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TO CATCH THE CONSCIENCE:
THE DEMONIC ELEMENT
IN THE NOVELS OF
MURIEL SPARK

BY
RONALD C. LOUGHEED

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario

1964

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Approved:

Mary J. Manley

Homer Plante

Elizabeth W. Buff

20922

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

Hamlet

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the demonic element as it is found in the writings of Muriel Spark. Its purpose is to examine the development of this device and to estimate its influence on her style.

The introductory chapter outlines the works Mrs. Spark has produced to date. It sketches the influences in the author's life and attempts to show their relationship to her novels. In this section the motivating force behind her writing is determined in order that it may be used as a guide for the intensive studies in the succeeding chapters.

Detailed examination is limited to two specific books. Chapter Two deals with The Comforters; in this novel I have traced and analysed the diabolic characteristics of the demonic figure. This same procedure is used in Chapter Three to treat The Ballad of Peckham Rye; here, in addition, I have shown the development of Mrs. Spark's style in her handling of the demonic element as well as the contrasts between the two books.

My study of Mrs. Spark indicates that she is deliberately using the diabolic element and has drawn upon reliable classical sources to authenticate her creations. It is evident that she is not writing just another kind of

science fiction. In view of her recurrent theme of conversion I conclude that she has chosen this special approach for moral purposes. She aims to reveal, without homiletics, the sinfulness of the world and its easy subservience to the demon. She is a new version of the moral critic of the world for she is the still small voice to the collective mind of man.

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CHAPTER ONE

MURIEL SPARK: AN INTRODUCTION

Like Keats most people enjoy the thrill of seeing a 'new planet swim into their ken'. There is always an aura of excitement, an appealing freshness, accompanying such a spectacle. These are my reactions to one of the newest planets in the literary heavens. Since Mrs. Muriel Spark made her first official appearance to the world in 1957, her light has grown so bright that she now promises to become a permanent astronomical guide for those adventurous young sailors who launch their literary craft hopefully upon the critical seas of the world. If the critics are right, time will guarantee the permanency of her work.

As with all good writers, Mrs. Spark's background has been a strong influence on her work. She was born and raised in Edinburgh. One soon sees how the Scottish environment of her youth threads its delightful colouring through so many of her plots. After her schooling she spent several years in Central Africa; as yet those years have not provided material for a novel, but they have supplied the ingredients for some excellent short stories. A third influence derives from Mrs. Spark's spiritual perambulations. The daughter of a Jewish father, she

attended a Presbyterian school in Edinburgh. After World War II, according to her biographer, she began to think of herself as a pagan.¹ In quest of a religious anchor she was drawn to High Anglicanism and from there it was but a short step to Roman Catholicism, the faith she adopted for her own in 1954. As I shall indicate in later chapters, this spiritual metamorphosis shows in nearly all of her writing giving it a deep and universal significance.

In the short span of six years her production has been indeed prolific. Her first novel, The Comforters, was published in 1957; since it is the basis of my discussion in Chapter Two, I shall leave it for the moment to pass on to her second book, Robinson, which appeared in 1958. It is a kind of up-to-date trip to Purgatory as experienced by the heroine January Marlowe. Set on a tropical island, the story involves the experiences of three survivors of a plane crash with Robinson, owner of the island, and his protege, Miguel, a nine-year-old orphan. The fascination of the exotic setting and the sharp contrast of characters give the whole book an eerie atmosphere. One of the survivors, Tom Wells, is obviously Mrs. Spark's typical demonic figure: involved with black magic and possessed of an unscrupulous nature, he presents a picture of evil. Then there is Robinson, an

1. Derek Stanford, Muriel Spark (Fontwell, 1963), p. 28.

ex-seminarian, who now deplotes what he calls the superstitious aspects of the Roman church. Finally, at the other end of the scale, we have January Marlowe, a young widow, staunch in her Roman Catholic faith to which she is a convert. In the end the demonic figure is safely incarcerated in prison, Robinson is shown up as a rigid intellectualist and egoist, and his beloved island is doomed to sink beneath the waves; but January's faith stands vindicated and deepened.

In 1959 Spark brought out her famous Memento Mori. With amazing knowledge of the aged she traces the lives of a group of oldsters who, one by one, are paged by a mysterious telephone voice which tells them to remember that they must die. There is a grim fascination in watching the varied reactions of these old people to this summons to eternity. The Sparkian demonic figure in this book appears in the person of Mrs. Mabel Pettigrew who uses any device from sexual perversion to murder to achieve her diabolic goals. As a foil to her ignominy, we find the expected protagonist for good in the person of Jean Taylor, who is, significantly, a Catholic convert. Between these two characters the rest move about in their aimless circles, circles which have become ingrained habits with old age. Although this provides some very fine comedy, the reader is never allowed to escape the chilling vibrations of imminent death, the sense that one

day he too will totter on the shaky limbs of old age and weak faith. With this book Spark's reputation was made.

One of her most popular books, The Ballad of Peckham Rye, appeared in 1960. It is the subject for analysis in Chapter Three of this study. In the same year as The Ballad, Mrs. Spark published The Bachelors. In this novel the demonic figure is easily spotted in the character of a spiritualist called Patrick Seton. Like his predecessors he is a cold-blooded scoundrel, but in this plot he is more artfully used to create some masterful moments of suspense in his plan to murder his mistress. A humorous hodge-podge of characters crowds the pages of this book; they are drawn from a curious lot of widows, bachelors and divorcees. As a psychological preparation for the reader, the hero, Ronald Bridges, is, again, a convert to Roman Catholicism. He acts as a kind of lay-confessor to the other characters. After retribution has been meted out to the demonic figure, the reader sees through Ronald's eyes the utter futility of this particular segment of society. One is left with the feeling that the hero's recognition of this waste will preserve his own soul.

The year 1960 also produced a collection of Spark's short stories, The Go-Away Bird. Both the religious and the African themes are prominent in these tales which cover a wide range of subjects. In them one meets the very religious white couple who prove to have no religion at

all when, after fervent prayers for a child, the wife gives birth to a black baby. In another, a pair of twins are so horrible that they offer ample justification for infanticide. The title story provides a perfect demonstration of Spark's superb skill in this medium as well as a sample of her unusual technique with the art of fictional murder. In a brilliant character sketch she does a splendid job of flaying a left-over of the mad 1920's. On another occasion the reader is taken into a retreat house to meet a pilgrim who, because she lacks all neurotic symptoms, is despised by her fellow retreatants; in the end she wins their respect by going completely mad. Even ghosts of murder victims and fallen seraphs from Hell are worked into these stories which offer an excellent sampling of Mrs. Spark's creative ability.

Another collection of short plays and stories came out in 1961 under the title of Voices At Play. In this volume the reader is introduced to the witty and brilliant mind of Muriel Spark at play. It is a spicy pot-pourri of ghosts, science fiction and satire. One notices in this group of tales that the religious thread of Sparkian writing is rather weak, but to compensate for this the demonic side is very much in evidence. There can be little doubt that this particular set of stories definitely assures Mrs. Spark a top place among the short-story writers of this era.

by the martyr-hero, Nicholas Farrington. She says: "He's got a note in his manuscript that a vision of evil may be as effective to conversion as a vision of good." In accord with the pattern of our author's fiction a conversion occurs. Nicholas becomes a Catholic as the result of his experience during the raging fire that provided the climax. His spiritual crisis happened when he saw a girl selfishly saving a prized Schiaparelli dress while her friends stood in the shadow of death and one was eventually consumed in the holocaust. We agree with Nicholas that the contrast was shocking and unforgettable. In this special moment I believe we have the very heart of Spark's purpose in writing. She has a definite moral aim to reveal the evil in this world. She does not preach about it or capitalize upon it. She seems to trust that the revelation may work upon her readers even as it did upon the character of Nicholas. Her method reminds one of the old English custom of hanging highwaymen beside the road. No words or signs were needed; it was a cruel but effective warning.

In our secularistic age to write in a moral vein is likely to consign one's self to oblivion. Spark avoids this fate in several ways. First, she uses the demonic figure which was common in medieval thought and art, but she brings the figure up to date, gives it modern clothes and views and setting and lets it follow a natural course among the gullible humans of this earth. Her choice is a

wise one since man has always been captivated by tales about the Devil. Father Farrell stated this very succinctly when he wrote,

The Devil, who is a past-master in the bizarre, cannot help but be a source of fascination; besides, he has staged a dazzling come-back in modern literature.²

Obviously, man is not so far removed from the primitive state as he pretends to be. In the age-old paradox he is still attracted to those eerie and unnatural things which he fears in his very soul. The last few years in England have seen the apparent revival of witchcraft in that country. Richard West reveals in an article that a rash of black masses has swept the countryside.³ In view of these occurrences in her homeland, I consider that Mrs. Spark is perfectly attuned to the times. In Chapters Two and Three I shall deal in some detail with her use of the demonic image.

A second device the author employs to disguise her moralist's approach is her style. She writes with such a deadpan comic touch that one is never quite sure when to laugh or cry; but, as Brian Wilkie says, "the comedy conditions the reader for her message."⁴ So well does

2. Walter Farrell, O.P., The Devil (New York, 1957), p. 7-8.

3. Richard West, "Satan on the A6", New Statesman, LXV (March 22, 1963), p. 420.

4. Brian Wilkie, "Muriel Spark: From Comedy to Disaster", The Commonweal, LXXIX (October 11, 1963), p. 80.

Spark accomplish this masquerade that some of the less astute critics are completely fooled. Brigid Brophy attempted a 'hatchet' job of criticism on The Girls of Slender Means.⁵ Whether through wilful ignorance or a critical deficiency, Brophy declares that Spark's writing is badly in need of priming and her style is too childish and full of mechanical repetitions. I believe that Brigid Brophy has failed to appreciate the wit and wisdom of Mrs. Spark. It is most difficult to write a thing in such natural modes that it seems simple; this same charge was often thrown at the early writings of Hemingway. Like his critics, Brophy has apparently been perfectly fooled by Spark's disguise. Father Gardiner aptly described her secret when he made this comment:

Frankly, I think most of the praise is deserved on the basis of her style. It is subtle, but there is no one today who can match her Mona Lisa atmosphere--Muriel writes the way Mona looks.⁶

Therein we have the purpose of this study: I shall examine in some detail the demonic figure in two of Mrs. Spark's novels and out of this examination I hope to provide an interpretation of the mystery behind this 'Mona Lisa' style.

5. Brigid Brophy, "The Girls of Slender Means", The London Magazine, Vol. 3 (December 1963), pp. 76-80.

6. Harold C. Gardiner, "The Girls of Slender Means", America, Vol. 109 (October 26, 1963), p. 488.

The two novels chosen for analysis are The Comforters and The Ballad of Peckham Rye because the demonic element is quite perceptible in their stories. Admittedly, these are arbitrarily chosen, but space is limited and, after all, it is not necessary to devour the whole pudding to ascertain its flavour and ingredients. To begin our analysis we turn to her first novel where, as her biographer says, "we become aware that her world picture is ours inverted."⁷

7. Stanford, p. 109.

CHAPTER TWO

THE COMFORTLESS CONVERT

The Comforters was Muriel Spark's first novel.¹ As the eldest of her small family of words, this book could be expected to reveal the author's basic ideas and ideals; in later works these are often concealed beneath the smoothly precise prose of the sophisticated artist. No doubt this is the reason why critics tend to say that a writer's first book is often partly biographic in nature. In any case, we can find in this novel many details connected with the author's early life.² The story itself is based on the fact that she once planned to write a tale about the trials and tribulations of Job.³ In order to show the parallel between the novel's characters and the biblical prototype, I shall recapitulate the ancient Hebrew story. Job was a good man, faithful to God in all things. When Satan challenged this man's faith, God⁴ allowed the devil to try the fortitude of His servant.

1. The Comforters (Penguin Books, 1957). Subsequent references will be to this edition.

2. Derek Stanford, Muriel Spark (Fontwell, 1963). In this brief biography of Mrs. Spark, Stanford draws a few parallels between her personal life and this novel.

