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Muriel Spark's Comic Manifesto: Wit as Weapon, Tool, and Cure

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Abstract

Muriel Spark's detached, and often dark, sense of humour has brought her prolific body of work both popular and critical acclaim. However, some critics lament that she treats the events and characters of her novels too lightly; that her deliberately cultivated sense of distance prevents her works from dealing with truly important issues. This thesis argues that Spark's sense of purpose lies within her comic and satirical tone, as opposed to existing in spite of it.

In her interviews and speeches, Spark reveals a preoccupation with the idea of ridicule as a method of confronting evil. Her 1971 speech, "The Desegregation of Art," states that "Ridicule is the only honourable weapon we have left" (35), and urges her audience to abandon more sentimental styles of art in favour of satire. To Spark, self-knowledge is tied to a sense of the absurd, and it is the writer who must both recognize the ridiculous and share that recognition with her audience, all the while delivering pleasure and entertainment.

Spark's detached writing style provides a necessary distance for seeing absurdity and avoiding sentimentality. Spark's attitude of detached ridicule mirrors Henri Bergson's social theory, where ridicule is seen as a disciplinary element and becomes a crucial tool for social control. She employs ridicule on two separate and distinct levels: an authorial level, in which she chooses the content she will expose to mockery, and a level within the narrative, where characters use ridicule and laughter to influence events. In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* [1960], *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* [1960] and *The Abbess of Crewe* [1974], Spark's powerful characters are those who wield and control satirical insight, an insight which usually accompanies the role of "writer," as they act against oppressive, and often fascist, authority.

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Introduction

A Curious Blend of Criticism and Praise

Throughout her career, Muriel Spark remained a poet who happened to write novels. She explores the role of the artist through her fiction, continually examining ridicule's role against oppressive authority. Spark's novels have inspired an intriguingly varied body of criticism, from glowing approval to baffled dissatisfaction, and only the poetic influences in her novels seem to meet with complete approval. Though her wry and witty tone is largely responsible for her popularity, many focus on her biography and religious background in their analyses of her novels. Before examining the impact of Spark's comic focus on her writing, this introduction looks at the religious and genre theories which comprise the majority of critical attention paid to Spark.

Spark identified herself as a poet from her earliest days. She was already playing the role of aspiring poet during her elementary school years, and she never deviated from that vision:

> I was about nine or ten and I never stopped. I never stopped till I started writing novels, really. It was my main thing and I never thought of myself ever as being anything but a poet, and when I started writing novels and began getting a name for novel-writing, I still thought of myself as a poet and I still do. I can't somehow think of myself as a novelist as such, because I have a poetic way of seeing things. (Hosmer 135)

Between the publication of her first novel, *The Comforters,* in 1957 and her death in early 2006 at the age of 88, Spark wrote twenty-two novels as well as numerous short stories, plays, essays, magazine articles, and reviews. She received a plethora of awards, accolades, and honorary degrees. Despite the fame that novel writing won her, Spark never relinquished her self-

identification as a poet. She openly expresses a preference for her later novels and her poetry:

> Interviewer: [*Not to Disturb*, *The Abbess of Crewe*, and *The Driver's Seat*] have a very thin, sparse prose; [...]
>
> Spark: I prefer those books; they're nearer to poetry, more my sort of thing.
>
> (McQuillan, "Interview" 215)

The poetic influences in Spark's writing appear as a distinctive starkness not usually associated with novel writing. As Alan Bold has suggested

> Spark's singular achievement as a novelist is to synthesize the linguistic cunning of poetry with the seeming credibility of prose. One of the most self-conscious of stylists, Spark has a fondness for scattering poetic quotations, like clues, throughout her fiction.
>
> (Bold, "Poet" 85)

Her "self-conscious" style concerns not only Spark's word choice but the format and message of her medium, and it would lead to a variety of post-modern play within the structure of her novels: "she remains a poet, for poets have always bothered more than novelists about the exact nature of their chosen mode" (Kermode, "To *The Girls*" 175). This concern manifests itself in increasingly slimmer and more stylized novels, but also in Spark's constant questioning of the role poets play in communities. With so clear a sense of herself as an artist, and a lifelong relationship with the written word, it is not surprising that Spark would later develop a distinct theory about the social role and duty of art and writers.

