Lord, who distinguishes our cause and delivers us from the unjust and deceitful man.²

The thematic use of these verses at moments when the characters are exposed to moral danger is one of the author's oblique satirical comments. By using the quoted text as a symbol the reader is able to make his own judgment.

In The Girls of Slender Means we again hear poetry, but this time it is Joanna, the one ideal character in the novel, who recites selections from the poets and The Book of Common Prayer.

As Joanna recites a stanza from Drinkwater's romantic "Moonlit Apples"³ the girls are engaged in their freetime activities and here the verses in-

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dicate what the author wants us to see; these apples symbolize their radiant youth and even the somewhat clouded sky signifies the kind of atmosphere in which they live.

The romantic verses function as a choral commentary on the action of the story. Nicholas waiting for Selina to join him hears the voice of Joanna reciting a passage from Resolution and Independence. These stanzas in the traditional Ubi sunt theme foreshadow the fragility of Nicholas' romance and at the same time the transitoriness of human experience.

Of more sinister portent are the lines from "Don Juan", Canto III, which induce Nicholas to realize that Joanna is far too innocent to be thrust into the modern world unprotected.

Perhaps the most effective of these poetic symbols is the stanza from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" which conveys to us so vividly how shocked Nicholas is by the tendency of the girls to fall in and out of love. It also suggests how Nicholas fears that in this kind of environment his own quest for higher values would be fruitless.

At the climax of the story when lives are in danger Joanna's childhood habit of reciting the daily psalter returns to sustain her and the others. The irony here is almost poignantly forceful for while they are heedless of the meaning, at least the ritual prevents panic.

In The Ballad of Peckham Rye these biblical references are ironic

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5 Ibid., p. 108.
6 Ibid., p. 121.
allusions pointing a contrast between sordid human affairs and traditional ideals. In The Girls of Slender Means, however, the significance seems to be in awakening the reader to what is wrong in their precarious moral existence.

I have mentioned ritual, and this may be part of Mrs. Spark's technique: to use scriptural passages, poetry, and a wealth of literary allusions to enable us to ponder the contrast between our materialistic age and the lofty ideals we find in the greatest poetry. Viewed this way, her device of the poetic symbolism has ritualistic value in stressing the author's attitude towards contemporary life.
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