3. Ibid., p. 63.

4. Job 1:6-12. All biblical citations used in this study are excerpted from this source.

Although Job had to endure terrible tortures, his physical suffering was the least of his problems; his real trial involved the mental struggle to hold on to his faith. In this respect, his own doubts plagued him fiercely, but the worst brainwashing occurred at the hands of his "friends". The three patriarchs in his story have become throughout history the archetypes of false comforters. In the end Job triumphed over all his tormentors including those self-righteous consolers.

The essential elements of the Job story reappear in The Comforters. The heroine, Caroline Rose, is a modern version of the biblical hero. Newly converted to the Roman Catholic faith, she finds the struggle to consolidate her belief an arduous one. In fact the novel is centred in this crisis of faith. Her "comforters" are as far off the line as were Job's: Laurence, like Bildad the Shuhite, is an expert on dogma who knows all of God's laws without any knowledge of the Lord Himself; Helena, like Eliphaz the Temanite, knows all God's ways but lacks awareness of His enemies; Willi Stock, like Zophar the Naamathite, knows God's enemies but can offer nothing more than shallow, futile platitudes; together they contribute nothing in the way of comfort for the new convert. Like Job she might well say of them, "Miserable comforters are ye all".⁵ By the end of the story the reader, through Caroline's eyes,

5. Job 16:2.

perceives the hollowness of these people; it is this perception that puts the heroine's faith on solid ground at last. Now, if in this story Caroline has her God, her troubled faith and her false comforters, does it not follow that somewhere in the plot we must meet a representative of the biblical Satan? This role I would assign to Georgina Hogg.

From the moment we meet Mrs. Hogg we realize the woman is intent upon destroying Caroline's infant faith. As Satan did with Job, she subtly makes every effort to ruin the heroine mentally, and, when that fails, physically. She may not be an image of Satan himself, but her words and actions qualify her for a diploma from his dark school. Consider what M. de Rougemont says of Satan:

For we know that he can create nothing, not even the field of his activity. He can therefore only twist and deform what exists and was well made by God. Our very vices are not true creations of the Devil, but only deflected virtues.⁶

In Spark's novel, Hogg is the perfect antithesis of everything creative as she tries to deflect Caroline's new virtue into the insidious path of her own kind of "spirituality". There can be little doubt that Hogg's role in the plot is a demonic one and my purpose is to supply evidence in support of this assumption. I shall begin with her most obvious characteristic, her great size, a feature which the author stresses at intervals in the narrative.

6. Denis de Rougemont, The Devil's Share (Washington, D.C., 1944), pp. 50-1.

Eminent artists have always attributed huge dimensions to Satan. In The Inferno Dante revealed the Devil as a giant to end all giants. His tremendous figure is beastly and obscene; its hugeness stands in the infernal ice as an image of the ultimate in evil.⁷ Appropriately, Dante chooses for Satan's nearest servants five giants out of mythology; John Ciardi makes reference to the symbolic role of these creatures: "They are symbols of the earth-trace that every devout man must clear from his soul, the unchecked passions of the beast."⁸ Georgina Hogg's abnormal size is one feature which would seem to ally her with these monsters and thus fit her to function in modern fiction as a servant of the Devil. Moreover, one cannot deny that her actions are certainly not meant for the good of Caroline's soul.

Another master-poet, John Milton, gives Satan a fabulous stature.⁹ He gave him also the semblance of a noble bearing; indeed Lucifer the ruined archangel has a stately manner, an overpowering presence which will impress the shallow-minded. This impressive feature we find in Hogg during the early part of the book before we come to the full realization of what she really is. The barren mind of

7. See The Inferno XXXIV, 28-33.

8. The Inferno, A New Translation (New York, 1954), p. 257.

9. Paradise Lost, Book I vv. 192-210.

Helena never does recognize the demonic Hogg and, fearfully impressed by Georgina, she naively helps to further the woman's evil. Of course, we are not suggesting that outsized people are minions of the Devil, but Spark seems to follow the tradition of Dante and Milton in her initial presentation of the power of evil.

We soon discover that Mrs. Hogg's mammoth physical dimensions are matched by a monstrous inner nature that fairly reeks of malevolence. At one point Caroline thinks of this creature as a gargoyle,¹⁰ and the author herself uses the same word to describe her.¹¹ When we remember that a gargoyle is a grotesque figure primarily used for decorative contrast, or as a waste chute, and usually representative of "unearthly" creatures, it seems significant that Spark should assign that specific term to this woman. Like the ugly stone figure on the exterior of a medieval cathedral, Hogg constantly reminds us of the presence of evil in the world. She is a monstrosity of womankind. The first specific reference to this ungainly nature may be found in the description of her gargantuan bosom. Three times in the story, each time by a different character, this anatomical deformity¹² is discussed.

We find a demonic parallel to Georgina's bosom in

10. See The Comforters, p. 140.

11. Ibid., p. 156.

12. Ibid., pp. 31, 138, 140.

Jules Michelet's study of Satanism;

At the head of the company of Foolish Virgins their leader, the woman of sin who is enticing them down to the abyss, is full, swollen out, with the Demon, who hideously distends her body and escapes from beneath her skirts in a black cloud of dense, stifling smoke.¹³

Hogg's breasts are swollen out of all proportion. Is this unnatural aspect due to the demon dwelling within her?

A woman's bosom is a symbol of motherhood, of her special function in life. Therefore, Hogg's chest should indicate a woman overflowing with motherly love; instead we find that she is the opposite of everything maternal. She has no real love for the son she bore; she warped him mentally through his early years until, when we meet him as a youth, he is a vicious, unhappy piece of humanity. She rejoices when this son betrays his father, not because he did the right thing in writing to his mother about his sire's bigamous marriage, but because he was treacherous to that parent who had reared him from the age of seven. This is the kind of treachery which Dante consigned to the uttermost depths of Hell. It is also significant that this son was born a cripple; here we find distinct overtones of the Satanic legend which shows the Devil as handicapped.¹⁴ Years later, this same son's lameness disappears when he finds love for the first time in his miserable life.

13. Jules Michelet, Satanism and Witchcraft (Citadel Paper Bound, 1962), p. 47.

14. See Joshua Trachtenberg, The Devil And The Jews (New York, 1943), p. 208.

I believe that this symbolizes the rebirth of a spirit which had been crippled by the presence of an evil incapable of love, especially that love as revealed by Christ, which can heal both physically and spiritually.

There is also some analogy between Hogg and the monster in Beowulf; in the Anglo-Saxon poem the mother of Grendel was descended from Cain and, like him, she was forced to relinquish happiness and to lodge herself in the wilderness. In a similar sense, there is no evidence that Hogg ever knew happiness, even as a child; she lived in a kind of wilderness of non-identity because we never see her with anything remotely resembling a permanent home. Like Grendel's mother, she attempts to destroy all that is good, fine and noble; in the end she, too, is defeated by a type of the Christian hero, or in this case, heroine. The Beowulf poet describes the defeat of the monster in this fashion:

For God brought about the victory. Once Beowulf had struggled to his feet, the holy and omniscient ruler of the sky easily settled the issue in favour of the right.¹⁵

In the novel we see that Caroline is perplexed by the problem of Hogg until that moment in the river when she finally "rises to her feet" and settles the issue once and for all by casting off the clutching claws of Georgina.¹⁶

15. Beowulf, (Penguin Books, 1957), p. 63.

16. See The Comforters, p. 197.

A second physical oddity lies in the fact that Hogg has no eyelashes; this, at first, seems like an insignificant detail until we consider the function of these minor organisms. Spark has cleverly chosen a characteristic that subtly reveals the demon, for the lash is the secret of the eye's personality. From the Egyptians down to the present time, cosmeticians have made much of the knowledge that the lashes bring out the eyes and give character.¹⁷ If they were without lashes the eyes would be about as noticeable as a pair of ears--they would still be there but who would pay any attention to them? We discover this peculiarity in Georgina Hogg's appearance at the beginning of Chapter Two and it seems important to note that from this point on her eyes are mentioned only once. They must be there but no one is ever aware of them; thus they seem to be just two expressionless pits of nothingness resting in her head. Why nothingness? Because if she is truly possessed of demonic qualities she will lack human characteristics such as pity, love, understanding. These traits are indeed alien to her personality. Like C.S. Lewis's devils in The Screwtape Letters, she has no comprehension¹⁸ of human emotions in others or herself. This explains

17. The recent movie, Cleopatra, has revived an interest in the Egyptian method of making the eyes quite outstanding. For the same reason any actress worth her salt possesses several pairs of false eyelashes.

18. Lewis says that "A being which can still love is not yet a devil." The Screwtape Letters (New York, 1962), p. X.

why, throughout the book, she is impervious to insult or to reason. She is like the sightless souls purging the sin of gluttony in Dante's Purgatorio, and the reader soon senses that, unlike them, she will never secure a place in the Christian world.

In this glutton image we find another demonic possibility. We note that Spark takes great care to depict Hogg as a creature greatly concerned with food. For Caroline, the act of chewing is constantly associated with Hogg. The first time we see the two women together at St. Philomena's retreat centre we hear Caroline thinking, "Eat me, bloodywell take the lot."¹⁹ Obviously, the girl is not referring to a physical eating; it follows then that subconsciously she must suspect that Hogg wants to devour her soul. This deduction is supported when we discover, moments later, that Caroline is chanting a kind of exorcism, her private formula: "You are damned. I condemn²⁰ you to eternal flames." A childish curse, perhaps, and yet it does serve as a counter-defence against evil--a sort of soul guard; and, possibly, it is finally effective during the great struggle in the river. Nevertheless, Hogg's chewing, symbolic of devouring, haunts both Caroline and the reader throughout the story. Time after time we find this ugly woman chewing, and always in a rhythmic

19. The Comforters, p. 30.

20. Ibid., p. 30.

fashion; on one occasion she masticates in time with the refectory reading of a passage from the Gospel of St. John, the book of love, the doctrine of which she negates²¹ whenever we see or hear her.

The characters who are most aware of this eccentric habit are usually Hogg's victims or intended prey. In an interior monologue her husband, Mervyn Hogarth, relates that this compulsive eating was characteristic of Georgina from childhood. As cousins, they had played together and he recalled: "There was always something in her mouth; grass--she would eat grass if there was nothing else to eat."²² Now one could argue that Spark was simply using this device to add interest to the character, but if this is her only reason then one will find it hard to explain why she has concentrated on making Hogg destructive and repugnant. Mrs. Spark is not prone to exaggeration in her revelation of character; her portraits are always clear and concise. Therefore, I am convinced that the constant reference to eating and chewing is a deliberate technique for evoking questions within the reader's mind. And these questions are bound to lead to ideas which will suggest the demonic.

Scriptural associations will inevitably arise, and I shall allude to these. In the Bible we read

21. See The Comforters, p. 39.

22. Ibid., p. 141.

these words concerning Satan: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the Devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."²³ Since most of the characters in the novel think of Hogg as "greedy", one could think of this greed being motivated by a diabolic desire to "devour" all whom she can influence. Countless legends have grown up around wild scenes depicting the Devil devouring his prey; many writers have converted these images to their own purposes, and they often keep eating in the foreground. C.S. Lewis imagines the devils gathering at a banquet to sup upon the souls they have captured from God.²⁴ Dante created a most grotesque scene of spiritual consumption in his imaginative portrayal of Satan's domains: in the three mouths of his Satan we see Judas, Brutus and Cassius undergoing eternal punishment for treachery to their lawful leaders:

In every mouth he worked a broken sinner
between his rake-like teeth. Thus he kept three
in eternal pain at his eternal dinner.²⁵

Now in this Dantesque image there is a remarkable parallel to Hogg. It is revealed that she has three hairs growing out of her chin. Surely it is more than coincidence that these match in number the faces on Dante's Satan. It would not be inconceivable to imagine these hairs as a kind of

23. I Peter 5:8.

24. Lewis, pp. 154-5.

25. See The Inferno XXXIV, vv. 56-7.

"mark of the beast", the identifying emblem of a demon. Anticipating rejection of such slim evidence, I adduce further support by quoting the secret thoughts of Hogg's husband, Marvyn:

Georgina's lust for converts to the Faith was terrifying, for by the Faith she meant herself. He felt himself shrink to a sizable item of prey, hovering on the shores of her monstrous mouth to be masticated to a pulp, and to slither unrecognizably down that abominable gully, that throat he could almost see as she smiled her smile of all-forgetting. Repent, Mervyn. Be converted! And in case he should be converted perhaps chemically into an intimate cell of her great nothingness he stood up quickly and shed a snigger.²⁶

Spark has given us here a picture that is too close to Dante's Satan to be accidental. It can lead us to assume that Hogg is meant to be a demonic character. This basic assumption can now be used to lend much support to an earlier revelation of Mervyn's: it was that moment when he revealed that Georgina was always after a person's peace of mind.²⁷ Peace of mind would be real food for a demon since this is the mental state which leads man closer to God.²⁸ If a demon can capture a man's peace of mind it is not too unreasonable to say that he has gained a hold on the victim's soul. From the emphatic and repeated references to Hogg's enormous figure, her monstrous mouth and her repulsive eating habits, I believe we should

26. The Comforters, p. 147.

27. Ibid., p. 145.

28. See St. John 14:27.

agree to accept some evidence of the diabolic in the recurrent chewing symbolism.