Spark's attraction to the world of poetry and writing took on near religious connotations: "I had strong religious feelings as a child which were really bound up with art and poetry" ("My Conversion" 24). Religion would later become a central component of Spark's life; in 1954, just before her literary career blossomed, she converted to Roman Catholicism. She speaks sparingly

of her conversion, merely mentioning that "my own conversion was really an instinctive rather than an intellectual experience" ("My Conversion" 25) and noting that "the reason I became a Catholic was because it explained me" (Whittaker 25). Spark argues that her conversion provided her with a secure and distanced foundation from which to launch her satirical and experimental fictions: "I didn't get my style until I became a Catholic because you just haven't got to care, and you need security for that" ("My Conversion" 27). But she does not present her conversion experience as the focus or inspiration for the content of her novels.

The question of Spark's conversion, and of her often unique interpretation of faith, is particularly intriguing to her critics, and these issues appear in essentially every one of her interviews. Her book covers relentlessly emphasize her conversion and foreground her as a "Catholic Writer." Richard Mayne points out how "her publishers rather rub it in, on some of her dust-jackets, by quoting praise from quite a gang of her co-religionists" (50), expressing his disapproval of a focus that seems to alienate non-Catholic readers. This emphasis on Spark's religious life is often overpowering. McQuillan begins his interview with a pact not to ask about her biography and then, to his own chagrin, proceeds to talk about little else. Even if an interviewer manages to stray away from the more personal questions and focus more fully on her literary work, editors still forcefully bring her religion back into the foreground. They emphasize her religious background, as shown when the short abstract for her interview with Robert Hosmer focuses solely on the issues of her autobiography and religion: "In it, she talked too of her conversion to Roman Catholicism, which she considered very important and broad enough that it needs a different book to be written" (Hosmer 127). This sentence, which forms fifty percent of the abstract, exemplifies the narrow emphasis on Spark's life and religion as it blatantly ignores the fact that in the 32 pages of transcript, the topic of Spark's conversion

appears only once. In fact, the interviewer quickly moves on ("I certainly respect your reticence on the subject of your conversion" [132]), a reticence that many critics seem loath to share.

This focus on Catholicism is not confined to interviews and biographical inquiries, but makes up the majority of critical work on Spark. Many articles and books focus almost exclusively on the influence of Spark's religion on her novels: *Vocation and Identity in the Fiction of Muriel Spark* by Rodney Edgecombe, "Future Conditional" by Peter Kemp, "The Novel as Jerusalem: Muriel Spark's *Mandelbaum Gate"* by Frank Kermode, "Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark" by Alan Massie, "Holy Outrage" by Derwent May, and *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* by Ruth Whittaker. Spark is often compared to other Catholic writers of the period, such as Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh.[1] Ruth Whittaker identifies religion as "the theme of all her work. This is the relationship – shown openly or implied – between the secular and the divine, between man's temporal viewpoint and God's eternal vision" (1), and this echo appears again and again in criticism. Spark's novels often contain religious conversions and a subtle hinting at a spiritual life beyond the here and now, and her strong authorial presence can be seen as a secular textual parallel to the existence of an omniscient god. Despite their willingness to focus on religion, her critics do not always approve of Spark's

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[1] Graham Greene, who also struggled with the label, less ambiguously bestowed, of a Catholic Writer, acted as an unofficial patron by sending Spark money and encouragement during the difficult financial period of her first novel. This novel, *The Comforters,* later attracted the attention of Evelyn Waugh; upon reading an advance copy, he compared the auditory "hallucinations" to the use of similar devices in his own unfinished book, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* [1957], openly praising Spark for having done it better. Greene and Waugh, aside from boosting Spark's popularity, reflect in their own work the two most distinctive elements of Spark's writing: religion and satire. Greene, also a Catholic convert, is well known for the multitude of Catholic themes which appear in his work. Waugh, though also Catholic, was better known for his biting wit than his religious views. As Spark puts it: "Graham Greene has atmosphere; and Evelyn Waugh had point" (Hosmer 132). These two elements would find a fruitful marriage in Spark's own work.

perceived Catholic preoccupations. Instead of religious content, Derwent May declares "What we want from Miss Spark is her worldly wisdom" (46), yet his review of *The Hot House of East River* [1973] revolves almost exclusively on a religious interpretation, zeroing in on issues of purgatory and God and ignoring other avenues of critique.