From the subject of eating we pass to the ritual of the Black Mass through the connecting link of the wafer, very vital to this evil rite. Although she is not directly connected with it, Hogg is surrounded by the ghastly aura of this blasphemous practice. In the more orgiastic forms of the Black Mass the altar is often the body of a living woman;²⁹ such a woman would have to be very evil-- a living blasphemy; Hogg fills this requirement very well and, in an indirect fashion, provides a kind of altar of profanation for anyone who falls into her villanous clutches. One may say that black magic is a thing of folklore and superstition but the fact is that witchcraft is far from dead in England today. In Time we find evidence that Black Masses are still carried out in that country and are causing much concern to the clergy.³⁰ Thus it does not require much stretching of the imagination to see how Muriel Spark could be led to incorporate the essence of such material into the setting surrounding her demonic figure. She tells us how Caroline sensed that Hogg would get "an ecstasy out of murdering her"³¹; this certainly smacks of the ritualistic ecstasy which is reputed to be

29. See Michelet, p. 106.

30. Time (Vol. 82, No. 26), December 27, 1963, p. 68.

31. The Comforters, p. 35.

found in the licentious orgies of the Black Mass. Indeed, we learn that during the Middle Ages the actual sacrifice was sometimes a living person.³² Therefore I think we can surmise that from the outset Hogg harbours a consuming lust for Caroline's soul.

A further connection with the Black Mass can be found in the family crest which eventually relates Hogarth to Hogg. A crest is a type of seal; in Christianity we think of a baptized person as one who is "sealed" to the church and faith.³³ Now, if we imagine we are dealing with someone who is sealed to evil--we will expect to find some symbol of this satanic union; perhaps the crest will do it. To grasp the significance of the crest one must remember that Mervyn is the image of disillusionment; this is made very clear.³⁴ Everything in his life has come out just the reverse of what he had dreamed; now, as the Black Mass is a hideous parody of the Holy Sacrifice, so in his life we begin to see a hideous parallel. But what has brought it about? He married Georgina thinking he was getting a jewel of a woman, but discovered to his dismay that she was just the opposite of everything he had expected. The author remarks that he was an innocent

32. See Charles Williams, Witchcraft (New York, 1959),

33. Just as the King's seal in the warm wax suddenly gives it an importance and meaning so the act of baptism raises a man in an elite and significant spiritual union.

34. See The Comforters, pp. 141, 146-7.

participant in a Black Mass; could she intend to suggest that by marrying a demon he had, in a sense, thus become part of an evil union? History reveals that sexual union was an important part of the sacrilegious activities of witches and devil-worshippers.³⁵ In the strange marriage of this ill-matched pair one finds a definite link between Mervyn's disillusionment and Georgina's evil nature. Thus I believe that the crest stands as a grim symbol of an unholy marriage, a profanation of the sacrament of matrimony.

If this interpretation of the crest should seem pretentious, we can consider the evidence for Hogg as a character of unusual origin. One can see how Spark has used her other characters to set Hogg far off from the rest--a kind of social leper. Eleanor calls her a witch; Louisa Jepp, who refused to allow Hogg to enter her home, says she is not decent, implying that she lacks humanity;³⁶ on another occasion Louisa hints that there is something weird about her, a suggestion which haunts the reader's imagination.³⁷ Perhaps the most significant reference occurs when Mervyn wishes he had "carved her image out of stone" instead of marrying her. The stone image immediately evokes pictures of the god Baal, of evil idols from the dark, pre-Christian past of man. It suggests that Mervyn

35. See Williams, pp. 161-2.

36. See The Comforters, pp. 28, 117.

37. Ibid., p. 178.

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suspects Hogg's demonic nature and realizes he would have been wiser to have possessed only a graven image of her. Basically a weak man, he recognizes that her presence has led and driven him down twisted paths, for she always stirred in him "a brew of old troubles"³⁸, troubles which might be better translated as sins. He recalls for us the knowledge that this malevolent spirit of hers existed from her childhood, that even then she gleefully exploited the transgressions of others--a kind of glee that echoes a diabolic delight in evil for the sake of evil since she used her information for no purpose whatsoever.³⁹ Her greedy searching for weaknesses and flaws is the complete antithesis of Christianity's teaching of forgiveness. Even in her youth she thus stood for the opposite of goodness.

A further attribute of the devilish nature can be found in her repulsiveness. We believe that man has a natural aversion to evil; it is, therefore, quite remarkable how the varied characters of this novel are in perfect agreement over one thing--the odious nature of Georgina; even the charitable Helena admits that she can't stand the woman. Since Caroline epitomizes the good soul struggling for survival in the midst of doubt and evil, it is natural that we see this revulsion most clearly through her eyes. She sees Hogg as "abominable"; she wants to "clean her

38. The Comforters, p. 141.

39. Ibid., p. 141-2.

teeth" after talking with her; she refers to Hogg's indecent smile.⁴⁰ Later in the story, she finds Hogg's very touch to be repugnant. All these sensations are the fundamental reactions of good to evil--a natural loathing. She appears obscene to Caroline, and even Louisa Jepp, the symbol of natural wisdom and good sense, stresses the indecent quality that hangs about her. When we note that indecent means "tending to the obscene" we begin to realize that the author has used every means to reveal Hogg's physical structure and social behaviour in such a way as to lay particular emphasis on the foul aspect of the woman, an aspect which accents her demonic nature.

Paradoxically, while Helena Manders recognizes her own dislike for Hogg, she never fails to lend her a helping hand. On only one occasion does Helena achieve enough backbone to half-defy the woman.⁴¹ She was pleasantly surprised at the feeling of confidence this gave her, but the very next time they meet, Helena has slid back to her former weak stand.

It seems to me that in the strange relationship between the two women we have a symbol of the Christian struggle, a picture of the weak Christian yielding to minor faults because he cannot rally enough strength to combat them. In this case Helena rationalizes that by so doing

40. See The Comforters, pp. 33-4.

41. Ibid., pp. 152-3.

she can cancel them out through her charity. Until Caroline's final stand, only Louisa Jepp had the moral stamina to control Hogg; all the others yielded to her in varying degrees. Her son, Andrew, had to flee to escape her. He bears the name of Christ's first disciple--but he bears the name only. He is a disciple, but solely for Hogg's brand of belief, one filled with ugly hate. Ultimately, the mother's loathsomeness drives the son away. This incident of the loss of her child is a remarkable episode in itself; she had complete control of the boy through all of his formative years, yet the moment he comes of age he eagerly deserts her to live with his father. As I mentioned previously, this would seem to indviate the woman's utter lack of maternal spirit, for a boy is unlikely to run off to a father he scarcely knows unless he has been existing in a world where all human warmth and love are missing. It is difficult to imagine a mother as revolting as this; yet, in the story, we find those abnormal traits which reveal her as a dramatic personification of the word 'repulsive'.

In the repugnant qualities of Georgina's character we can see some of the deadly fascination of sin itself. As the snake hynotizes its prey, so sin exercises its vivid attraction. Man may hate it and fear it, but he is drawn to it again and again through the tempting possibilities of forbidden pleasures. The people of the novel hate and fear

Georgina, but in one way or another most of them are involved with her. Somehow they cannot escape from the dominating influence of the woman. Helena looks after her like a mother-hen with an ugly duckling; Mervyn had to run away from her to save his mind and soul, yet he cannot erase her from his life; Caroline despises her, yet, as we see, she spends much time pondering the strange paradox of the woman. This was revealed at the time Caroline was recuperating in the hospital. Helena Manders had gone up to the girl's room to pick up some articles for her. In Caroline's notebook she found these terms listed under "Possible identity":

Satan
a woman
hermaphrodite
a Holy Soul in Purgatory

At first glance, these thoughts would seem to apply to the mysterious voices Caroline hears; on second thought one realizes that they have little or no connection with that weird novel-writer who, Caroline suspects, is using her as a character in a story; so, they must be related to the other major problem in the girl's life--Georgina Hogg. We have support for this conclusion near the end of Chapter Five when we are permitted to see within the mind of the heroine and discover that she senses some connection between Hogg and the invisible typist;⁴² she doesn't want to think about this because of the evil implications

42. See The Comforters, p. 102.

behind such a possibility. She deliberately tries to treat Hogg as merely a bad example of the Christian way of life in order to avoid facing up to the demonic potentialities in the woman. Yet, she has toyed with the idea that Hogg is Satan. We understand her method of reasoning; for the woman does prate religion all the time, yet fails to practice the part she preaches.⁴³ From personal contact Caroline sees Hogg as the antithesis of everything she thought her new faith stood for--thus she could deduce that Hogg is possibly a thing of evil masquerading in a pious disguise. A fat wolf in sheep's clothing.

It is interesting to note that Caroline places the feasibility of Hogg being just a woman right next to the guess about her Satanic role. Very few of Mrs. Spark's women are ever shown in heroic colours, which is really unkind to the weaker sex. As this is not the place to analyse the author's feelings on this subject, we shall consider Caroline's third hypothesis, hermaphrodite. This bisexual creature, in reality, lacks all sexuality; obviously, as another woman, Caroline has detected the sexlessness of Georgina, a fact Mervyn had to marry the woman to discover.⁴⁴ Caroline's final conjecture is a most charitable one: Hogg could be working out a kind of purgatory on earth, but if so, she is certainly going

43. In Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice Antonion says: 'The devil can cite scripture for his purpose.' I:3.

44. See The Comforters, p. 142.

about it in a way that will prolong her after-life penance for centuries. Spark never clarifies this problem; we can only surmise about these terms, but I conclude that they are meant to direct our thoughts toward the demonic potential in the character of Georgina Hogg.

There is no guess-work about the person of Louisa Jepp; at every turn we discover that she is sure and sharp in her recognition and treatment of the monstrous Hogg. Louisa is one of Spark's rarities--a lovable woman. Spark's biographer states that she is a "free, imaginative portrait of her much-loved grandmother"⁴⁵. The reader is drawn to the old lady with a deep affection and, in spite of her smuggling "sport",⁴⁶ we think of her as the only religiously balanced person in the book. It seems quite apparent that she represents the forces of good even as Hogg stands for the legions of evil. Louisa's gypsy background provides the setting for her reputed occult powers, since these romantic wanderers have been famous for their knowledge of magic and fortune-telling. She seems to be set up in the book as a gentle kind of exorcist. Now one must remember that an exorcist uses good or white magic to combat evil or black magic, or to drive out a demon. The fact is made quite clear that twice in the story Louisa appears to 'exorcise' Hogg right off her property and out

45. Stanford, pp. 32-3.

46. As the old lady says, this kind of smuggling may be a crime but it is certainly not a sin.

of her life. It is significant that the second occasion occurs at the structural centre of the plot.⁴⁷ Here we see these two opposite types meet face to face in a strangely dramatic moment; no harsh words are spoken, no violence is offered, but somehow one senses the bright, silver sword in Jepp repelling the demon invader. On a stage their meeting would be the highlight of a play; the audience would be fascinated with the image of this quiet little lady calmly rendering powerless this serpent in her garden, serenely neutralizing its venom and then blithely casting it out of her presence. If they are like Louisa, the meek will certainly inherit the earth.

The subject of exorcism recurs at the conclusion when it is revealed that Hogg's body was never recovered from the river's depths. For centuries, legend has it that water can exert a peculiar influence over demons, particularly running water. Robbie Burns dramatically immortalized the idea in "Tam O'Shanter". Mrs. Spark, who reveals Scottish influences through most of her work, is using this means to eliminate Hogg. The juxtaposition of the two ideas leads one to deduce that Hogg was exorcised through the river; the author makes plain through her characters that an instant relief spread over all the scene once that baleful woman had disappeared from their lives. One should note that the water device is not

47. See The Comforters, pp. 109-112.

restricted to this novel alone; Spark makes use of it with another of her demonic figures, Dougal Douglas, in The⁴⁸
Ballad of Peckham Rye.

I have tried to avoid talking of Hogg as 'dead' in the preceding paragraph because, in a way, she never quite achieves a status of reality in the story. After all, how can something die when it has never seemed to be a part of the mortal world? The author tells us that Georgina simply disappeared whenever she entered her room because she had no private life.⁴⁹ This is strange; a human being must have a private life--it is the prime requisite of human nature. Hogg's failure to have this type of existence suggests that she is non-human and that leads back to the hypothesis of a demonic element in the novel. On the way to the fatal picnic she vanished right in front of two witnesses. No explanation is offered, but it appears reasonable to conclude that her diabolical powers were temporarily suspended and the body she used as a vehicle of disguise simply lost its visual reality. Her companions in the car that day provided no reason for her demonic power to stay on the alert; Willi Stock was already a diabolist: dabbling in Black Masses, and Helena had never presented any real challenge to Georgina's devilish

48. Dougal is quite voluble in expressing his great distaste for crossing water but he can do so if he wishes.

49. See The Comforters, p. 156.

ambitions. Her final disappearance involves the failure to recover her drowned body; it is fitting that the corpse does not emerge since it would have given her at least a semblance of humanity.

It should be apparent that my reading of the novel has convinced me that Hogg was assuming a human body to fool her intended victims, that she put on the body like a dress and could discard it just as easily. There is support for this theory in my earlier comments about her complete lack of emotions as revealed through her lashless eyes, but the most damning evidence was given by Mervyn who discovered when he married her that she was as sexless as a potato; obviously the demon could make up a body, but it could not manufacture the emotions to accompany the illusion; it lacks the soul, that human spirit which can know love and respond to it. In a sense she was a kind of zombie, a walking thing that is neither dead nor alive.

Mervyn contributes further evidence about the unreality of Hogg's body when he calls upon her to stop meddling in the smuggling game. He reveals at that time that he has trouble seeing her.⁵⁰ It seems that she was never quite in focus for him, yet he, more than anyone else, had a fine opportunity to study this creature. His attitude strikes a strange note. Why could not her own husband ever see her clearly and distinctly? It must be

50. See The Comforters, p. 141.

that in reality there was no authentic human shape for him to study--only a demonic figure which would have no sense or meaning in the terms usually applied to humanity.

In her naive way Helena contributes some evidence for this view when she often remarks that Georgina is "not all there". She means exactly what she says, but the reader soon begins to interpret it in a different manner--she is not all there because she was never there in the first place. The proof accumulates from the number of incidents when it is revealed that mice move freely about her room in a manner which denies her physical presence in the area, a presence which is necessary only if she has a human audience. Then, too, one cannot let slip the opportunity to remark that the rodent form has been attached to demonic tales and therefore these little creatures might be the most adequate company for an evil spirit.⁵¹

In her choice of a last name for Georgina, Muriel Spark has unveiled her own background and also added to the demonic picture.⁵² We know that the author was raised by a Jewish father; we know that one of the oldest Hebrew laws has to do with the unclean flesh of swine; we can, accordingly, assume that the name Hogg was no idle choice.

51. Carl Stephenson, Medieval History (New York, 1943), p. 622.

52. George Fergus, Signs and Symbols (New York, 1951), p. 20.

This will also account for much of the repulsive quality attached to Georgina. Moreover, in respect to this choice of a name, it would be wise to take note of the fact that Mrs. Spark, in 1957, was a recent convert to Christianity; the Gospel narrative would be reasonably fresh and new to her. Far-fetched though it may sound, I think we could find a connection with that dramatic moment when Christ drove the devils out of the boy and into swine grazing on a hillside.⁵³ Mrs. Spark could be presenting us with another 'Hogg' possessed by at least one demon.

In his brief study of Muriel Spark, Derek Stanford makes an interesting comment:

If, therefore, one wishes to describe The Comforters as anything else than a fantasy, brilliantly sufficient in its own right, then it is as a parable of the individual's isolation, his lonely self-centredness, that one might read it.⁵⁴

In the years to come I fear this word 'fantasy' will often be used to describe the books of this author. I say 'fear' because we must not let ourselves be tricked into thinking her novels are merely well-polished pieces of sophisticated science fiction. Mr. Stanford's second description is far more accurate for this book: it is a parable, a parable about a modern female Job; and Georgina Hogg is the evil-doer to be found in most parables. As in

53. St. Mark 5:1-13.

54. Stanford, p. 63.

a medieval morality play, she is the abstraction given a human form to fulfil all the demonic qualifications. Some of these are revealed by Edward Langton's description of the role of Satan in this world; "He (Satan) appears, chiefly, however, in the threefold role of accuser, seducer, and destroyer."⁵⁵ I believe that Hogg followed these steps in her evil progress. She always sought out the flaw or weakness and then made accusations.⁵⁶ No crime was ever revealed, but one never forgot that she knew. Gradually this moral blackmail could be worked on the victim until the very essence of his being was sucked out of him and he became an aimless robot, as in the case of Mervyn. Such was the manner of Georgina's approach to Caroline. Sensing the tender greenness of the girl's new-found faith, she began to pick at her and harp upon Caroline's meagre experience in matters of religion until the girl was driven to distraction. So great was the mental stress induced that Caroline started to hear voices and invisible typewriters; these hallucinations could have resulted in utter madness from which neither her soul nor her mind might ever have recovered but, ironically, at the climax in this struggle between good and evil, it is the

55. Edward Langton, Essentials of Demonology (London, 1949), p. 56.

56. In The Ballad of Peckham Rye Dougal Douglas analyses each new acquaintance to discern the person's flaw. This is treated in more detail in the next chapter.

powerful diabolic figure who is destroyed.

These mysterious voices are one of the most intriguing elements in the book, and yet I believe they are the one thing most of us can understand. To clarify this statement I quote from Papini, the Italian scholar who made a study of demonology:

Anyone with a little experience in spiritual retrospection hears within him "voices" which are not his voice, hears promptings and seductive urgings which a moment before were unknown, unforeseeable and unbelievable.⁵⁷

These voices our heroine hears begin after she meets Hogg, and they cease when Georgina disappears in the river. Thus the voices must be related to the demonic figure; the fact that they nearly destroyed the girl's mind is in full accord with Hogg's plans for Caroline. It would be impossible to number those people who have faced the problem of inner voices; Christ still stands foremost with His rejection of them in that famous temptation scene which has served as support for countless, wavering followers. Scoffing does not eliminate the problem; one cannot jest away a very real enigma. Bernard Leeming stresses how genuine it is in his brief study:

Very generally it is held by theologians that the devil has power to exert influence upon the imagination, the nerves, glands and physical organism, but not directly upon the will.⁵⁸

57. Giovanni Papini, The Devil (New York, 1954), p. 27.

58. Bernard Leemin, S.J., The Devil (New York, 1957), p. 69.

Like most of us, Caroline endured a long struggle with her demon tempter; it would have been easy for her to give in to the madness that impinged upon her mind, but she fought for her sanity and soul with a valour that was not to be conquered.

Before leaving the character of Georgina Hogg it should be pointed out how well she may stand as a collective image of the Seven Deadly sins, a role that would come quite naturally to a demon. In his study of the devil Papini remarks: "The Satanic sin above all others is pride, presumption, arrogance."⁵⁹ This is an apt picture of Hogg. Her every action bespeaks an awesome arrogance as she rides roughshod over all those too weak to combat her. This is evident even in that humorous scene at the retreat when a young man found himself embroiled in a wild tirade over a simple comment about his tea. Her presumption knows no bounds when she tries to force herself into the home of Louisa Jepp. She certainly possesses the type of overweening pride which cost Satan his place in Heaven. There is her smug vanity in her supposedly religious life; it is so twisted that at one point it sounds as if she has "Our Lady" working for her personally to the exclusion of the world. She poses as the exponent of knowledge of the faith yet, according to Louisa Jepp, Hogg's hypocrisy would

59. Papini, p. 129.

drive people away from the Catholic church. We see a sullen pride as she declares that she has "crosses to bear"; At first we think of this as just one more meaningless repetition of a pious platitude, but as we learn more about the creature we see a grimmer sense; these 'crosses' could be symbolic of the fact that these people are 'dead' to this world and are thus immune to her evil probing and prodding. Demonic poisons have no effect on men who have overcome the temptations the world has to offer. Perhaps in the end it was her shattered pride over her failure with Caroline that finally finished Hogg once and for all.

The second of the deadly sins is Envy. At their first meeting Caroline realizes that Hogg envies her looks and intelligence;⁶⁰ Mervyn recalls that when they were children she spoiled all of their games, apparently because she envied them their youthful pleasures. She envies the happiness the others possess in their lives and in their families and seeks to wreck it; several times she tried to disrupt her benefactor's family; one, in the case of Helena's mother, Louisa, she intends to install herself as "companion" to the old lady despite her objections; at another time Georgina maliciously tells Helena that her own son Andrew is better off crippled than a lapsed Catholic like Helena's son, Laurence. These actions are the products of a vicious mind--the twisted brain of a

60. See The Comforters, p. 35.

pathological schemer or the technique of a true demon.

Her envy leads directly into the sin of Anger. We never see her evince or enjoy happiness for a single moment. She is angry with the whole world. We realize how deep this wrath is when we see the venomous hate she aims at people such as Caroline. At the conclusion, this anger comes to a full growth of evil as she tries to drag the girl down to her death. It was on the occasion of Mr. Jepp's death-bed sufferings that we saw this malicious monster at work; Louisa reveals that Hogg made the poor man's last days a veritable hell on earth. With incidents like these we can understand why so many characters refer to Hogg as 'mean-minded'; it drives home to the reader's mind the sullen, depraved, poisonous nature of the woman. We have the feeling that here is a person who could watch the whole world go down to a horrible chaos and then, and only then, she would smile her first smile.

It is not difficult to accuse her of the sin of Sloth. We discover that she wears nothing under her blouse to control her enormous bosom; she says she will appear just as God made her. This has always been the slothful man's excuse for his degrading lack of action. Later, at her famous meeting with Louisa, she is so shoddily dressed that Mrs. Jepp's charwoman looks like a lady by comparison. She prates a great deal about all the work she has to do, yet we never see any evidence of such labour. There can be no

doubt that sloth well becomes the 'lady'.

For the fifth sin of Avarice we might say that she covets a person's peace of mind as poor Mervyn sadly discovered. Louisa says that she is poisonous and Laurence speaks of her "worming" in on Caroline. These terms apply to the avaricious who covet to the last degree. She wants everything that the others possess--their faith, their happiness, their peace of mind, their very souls.

With Hogg the sin of Gluttony is very obvious. As I indicated earlier she is always eating or chewing on something, a habit which has the same repulsive appearance wherever it is overdone. Her adopted name of Hogg fits her well in this respect and her great size supports the swinish picture created. She would make an excellent warning poster against this sin of voracity.

Since I have already declared that Georgina is sexless it may well seem an impertinence to now accuse her of Lechery. Consider her reaction to the bigamous marriage of her husband; she knew all about it, but, in failing to turn him over to the authorities she became his accomplice. Would it be too much to say that she appeared to derive a perverted pleasure from it? She reports to Caroline on just how many visits Willi Stock has made to the girl's room at late hours; this would indicate the lecherous leering of a "peeping Tom". Then there is the way she lusts after knowledge of other peoples' sins. Isn't this

a symptom of a perverted disposition, the kind of perversion that could be listed under lechery? It is significant that, although Louisa never explains, her insinuation that Hogg is not a "decent" woman seems to speak volumes.

In respect to this word "decent" we must make reference to a minor character in the novel, Ernest Manders. It is made clear that he is homosexual. From the first revelation of the man we see him as an abnormal part of humanity, yet no one ever thinks of him as "indecent". In fact, he fits into their lives in his own gentle way as an accepted, but different, member of society. It is strange that he who is definitely abnormal should be acknowledged while Georgina should be universally rejected. It is strange, unless we think of humanity acting as a single body in its common dislike for an alien spirit in its midst. Mankind can always find a place for its deviates, but not for the spawn of hell who trespass upon its earthly grounds; once more man's instinct offers him a type of protection from the forces of evil.

In Muriel Spark's parable of a modern Job we find a great deal of the author's own experience. It is quite apparent that her conversion made a deep impression on her (we find the conversion device through so much of her work that we cannot lightly pass it by). Like most people who have experienced this change she was probably drawn to her conversion through her own intelligent reasoning; she

would evaluate the beliefs confronting her and attempt to choose the right one.⁶¹ It would be much later that her heart would become involved in the conversion. Since Mrs. Spark is a good observer of the human comedy we can deduce that she would analyse herself also. The results of this analysis are revealed in the character of Caroline. Through most of the novel Caroline's conversion is basically one of the intellect. This is the reason why Hogg is able to work upon the girl's mind; her faith is still in the vulnerable mental area--it has not yet been safely stored in the emotional vault, the heart. Caroline is not a true convert until she begins to accept religion with her heart, and that moment occurs at the climax when, in spite of her revulsion, she sets out to help her spiritual enemy, Georgina Hogg.

It is in the symbolism of Caroline's selfless act of sacrifice for her enemy that we find the proper and suitable ending for the story. From Mrs. Spark's own heritage comes a famous moment that has a parallel to this event; she could recall the dramatic story of how Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt; they passed safely through the Red Sea, but when the Egyptians tried to follow they were drowned. There is a link here as Caroline and Hogg both are involved with the stream but the girl is brought to

61. Sir Edwin Manders thought of Caroline's religion as "all mind and no heart". The Comforters, p. 202.

safety whereas Hogg goes down to defeat. From that day on Caroline became "lighthearted".⁶² Could it be because her belief was now securely based in her heart? One's heart can indeed be light when all doubt and mistrust are removed. I firmly believe that our heroine's conversion was not completed until she received that emotional "baptism" in the river.

Thus Spark leaves us with her modern version of an old lesson. The good man upholds the glory of God and evil is destroyed or at least defeated. And, like the biblical story, this one doesn't have every character immediately saved for Heaven. It leaves us with the image of a world in which evil roams at will, opposed by few and accepted by many; a world in which men are possessed by their interest in material things so that they lose sight of their real objectives and are unable to fight their spiritual enemies. It is a world that appears quite unpleasant. It is a relief to move from this dimension into the gleeful tricks of Dougal Douglas and the characters of Peckham Rye.

62. The Comforters, p. 202.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DEVIL'S BALLAD

A casual cliché we often hear is the one 'that every man has his price'. This statement suggests that every human being has at least one weak spot in his character, a spot whereby sin can worm its way into the core of his person, into the very soul. Now imagine a man so gifted that he can immediately detect human weakness and exploit it for his own purposes; impossible, one thinks, yet the police files list countless names of criminals who owned some part of this talent--the police call them confidence men. In this modern world with its 'high-pressure' salesmen it is the rare and secluded individual who has not been exposed to the semantic manipulations of some skilled purveyor of the so-called necessities. And it is the still rarer individual who has not fallen sometime under the hypnotic spell cast by these wizards of words and ended by purchasing an article for which he had no use. Fortunately, these men are not purveying evil as such, but they are playing upon the stupidity of men. Consider what a terrifying thing it would be if all of these salesmen could be rolled into one to create a man who was able to detect the flaw in every man he met. This is what Muriel Spark has done with Dougal Douglas, the anti-hero of The Ballad of

Peckham Rye.

The novel tells the story of a man's sudden appearance in, and equally sudden disappearance from the village of Peckham Rye. In the course of his sojourn there, he influences young, middle-aged and elderly persons to act in ways that cause physical and moral harm to themselves and to others. The phlegmatic electrician, Humphrey Place, jilts his miserly fiancée, Dixie Morse, right at the altar; the guilt-ridden factory owner, Mr. Druce, murders his bored secretary and mistress, Merle Coverdale; the methodical Mr. Weedon, Druce's personnel manager, has a nervous breakdown; Dougal's proud landlady, Belle Frierne, suffers a stroke; the town fool, witless Nelly Mahone, endures abuse from a gang of hoodlums; young Leslie Crewe, typical juvenile delinquent, enters upon a junior crime career; Trevor Lomas, the town tough, is incited to bloody violence; the workers of two textile companies become increasingly addicted to absenteeism and dissatisfaction with their jobs.

The story opens with the dramatic portrayal of a young groom rejecting his bride; Spark then uses the flashback technique to explain how this astounding situation came about. A youthful Scotsman, Dougal Douglas, arrives in town and takes a job with a manufacturing firm as a 'human' study man as compared to a 'time' study man. It is soon revealed that he is ghost-writing the memoirs of an

actress, Maria Cheeseman. Shortly thereafter he takes an extra job with a rival manufacturing company. It is implied that this ambitious youth has a fourth job but the reader begins to realize that it is likely the one true vocation he has because it seems to be the sowing of evil. Certainly, despite his various employments he has plenty of time to meddle in the love affairs of various couples; in fact, the entire plot revolves around his tampering with the lives of those he meets, with the grim results I mentioned previously. There is no proper climax or conclusion to the plot; Dougal simply disappears from Peckham Rye and the jilted Dixie manages to finally wed her Humphrey. The reader is left with the feeling that he has just been taken for a quick walk through "The Twilight Zone".

It may appear unnecessary to discuss the demonic qualities of Dougal, but it is essential because in his character we can see Spark's maturing style and her approach to the problem of evil in the world today. In her first book, The Comforters, Georgina Hogg is a nightmarish succuba straight out of medieval folklore--a crude, unlovable, diabolic figure--the image of a demon as seen through the eyes of an eager new convert. In The Ballad we find an urbane, sophisticated demon whose suave manners and infectious personality win our hearts in spite of ourselves. This is the authentic image of evil. Contemplated

as an abstraction, evil may be ugly but in its concrete form it is all too attractive. No man would ever have his price if evil were revealed to him as a gross, repulsive thing; it is the false countenance of apparent beauty which entices him to fall from grace.¹ In his theories of the origin of Satan, Michelet sees him as a composite of Bacchus, Pan and Priapus.² Here we have our Dougal Douglas; gay, irresponsible, lustful and completely amoral if not immoral. And here we have the kind of demon who is bound to be a success in the present-day world.

From the first day of his appearance in Peckham Rye Dougal works subtly but efficiently. With the care and perseverance of a dedicated gardener he sets about encouraging the growth of the deadly sins in the town. He does not plant the seeds; they are already present. He simply gives impetus to the latent force for sin that exists in each of his victims. Through his diligent efforts the Ten Commandments are shattered one by one; the striking thing about his actions is that he achieves his ends slyly, with the cunning of a fox. One sees in him none of the sledgehammer tactics employed by Georgina Hogg. This is a new kind of demon in fiction. Spark has matured considerably in the two years which lapsed between the creation of

1. The Satanic parallel to this is found in Satan's vow: "Evil be thou my good." Paradise Lost, IV, l. 108.

2. Jules Michelet, Satanism and Witchcraft (New York, 1962), p. 104.

these demonic figures; she seems to have reached an understanding of the nature of sin and its purveyors. In order that we may realize this new dimension in her work it is necessary to examine Dougal Douglas from several different aspects.

As she did with her female demon, Spark has retained in Douglas certain physical characteristics to identify the diabolic nature of the creature. Dougal's peculiar defect is a crooked shoulder--once again an emblem of evil--the misshapen one, the deformed devil of medieval legend but with a distinct difference.³ Now the deformity is not a repulsive thing; it contributes to the attractiveness of the man. He is fascinating. He stands out from the faceless crowds of ordinary individuals. Curiosity about him increases from page to page. He is as magnetic as sin itself.

Early in the story the author reveals that Dougal's crooked shoulder gives him an advantage in a fight; it allows him to reverse the normal use of his hand in order to get his opponent by the throat as with a claw.⁴ Here is the medieval, clawed demon cunningly disguised in human flesh and no one is aware of this ghastly charade until he fights with Dougal; then it is too late because the demon

3. See Luke 13:10-17.

4. Muriel Spark, The Ballad of Peckham Rye (Penguin edition), p. 45. All subsequent references to the text will be from this edition.

literally has him by the throat. This is an interesting device for it parallels the idea stressed in religion today; sin does reverse the normal order of life until it has a man in its evil clutches.

The hand can become a claw. It has also another weird characteristic. On that occasion when Dougal ran his hand down Merle Coverdale's back we are told that his hand is long and cold.⁵ The hand may be cold for natural reasons, but one suspects that the author is thinking of more than poor circulation at this moment. She is drawing upon the imagery of Dante. Now most demonic figures are surrounded by heat and clouds of sulphurous smoke. Dante varied from the tradition by portraying ultimate evil as deadly cold: his Satan stands in the midst of the frozen river Cocytus.⁶ Since Dantesque imagery recurs in Spark's writing, it seems quite likely that the cold hand of Dougal is intended as a demonic symbol. Its extraordinary length is appropriate, too, in that it matches evil, which always seems able to reach a man no matter where he may be.⁷ We have further evidence of Dougal's diabolism in the strange pair of bumps on his head.

Part of his strategy is to show these bumps to people informing them that he had the horns removed for the sake

5. See The Ballad, p. 32.

6. See The Inferno, XXXII-XXXIV.

7. See The Inferno, XXVII, Purgatorio, V.

of making a decent public appearance. This device produces some very funny scenes; it also reminds us of medieval pictures of the Devil.⁸ In the end it is obviously the perfect disguise for a true demon, for it puts people off their guard. It has its parallel today in those occasions when some practical joker tries to sell ten-dollar bills for one dollar; people avoid him or look for the 'catch' but they do not believe him. There will always be exceptions to this and in the book Mr. Weedon seems to fulfil this need. He is apparently convinced by Dougal's little act; it appears certain that this belief led to his breakdown. However, in his case Dougal had already given the reader a foreshadowing; he said that Weedon's flaw was that he lacked vision.⁹ Weedon was a dull, unimaginative plodder; he took things strictly at their face value. Subtlety would be lost on such a clod; reality of the moment was all that held meaning for him; the facts were all that he could understand and this caused him to believe exactly what he saw and heard. Unlike other men, he could not laugh off or rationalize that which his mind suspected to be true; so, he did the only thing possible-- he suffered a complete mental collapse. Psychology states that this reaction is quite to be expected of this type

8. See Joshua Trachtenberg, The Devil and The Jews (New Haven, 1943), p. 208.

9. See The Ballad, p. 64.

of person in this kind of situation. No doubt the bumps were only cysts, but in the case of Weedin they were just as effective as horns would have been.

Through Weedin we see another eccentricity in Dougal, who is always offering to comb someone's hair and who delights in having his own combed. Spark did not introduce this element as a casual characteristic; the reader should look for the deeper meaning. In the book of Revelation there is a description of the evil locusts who, like demons, will be permitted to roam the earth and torment men, all men except those who have the seal of God upon their forehead--¹⁰ and these locusts "had hair as the hair of women". There can be little argument that Dougal swept through Peckham Rye with all the destructive force of a swarm of locusts. In the epistles of I Peter and I Timothy the apostles de-¹¹clare that excessive vanity about the hair is a sin. Again, in I Corinthians, Paul declares that long hair is a shame unto a man.¹² The Old Testament is full of references to plucking the hair from the head and it is usually done as a mark of sorrow and of shame for sins committed. The story of Samson hinges upon hair, and, as one watches Dougal combing hair or volunteering to do so, one catches

10. Revelation 9:8.

11. I Peter 3:3; I Timothy 2:9.

12. I Corinthians 11:14.

a vision of Delilah the demonic tempter caressing the potent locks of the famous strong man. At the end of World War II the world saw grim evidence of the symbolic qualities of hair in those poor women who had their heads shaved to show the world that they had collaborated with an enemy in their country. One must remember that it is often the simple and obvious motive which leads men into sin, and hair qualifies well as a factor in temptation. Spark may be contrasting the fortunes spent on hair-grooming with the starving millions on the world; the cost of a woman's permanent would feed a child for a year in India. Isn't this a sin of omission? Dougal personifies vanity--the door by which the demon secures easy entrance to the soul. Truly, one's fate could hang by a hair in the scale of divine justice.

Another physical talent of Dougal's lay in his ability to imitate people. The finest impersonator in the world could never hope to match this hero's repertoire. Through the story he becomes a professor, a television interviewer, a man of vision, a Zulu dancer, a Chinese coolie, a corpse--in fact everything from a lady columnist to a solid Edinburgh boy. He is so many persons and tells so many lies that one is never able to pin him down. This is important, because man is never able to pinpoint evil; its insidious nature can take so many forms that the human will, unaided by grace, is incapable of

unmasking all of them or of protecting itself against them. Perhaps the most significant of Dougal's many mutations is revealed in the cemetery scene with Merle when he poses on a tombstone looking like an "angel-devil". Here is the image of a fallen angel reminiscent of Milton's picture of Satan rising out of the fiery lake in which he had rested after his fall from Heaven. In this scene it is expressive that Merle is startled for a moment, but then she laughs. ¹³ Why? It would appear that, momentarily, she actually believed he was a devil, but then she shrugged it off as an impossibility. This is a very human reaction to an incredible suspicion.

It is this human reaction which offers a natural camouflage for Dougal; people won't believe what their eyes and ears tell them. He quite boldly tells Humphrey that he dreams of being the Devil--this in itself is a remarkable and unnatural event--and Humphrey is at a loss for a comment or answer. ¹⁴ Most people would be at a loss; this type of dream and person is too far out of the ordinary realm of thinking to be comprehended. Later, Dougal tells Humphrey that he is not really the Devil, just an evil spirit looking for souls to ruin. ¹⁵ From the reader's point of view one can see horrible implications in this

13. See The Ballad, p. 30.

14. Ibid., p. 50.

15. Ibid., p. 77.

statement, for one can see the many aspects of Dougal; but would one be any different in Humphrey's position? Probably, like him, one would be caught up with admiration for the personable Scotsman, would enjoy his wit and would see no evil in his strange remarks. Dougal has picked a fine disguise, as effective and deadly as that chosen by the coral snake--a faint echo of Satan's first form as a tempter of human beings. Denis de Rougemont notes this device:

In Baudelaire's Short Prose Poems we find the most profound observation on Satan written by a modern: 'The Devil's cleverest wile is to convince us that he does not exist.'¹⁶

In Dougal's uncanny gift for camouflage we see that Spark has used this Satanic technique in depicting the machinations of evil in our present world.

However cold and wily Dougal may be, he has a peculiar fear. It has its roots in the medieval legend that the devil does not like to cross water. Traditionally, we note that a demon could not cross running water.¹⁷ In this story he can do so but apparently it is a painful experience. This seems in keeping with the up-dated version of the evil one that is presented in the pages of this novel. It is a favourite device of Spark's, rather obvious, but quite effective.¹⁸

16. Denis de Rougemont, The Devil's Share (Washington, 1944), p. 17.

17. Robert Burns, Tam O'Shanter, l. 208.

18. Frank Kermode, "The Prime of Miss Muriel Spark", New Statesman, LXVI (Sept. 27, 1963), p. 397.

One of the strongest pieces of evidence to condemn Dougal as a devil comes, ironically, from the half-crazed ravings of poor Nelly Mahone. Her role is woven through the plot like a bright thread in tapestry; at first reading, her ravings, burdened with Scriptural quotations, seem to add nothing but a little local colour--the kind of madness often found in sorry souls in any town, particularly in a novel set in days of old.¹⁹ It is on the second reading that one begins to see a definite relationship between certain of Nelly's utterances and Dougal. Then it becomes clear that her role is akin to that of counterpoint in music; it brings out the subtle theme the author is developing. Her role functions as a Greek chorus or as Cassandra in Aeschylus' Agamemnon; she offers her ironic commentaries on the follies of the world about her but, as in the past, the mortals disregard to their ultimate ruin the consequences of their iniquitous acts. It would be possible to find a link between each of her religious quotations and Dougal but one in particular seems to reveal quite clearly her function in the plot. We hear her ranting in these words: "The wicked man fleeth when no man pursueth. . ."²⁰ These words are like a voice in the

19. Here one finds an indication of Spark's Scottish influences. Sir Walter Scott, among others, made effective use of "mad" characters in his novels; e.g. Madge Wildfire in The Heart of Midlothian. Spark has picked up this and similar devices.

20. The Ballad, p. 48.

desert prophesying of the ways in which the demon tempts his victims; at no time does he overtly drive a person to his doom, yet his presence is enough to cause a victim to pursue a sinful course of action. Young Leslie Crewe had no reason for hating Dougal yet he disliked him at first meeting; finally Leslie becomes so involved in criminal activities that he ends up in the courtroom. There was no need for Druce to murder Merle, yet the influence of the demonic figure seemed to impel him upon his fateful and fatal course of action. It appears to happen this way with all those who fall into Dougal's sphere of control; in rushing to escape some vague and haunting nemesis they tend to reap their just reward.

On one occasion Nelly inspires Dougal to say: "It seems to me that my course in life has much support from the Scriptures."²¹ This is a properly ambiguous statement. From our knowledge of Scriptures we should say that nothing in them could possibly support the wanton ways of this young man; but, if we read the other side of the coin, we can recall many places in the Bible where it is declared that the Devil and sundry evil spirits move among men seeking their destruction.²² Thus, in Dougal's twisted sense, he can use Scripture to support his behaviour. Is not such

21. The Ballad, p. 79.

22. See I Corinthians 7:5; II Corinthians 2:10-11; I Timothy 4:1; 6:6,9; II Timothy 2:25-6.

crooked reasoning perfectly symbolized by Dougal's crooked shoulder?

Although she is mad, Nelly appears to recognize from the beginning what Dougal really is; this is made plain by her action of spitting each time she meets him; she is relying on the ancient exorcising power of spittle.²³ Oddly enough this strange pair form a weird alliance against Trevor Lomas and his gang. As Nelly's peculiar partnership with Dougal develops, we hear her ranting out a secret message to him. The content of the message is functional to the meaning of the story, but even more significant are the biblical words the poor woman weaves around the despatch. She says that the Lord hates certain things and some of them very aptly fit our demonic hero: "A lying tongue, a heart that deviseth wicked plots, a deceitful witness that uttereth lies, and him that soweth discord among brethren."²⁴ He is indeed all of these things and more, but one of them is his speciality; he is an expert at sowing discord. For example, he is always encouraging people to take Mondays off, sometimes even Tuesdays. In other words he is advocating slothful practices. So effective is he, that absenteeism increases by leaps and bounds in the firm of Meadows, Meade and Grindley. Thus Dougal

23. Philipp Schmidt, Superstition and Magic (Westminster, 1963), p. 199.

24. The Ballad, p. 107.

has neatly sown moral anarchy in the industrial family of this firm. Only Humphrey seems to show any opposition to this enticement to laziness and he does resist, not for any moral reasons, but because it is not in accord with good union rules; obviously the union and its regulations are far more meaningful to Humphrey than anything he might find in his God or in church.

It had to be a kind of discord which destroyed Weedin. If it were not for the distinct tragedy we would find the breakdown of the man a fine piece of bathos. Weedin was a man who did things mechanically and methodically; Dougal brought discord into his system; he could not fit the Scot into any recognizable pattern or place. Bewildered, the poor man went from a state of confusion to childish, frustrated crying. When, at last, he could see no way out of his dilemma, his mind rebelled and collapsed. Spark's handling of this pathetic situation gives the reader a clinical study of the human being who cannot adjust to change--the conformist figure of our world who is most easily destroyed by evil.

The discord between the lovers, Druce and Merle, is even more delicately sown.²⁵ Craftily Douglas builds a sense of guilt and hopelessness in each of these sinners; then he nurtures the weed of jealousy in the barren bed of Druce's heart and it blossoms in the fruitless murder of

25. See The Ballad, pp. 31, 99, 100.

the girl--one of the most pointless murders ever described in a book. Even the murder weapon, a corkscrew, is suitable to the crime; could anything have been more symbolic of the way in which Dougal wormed his way in upon this pair until he literally destroyed them body and soul? As we watch him plant his insinuations, we realize that this is a master demon at his fiendish work. It would be possible to see Dougal as simply an irresponsible, young man; but to do so would be to deny the skill of Spark. One would have to be remarkably naive not to detect the evil machinations behind the tragic Druce-Coverdale affair.

Dougal's genius for inflicting injury really knows no bounds. He incites Trevor Lomas to homicidal fury, then simply ducks and lets innocent Humphrey receive the sharp edges of the broken stein full in his handsome face.²⁶ A minor incident, one might say, but it is further proof of human suffering deliberately caused by this demonic Scot.

Perhaps his most cunning piece of discord is worked right within the mind of Belle Frierne. She was too proud to recognize her long-lost brother who reappears in town as a complete social outcast.²⁷ When Douglas hears of her pretended lack of recognition he performs a delightful imitation of the poor old man. Belle laughs but it is a

26. See The Ballad, p. 110.

27. Ibid., p. 86.

laugh born of hysteria; then she cries and one feels that those tears come straight from a troubled conscience. Later, when the brother whom she has failed to accept is dead, Dougal performs a ghoulish portrayal of his dead body and this, we sense, is the final straw necessary to shatter the mind of this pathetic woman. It comes as no surprise to discover that she suffers a complete stroke. The demonic figure has claimed a victim. How? By depicting through his mimicry exactly what her conscience was visualizing and struggling with--the fact that she was likely responsible for the old man's death.

When we talk of Dougal's deliberate mode of destroying people, the question is bound to arise as to why he did not do something about that terrible trio, Trevor, Collie and Leslie. The answer should be obvious: there was no need to use his influence on them for they were already so far gone in sin that they were more on his side than against him. The thirteen year old Leslie is a miserable little wretch whose crimes range from vandalism to blackmail. Collie Gould is a physical reject, a social reject and, eventually, a spiritual reject whose greatest feat involves helping to terrorize a demented old woman.²⁸ Trevor, as leader and sponsor of this Hell-driven trio, becomes a kind of human partner for the demonic Dougal; in a sense they are professional colleagues. Whenever a

28. See The Ballad, pp. 95-7.

dispute arises between them and they are about to come to blows, Douglas fails to give Trevor the thrashing that he so richly deserves. There is no doubt in the reader's mind that he can do it; yet, he always manages to avoid a full-scale conflict. In the fight in the tunnel at the close of the story Dougal has a splendid opportunity to chastise Trevor soundly or even to kill him. His failure to do so under these ideal conditions makes one believe that he had no desire to do the deed. After all, a good beating might have knocked some sense into Trevor's twisted mind and this could have spoiled his usefulness to the forces of evil. Thus one might say that the Devil takes care of his own quite literally in the case of these young hoodlums.

At this point it would be wise to make a comment on that mysterious tunnel. Dougal is fascinated with it. At first it appears that he is drawn to it through his archaeological interests. Then one detects that he has a great knowledge of this tunnel as well as an avid desire to walk through it before he leaves town.²⁹ Gradually the suspicion arises that he has known this place before and wants to revisit it for the sake of old memories. But if this be true, he then becomes inhumanly old--unless he is a true demon.³⁰ He often uses Anglo-Saxon words in his notes.

29. See The Ballad, pp. 115, 120.

30. Ibid., p. 92.

Could this be evidence of his life in earlier centuries? The whole affair of the tunnel and the nuns has an unsavoury odour, an aura of evil hangs about it; it seems to be an earlier echo of the devilish deeds he is now executing in Peckham Rye. Could it be that in the far past it had been the scene of earlier diabolic efforts on his part? Certainly when he walks through the tunnel he shows an easy familiarity with it. Then consider that moment when he digs out six carefully chosen shin bones and juggles them expertly.³¹ Is that how he juggled the souls of the original owners of those bones? Moreover, the scene takes on the eerie shadows of an ancient witch doctor casting his bones in a magic rite of evil. The fact that he performs this macabre act so naturally would tend to indicate that possibly in an earlier period he functioned as a demonic doctor to a pagan tribe. It is most fitting that this demon should reveal this ghoulish aspect in a dark hole in the ground.

Just as Nelly's religious ravings help to emphasize the demonic element and the tunnel offers dark and tantalizing mystery, one finds that the theme of crying adds a peculiar tone of melancholy to the story. The repeated references to tears remind one of the "weeping and wailing" of those souls who will be shut out from Heaven. Contrary to popular belief, crying has often been associated with

31. See The Ballad, p. 139.

Satan. Michelet tells us that in the Middle Ages a new concept of Satan arose whereby he was expected to help the grieving. As he says, "It is plain that Pity now appears ranged on the side of Satan."³² In John Milton's Satan we find a grief of towering proportions. So genuine is his grief that one is nearly moved to pity for the Fallen Angel:

. for now the thought
Both of lost happiness and lasting pain
Torments him;

Vaunting aloud but racked with deep despair;

. Farewell happy fields
Where joy forever dwells: Hail horrors, hail
Infernal world³³

Dante's Satan weeps cold and bitter tears; abnormal tears that are mixed with bloody froth and pus.³⁴ I believe that these are the correct pictures of Satan. There can be nothing incongruous about the Devil and his minions knowing sorrow; they, more than any human creature, should recognize its pangs because they are utterly aware of all that they have lost.³⁵ The good artist may give his demon a happy, carefree exterior, as Chaucer does in The Friar's

32. Michelet, p. 66.

33. Paradise Lost, I: ll. 54-6, 126, 249-51.

34. See The Inferno XXXIV.

35. One is reminded of the deep sorrow of Paolo and Francesca in Canto V of The Inferno and of the frozen tears of the damned in Cantos XXXII-XXXIV.

Tale, but one must not forget that it is only a facade to cover the eternal sorrow within. So Dougal weeps, but is it for Jinny or for himself?³⁶ He has lost his Jinny just as surely as he has lost his place in Heaven. He weeps for his failure to hold on to the girl, to retain her soul within his evil clutches. Generally, as shown in our novel, society thinks it unseemly for a man to weep; we accept the weeping of Dougal as a natural thing because we sense that it is the one genuine emotion he reveals in the story. And this could be the reason why he enjoys causing others to cry; he is seeking temporary company for his own eternal misery.

There is another and darker side to this sorrowing. It is a psychological fact that in daily life very few tears are shed for the object we mourn; we weep for ourselves. Mourners don't cry for the deceased; they are bewailing their own loss. Why? Our faith gives us hope that the dead person has gone on to a good reward, a better world; yet we stand about crying. If we were crying for joy at the good fortune of our dead brother it might make some sense, but obviously our grief is all too often a basically selfish thing and as a result it will be most dear to the demonic creature. We are indulging ourselves and this is the sure road to sin. Papini has remarked about this aspect of evil:

36. See The Ballad, p. 41.

The true evil of the Devil consists in exciting us to excessive indulgence in these sins, rather than in suggesting sin, and it is the giant size portion that ruins us all.³⁷

In that statement we can see the treatment of Dougal that Spark has developed. He encourages melancholy, absenteeism, greed, lust, treachery, and a host of other sins, knowing that indulgence in them will grow and grow until the people involved will be more than ready for their eternal punishment. Druce might have murdered Merle in any case, but Dougal made sure of it by exciting the man's jealousy; Belle Frierne's conscience might, in time, have given her cause for regret, but Dougal insured that it did so with his timely charades. Perhaps a man like Weedin was destined for a breakdown, but our demonic figure certainly speeded up the process. In a way Dougal becomes a marvellous catalyst who causes 'chemical' reactions in those who come into contact with him. If one adds pure oxygen to a flame it burns hotter, brighter and faster; he, like oxygen, induced a combustion of sinful components within his victims until they literally burned themselves out; a very fitting parallel to the searing torments of the fires of Hell.

In his study of the Devil, Denis de Rougemont states:
"Of all the creatures who have ever existed, the Devil is

37. Giovanni Papini, The Devil (New York, 1954), p. 202.

the one who knows the most about 'how to win friends and influence people'." ³⁸ As I have indicated earlier, Dougal could wield great power over others; the outstanding example of it in this novel is used to introduce the story and to conclude it; it is Humphrey's rejection of Dixie right at the altar. At the outset of the tale the reader's curiosity is whetted by this remarkable occurrence, but it is slaked when we see Dougal acting out one of his little ³⁹ skits to show Humphrey how he should reject his bride. On the surface it seems utterly impossible that this solid, steady young man should be so easily swayed, but in the scene at the altar he used the formula according to Dougal's coaching. We are well aware that the Scot possesses a superficial charm, or even hypnotic power, but to see him accomplish a feat of this kind is astounding; it is most impressive in the lesson it teaches about the ultimate power of evil. Consider the situation: Humphrey is the kind of citizen most men can respect with good reason; he is about to participate in the sacred rite of matrimony; yet, under the suggestive power of the demonic figure he reverses his own sound thinking and character and, in a way, even rejects his religious training. A most remarkable illustration of diabolic enticement.

38. Rougemont, p. 110.

39. See The Ballad, p. 112.

One may be prone to doubt the demonic characteristics Spark has given to Dougal. A bit of research shows that her portrayal would actually be much respected by students of demonology. For example, Papini says:

It is not true that the Middle Ages--the holy, dark Middle Ages--saw in the Devil only a ferocious, obscene monster, all claws and hairs. Often, instead, especially in literature, the Fallen Angel is presented as a benign and courteous creature, as a gentleman who knows the art of paying court to women and men alike. He exhibits, when he wishes, a disarming charm, considerable ability to flatter.⁴⁰

Throughout the story one sees that Dougal can mix freely with all classes of society. In this respect Spark shows at the conclusion that he was not limited to the English countryside. The information is given that he had spent time in Africa trying to make sure that the benighted heathen might continue to remain in that state by aiding the witch doctors in their ritual mumbo jumbo. Later he disrupted life in a monastery--quite a change from a salesman to a novice--but he is equal to the task. And there is a special irony in the fact that he offered his services to the Prior as an exorcist, when, in fact, he would have been exorcising himself. The knowledge that he finally becomes a writer could be Spark's wry joke at the immoral literature that is often issued by her profession. After all, as an author he might find his greatest field of influence; he could slay countless thousands with whom he

40. Papini, p. 196.

might not otherwise come into contact. Surely Hitler's Mein Kampf convinced the world of the power of an evil pen.

Several times in the course of the story it is stated that Dougal is conducting 'human research'. It sounds innocent enough until one reverses the terms to read 'research on humans'. To all outward appearances his jobs with the textile firms boiled down to simple personnel studies, but in reality they provided him with an excellent opportunity to study the human animal, to test his evil skills upon it, to search out its weakest spots. His research gave him the key: boredom. Most of the people who fell into his hands were bored with their jobs, with life or with each other. Here Spark is touching upon one of the great problems of our automated age; in respect to this growing situation in technology consider what de Rougemont says:

Boredom: the hunting preserve of the Demon.
Because here anything can become tempting, if it is sufficiently intense or exciting, flattering, easy, and a pretext to flee from oneself....⁴¹

In these words one finds a clue to the reason why so many people carelessly confided their most intimate thoughts to Dougal. Through him they were able to escape their boredom, through him they saw a kind of door offering release, and only when it is too late do they discover what really lies beyond that door. One may say that not

41. Rougemont, p. 153.

all of the characters were drawn to Dougal. This is true. However, an examination of these characters will reveal why they are not attracted.

Three such characters, Trevor, Collie and Leslie, are each a kind of human devil and in Dougal they have a competitor, a rival. Peckham Rye has always been their hunting preserve and they will brook no interlopers. In a way, they have their contemporary counterparts among the die-hard Southerners of the United States. Another enemy of Dougal was Dixie. She hated him, not because she was virtuous, but because he was interfering with the management of her chosen victim, Humphrey. Only a very naive person could see a happy marriage for this couple in the future; daily, Dixie reveals all the ingredients of a perfect shrew, a true witch wife. One may object again by saying that there seems to be little sense to competition among demons. I think C.S. Lewis answered this in The Screwtape Letters when he shows a hierarchy of devils; in the end, Screwtape is looking forward to dining on his nephew, Wormwood, who has failed in his diabolic career. So it is rather fitting that in his human research our demonic hero should not only work on his own victims but also enjoy an evil delight in goading those human animals who are already steeped in sin and wickedness.

In his research Dougal attempted to arouse and strengthen the sinful inclinations of every person he met.

With people like Trevor such a task is easy; men like Druce take longer. His methods varied from man to man but one device worked well on most of them, a device related to the idea of boredom: his strategy was to encourage people to do exactly as they pleased with a complete disregard for rules. By this method he could create moral and social anarchy. Spark is touching here upon an important idea, for as de Rougemont says: "Unconditional freedom is a phantom, the harbinger of the worst tyrannies."⁴²

Freedom has become a watchword in this age but if the meaning of the word is misunderstood, disregarded or the values inherent in freedom are misconstrued, then it could become the curse of the world. In The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, Spark developed this theme quite effectively. In The Ballad the theme is not so obvious but it is still the very potent wedge Dougal uses to pry the masses loose from their Rock of Ages. Spark is outlining that demonic twist in life which has caused death and suffering through all of history. Unrestricted freedom turned the Peasant's Revolt and the French Revolution into memorable horrors. In modern times the infamous Congo affair exhibited that demonic urge that is ever present, ever waiting to drag man back to the primeval ooze. Dougal disregarded the rules enjoining fidelity, obedience, loyalty and love; he led others to do likewise. In fact, we discover that all

42. Rougemont, p. 102.

of the Ten Commandments get broken in one way or another.

Most of the characters have other gods before them; even steady Humphrey seemed to think more of his union's rules than of God's. No graven images are cast but we can see Dixie creating a golden calf with her mania for saving money. The very profanity of lives like those of the three young hoodlums takes the name of God in vain. At no point in the story do we see the Sabbath day as possessed of sacred qualities--church-going, apparently, doesn't exist among these people. Dixie and Leslie are prime examples of a failure to honour one's parents. Druce deliberately committed murder. Jinny, Dixie and Humphrey indulged in sexual sins and Merle and Druce were guilty of adultery. Stealing was second nature to the wretched little Leslie. Lying was so much a part of the story that one often lost sight of the truth, so that it is no surprise to find the office and shop girls ready to lay on to believe anything about Merle; Leslie would lie in preference to the truth, and his own mother was not above stretching the facts to suit her own purposes. Even the book Dougal was writing for Maria Cheeseman was full of lies about her life. Finally, one finds that the sin of coveting covers most of the people here as it would, no doubt, in the actual world. Trevor has eyes for Dixie, the workers envy the rich, Leslie covets everything that other people own. One could go on listing the covetous desires of these

characters, but the point has been made. It is quite apparent that, for all the fantasy of the plot, the author has adhered very closely to moral realism in depicting human character.

In the story we discover that not only are the Ten Commandments shattered but also that the Seven Deadly Sins are given a fine representation. There is the wicked pride of Belle Frierne, that pride which causes her to reject her own flesh and blood. Humphrey, Dixie, Druce and Merle portray lechery; later, through his homicidal act, Druce is an image of anger and treachery. Dixie's life would provide a good exemplum in a sermon on the sin of avarice; along with many minor characters, through her absenteeism, she depicts the sin of sloth. Envy seems to be the motivating force behind the evil nature of Trevor. Gluttony as such does not exist in the plot if one connects it only with food; however, if one might relate it to an overwhelming greed for everything, then we might see Leslie, in his attitude to Deagal, as a bestial little glutton of a blackmailer.

The one terrifying thought that comes out of this book is in its revelation of the weakness of the world one lives in; it forces one to realize that this age is a ripe field of sin just waiting for the demonic reaper to gather it in. Without preaching, Spark has unveiled our world as a morality play; she tears away the masks which

hide the evil of the earth; she bares the leprous skin of mankind and forces the reader to take a long, searching look at what we consider to be the best of all possible worlds.

It is now that one realizes why Spark called this novel a "ballad". Certainly one can find all of the characteristics of this poetic form in the book, such things as the use of the supernatural, terse dialogue, and tragedy; but the significant element is the "story". The poetic ballad always tells a story, one that is often tragic; its general appeal lies in the universal quality of its theme. Spark is telling a tragic story about a mythical town which could be any place on earth. Her story is tragic because it reveals the gross materialism and rank secularism that have grown up in the world so profusely that they are choking the spiritual life of mankind, turning this earth into a jungle, a wild and savage land in which the demon prowls hungrily in search of his prey. And the prey is man.

CHAPTER FOUR

SPARK'S SOUL-SCAPE

Muriel Spark's writing is comparable to an iceberg. On the surface it is a cool body, with crisp, clean lines, attractive because of its apparent simplicity. It is a chilling shock to discover that, like the berg, ninety percent of its strength is hidden and that is where the real power lies. Spark's writing is not to be skimmed. She is not a novelist to be taken with leisurely sips; if one is not prepared to drink deeply, then he would be wise to avoid her. If one does not wish to have his mind moved and his soul searched, he will refrain from reading her works. Just as Gerard Manley Hopkins coined the term 'inscape' to express his spiritual ideas, I believe Mrs. Spark has developed 'soul-scape'. By this I mean that her books possess a depth of power capable of revealing the soul within a landscape where physical things must fade to a secondary position in order to accentuate that which is important.

The word 'soul-scape' sounds rather pretentious until one considers the novels under discussion. In The Comforters Spark has wasted few words upon description of nature; in fact, the setting is often so casually outlined that the reader's imagination is starved for picture food. Even

the characters are not physically detailed to any extent with the exception of Mrs. Hogg. It would seem that Spark is so concerned with the spiritual landscape that she has no time for the relatively unimportant topographical details of a story. She desires to show us souls in various stages of belief or disbelief, of peace or torment. It is spirits, not bodies, that are portrayed in this book. Very deliberately Spark is turning the serious reader's mind inwards to a study of the human soul in all aspects of its divinity and its degradation. To achieve the proper effect the author composes her 'soul-scape' with the same care and precision as an artist composes his landscape.

This 'soul-scape' has a pervasive power. It directs our minds from the inner nature of the characters in the novel to our own. If one will face the truth about himself, he is bound to find his likeness somewhere in both The Comforters and The Ballad. Spark is able to turn the reader's eye inward to a new view of his soul--a view that few persons really want to see. This transference takes place as we recognize our weaknesses in those characters who must face the demonic figure, and we see our reactions in their responses.

This reader-identification is easily observed in The Comforters. As one allies himself with Caroline he begins to see Hogg as a sort of alter-ego to the heroine. Every time that Caroline meets Hogg or thinks about her she sees

aspects of her sinful self reflected in the grossness of that repulsive woman. Each time that Caroline flees from Hogg she is, in a sense, fleeing from herself. In her great struggle with the demonic figure in the river scene, Caroline has finally faced her evil nature and conquered it. In the meeting of this pair we have the symbolic struggle of good and evil in a man's soul. Spark adds further evidence to this theory by telling us, after Caroline is pulled from the river and placed in the houseboat, that "Caroline had a sense of childhood. . ." ¹ Here, in her detached way, Spark seems to indicate that a spiritual rebirth has taken place. One can hear Christ's declaration of the necessity for rebirth in the gentleness of that scene. ² Caroline has conquered her sinful image and now she is surrounded by a wonderful peace and contentment--that which we all lose when we leave behind us the purity and innocence of childhood. It can be seen that Caroline's soul-scape eventually became an agent in her redemption and an object lesson to the reader.

Three years after The Comforters The Ballad appeared to reveal how Spark had progressed with her soul-scape studies. Now the seeker after salvation no longer meets and destroys his sinful self in a head-on struggle. That

1. See The Comforters, p. 197.

2. See Mark 10:15. Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.

kind of dramatic and didactic scene is always effective, but unfortunately it soon loses its sense of reality since it seems to be primarily reserved for the great saints of history. In truth, the common man often faces his evil self and loses the battle, usually quite cheerfully. How would we react to a living Dougal Douglas? I imagine most of us would, like the characters, see in him exactly what we wanted to see, and like them we would suffer a downfall. The optimist will say that this is not a very flattering picture of mankind; perhaps not, but it is a genuine one. Shakespeare proved conclusively that it is the realist's portrait of mankind that will endure the ravages of time. It is quite evident that by 1960 Spark had come to a better realization of the fact that Christ had to die for man because, basically, man is incapable of defeating his evil alter-ego by himself.

In The Ballad the characters fall, one by one, under the wicked manipulations of Dougal. They do not possess the moral stamina necessary to fight him and it seems that they lack the love of Christ in order to seek His aid. Once Dougal has departed from the town the people seem to bounce back into their old ways and very shortly the demonic figure is vaguely remembered as a part of a misty legend. It becomes apparent that Spark is now following a new line of thought. It shows how the devil passes among men, reveals their sinful selves, departs, and men, being

what they are, soon ~~treat~~ ^{view} the whole affair as a kind of comical myth. This situation parallels our modern age as church after church questions the existence of the Devil or writes him wholly out of the dogma as a by-product of the Middle Ages. Could it be that Spark now believes that men never really recognize their sinful selves? It would seem so and, if one may judge from her choice of characters in this novel, the reason lies in man's arrogance, stupidity and general obtuseness.

Three years later we find that Spark's latest novel, The Girls of Slender Means, completes another phase in the author's emerging statement of faith. Progressively through her books one can see a gradual increase in the development of setting and character. In this novel we are made aware of definite locations and times and people. A strange sense of reality creeps into the story. These are the girls who could live next door; they are neither good nor bad--just human. When a conversion does occur in the plot it is of such a plausible nature that one can fully understand the motivating force. This is a surprising new facet of the author. In six years she has moved from the stiffly rigid figures of a morality play to the human, living passions of everyday drama.

The reason for this strange spiritual pilgrimage in her writing may have its source in her background. Her biographer states that " The Bible, particularly the Old

Testament with its archetypal figures, its recurrent situations and universal gestures, appealed to her." I believe that this fact is revealed in the gradual transformation of Spark's style and philosophy. Drawing upon her ancestral influences she based her first novels upon the cold logic of the Old Testament. Evil and good were clear-cut and man had to make a choice. Evil was a physical mal-
 evolence with both shape and form, and the rules of life about it were absolutely inflexible. Her first three novels show this hard, relentless Old Testament approach to the problem of sin. It is in the central novel, The Ballad, that we see the first real signs of a change. Although evil is very much present in the person of Dougal Douglas, yet, paradoxically, it is already becoming something of a more abstract nature. The evil in Peckham Rye is not supplied by the demon--he simply awakens it from its dark sleep in the hearts and souls of the citizens. In this treatment we see a new attitude toward the problem of sin; it causes Spark to pay more attention to the physical characteristics of her people in order to show their spiritual struggles. She is now moving away from the 'eye-for-an-eye' philosophy of the Old Testament toward the warmer human relationships of the New Testament.

The remaining three novels proceed toward a truer

3. Derek Stanford, Muriel Spark (Fontwell, 1963), p. 24.

picture of a world in which very few things are either white or black. The demonic figure is always present to offer incentive, but it becomes increasingly apparent that evil is coming from within the characters themselves. By the time one reaches the latest book, evil has become a common quality which pervades all of man's life. The reader can still perceive the demonic figure in the person of Selina Redwood but somehow the lines of the picture are no longer clearly defined--a haziness dims all the people as they stand condemned by their petty actions. These are real people--far more life-like than those in The Comforters; their setting is superbly done; the London of 1945 comes alive in the story. Why then don't the figures step into their customary places as we have come to expect? Because no longer is Muriel Spark trying to portray the world in solid shades. Now she seems to have come to the realization that men and life and sin are all so intermixed that it is impossible to segregate them according to personal whims.

Here we have the fascinating metamorphosis of a writer. She starts with the grossness, the perversity of that evil slug, Georgina Hogg, a woman so repulsive that she can exist only as a fictitious repository of all sins. She ends with characters possessed of a butterfly lightness, people who flit through this life in a carefree fashion putting off to the endless tomorrows that which

they should do today. But these persons we can understand because they are all-too recognizable extensions of ourselves and our neighbours.

It is significant that at the end of seven novels one has still found no moralizing on the part of Spark. Here, then, is that 'Mona Lisa' quality in her writing. As she has developed her style she has always managed to maintain a perfect separation between her work and her philosophy. Like the good preacher with an exemplum, she sets up a scene then steps back and says, "Look at it! If you see yourself pictured here don't blame me--blame yourself." She uses the comic touch with consummate skill, but one cannot simply classify her as a humorist. She smiles but it is one filled with a sadness--a melancholy which will cause her, if she doesn't smile, to cry out at the world's gross materialism. She laughs, then, only that she may open the windows of our hearts that the goodness of God may be able to shine in and purify the darkness inside. But she never preaches.

Even as some have attempted to classify our 'Mona Lisa' as a comic writer so others have tended to place her works in the realm of fantasy. These persons would likely call the story of Jonah a piece of science fiction. Fantasy is not a frivolous device to Spark--it is her guiding light. She uses it to pull away the veils from the eerie and awful forms of sin rampant on the earth. Her

purpose finds support in the words of C.S.Lewis:

The unusual event is perfectly permissible if it is what you are really writing about: it is an artistic crime if you simply drag it in by the heels to get yourself out of a hole.⁴

In this sense Spark is no criminal. To her, sin is an unusual event because it is unnatural in the design of God's creation; and the fantastic paths it can follow are utterly endless and unbelievable. Therefore I say that Spark is no science fiction writer unless we are to dispense with God and our whole religious belief.

It must be noted that Spark does not write about these things with the naivete of an Alice in Wonderland. She obviously fulfills one of the artistic requirements as laid down by Giovanni Papini, who declared that,

an artist who does not have some familiarity with the Devil, even if it were only to shake him off and defeat him, cannot be a true artist.⁵

Spark's personal struggle to define her own faith has carried over into her books. It appears in those characters who are seeking salvation and it becomes most obvious in that recurrent character converted to Roman Catholicism. Despite this, Spark does not moralize. The parallel is there but only because she is writing of things based on deeply personal experiences; but that is all. She does not pretend to be a theologian; she utters no clarion call

4. C.S.Lewis, Miracles (New York, 1947), p. 118.

5. Giovanni Papini, The Devil (New York, 1954), p. 148.

to salvation. She writes with the inscrutable manner of a Buddha, available for anyone who will seek and see the truth.

In just six years Spark's writings have passed through a remarkable cycle of literary development. She is by no means finished as a writer. One wonders what the next phase in her growth will be. Already she has progressed to a point of view in harmony with today's thinkers. We see her ideas reflected in the thoughts of men such as Robert W. Gleason, who states that:

Hell is then far more the work of man than of God. It is man who will not give himself to others, who refuses communication and generosity, even the minimal generosity required to accept the gifts of God.⁶

Here we have Spark's whole philosophy stated very neatly. In each succeeding novel her characters have got farther away from the fiery sulphur and brimstone and closer to the abstract pits of darkness which men dig for themselves. At the rate she is going one can assume that Mrs. Spark may soon open up new dimensions as she continues her spiritual evolution.

In an attempt to determine the nature of the work of art Denis de Rougemont says: "I define it as a calculated trap for meditation."⁷ Writers are something like trappers.

6. Robert W. Gleason, "Hell: An Apology", Thought XXXIII, (Summer 1958), p. 180.

7. Denis de Rougemont, "Religion and the Mission of the Artist", The New Orpheus ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (New York, 1964), p. 63.

In one group we find the lurid sensationalists who ensnare the reader in a morass of sensuality; they prostitute the art. In another group we see the intellectuals who enmesh their readers in webs of sterile, endless thought; they obscure the art. In the centre we find those authors who, like Muriel Spark, write to catch the conscience; they are reviving the art of fiction.

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VITA AUCTORIS

- 1926 Born on March 24, in Staples, Ontario.
- 1938 Commenced secondary education at Wheatley High School, Wheatley, Ontario.
- 1943 Graduated from Wheatley High School.
- 1944 Graduated from Teachers College, London, Ontario.
- 1946 Commenced Arts at University of Toronto.
- 1949 Granted Bachelor of Arts degree from University of Toronto.
- 1949 Commenced Theology at Emmanuel College in University of Toronto.
- 1952 Granted Bachelor of Divinity degree from Emmanuel College.
- 1962 Commenced Master of Arts studies at Assumption University of Windsor.