Indeed, so much criticism has focused on Spark's religion that some critics have begun to rebel against the entire practice of labeling her a "Catholic Writer." Martin McQuillan devotes most of his introduction to *Theorizing Muriel Spark* to arguing against this label, which he terms "an oxymoron." To McQuillan, "writing is not a theological activity, it purposely undermines essential and stable meanings" (4) and he strongly opposes the critical limitation of religious interpretation.[2] McQuillan's frustration with the limitations of purely theological readings raises a legitimate concern, for, as he suggests, it is far too dangerous to allow "The uncanny, 'experimental', or postmodern effects of her writing [to be] continually reduced by the power and authority of English canonical criticism to the safe domain of the properly 'Catholic'" (McQuillan 5). His book represents an attempt to place Spark in a broader theoretical context, through the lenses of gender and deconstruction. As the Danish critic Bent Nordhjem points out:

> Muriel Spark's novels in their way incorporate all the fashionable isms of the modern scene: surrealism, existentialism, absurdism, structuralism, feminism, etc. They do not expound them but take them as read. The Spark world is made up of what little the storm has left. The novels focus on the fragments scattered by the trends. (quotd in McQuillan 6)

It is in the spirit of these broader interpretations that I will be looking at her novels.

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[2] McQuillan takes particular issue with Malcolm Bradbury's essay "Muriel Spark's Fingernails" and his use of the phrase "our Catholic writers" (1).

Spark's Catholicism plays a crucial role in both her life and her art, but what interests me is the change in style that has occurred since her conversion. Though numerous critical essays and books highlight the Catholic influence in Spark's work, Spark herself tends to emphasize the style and structure of her novels. Her detached and insightful voice, which adds so much verve and humour to her books, is more than a mere accessory to her religion and her poetry. The cool distance with which she exposes the absurd builds a method of confronting what she terms "evil": a method which appears not only in her essays, but with increasing importance throughout her novels.

Indeed, much of Spark's fame can be attributed to her distinct style: "Enamoured of the oxymoron, she is one of the most subtle stylists of her time, a master (or mistress) of the paradox, a literary illusionist of enormous agility" (Bold, "Poet" 88). Yet despite its popularity, her detached style does not garner universal approval; some view her as "all surface, and a rather dry, sparsely furnished, though elegant and mannered surface at that" (Harrison 131). Spark's attention to detail and intense sense of place and time, as well as the accuracy of her conversations, often lead to attempts to place her in the realist tradition, a placement which ultimately leads to dissatisfaction as she refuses to bow to conventional rules of realism. As both Hynes and Whittaker point out, Spark makes no claims to be a realist, and to chide her for failing to achieve that which she was not attempting seems a misplaced criticism. Hynes responds particularly strongly in Spark's defense, emphasizing that "it simply won't do to demand that any writer produce what we may want" (4) and questions "the presumption that we have the right to demand of any author what we want to read about" (6). Spark fights against the assumption "that the novel is realism and that realism is secular" (Hynes 6) and her novels are well known

for their matter-of-fact inclusion of supernatural phenomena and their assumption of a life hereafter.

Beyond her distinctly wry and detached tone and her fondness for non-linear narration and the unexplained supernatural, a number of tropes regularly appear in Spark's work. One of the most immediately apparent is the inclusion of characters who are themselves writers or poets, and whose writings play major roles in the plot. This layer of meta-fictionality questions the role of authors in her fictional communities, examining their impact and goals, and draws attention to the artist's place in society. Spark's questioning of the authorial role appears from the very beginning of her prose career. In her first novel, *The Comforters* [1957], the main character, Caroline, is in the process of writing her own novel when she hears an omniscient voice narrating the actions of her life and begins to fear that she has fallen into madness. In interviews, Spark identifies the entire novel as an experiment: "I had to sit down and write a novel about somebody writing a novel to see if it was aesthetically valid and if I could do it and live with myself, writing such a – as I thought—low thing as a novel" (Gillham 350). In her speculations about authors and the act of writing, Spark confronts her own shift from poetry to prose, seeking to give a sense of legitimacy to her art. Identifying effective art, art capable of changing minds and hearts and of producing social and political effects, is claimed in "The Desegregation of Art" [1971] to be one of her goals, and her sense of the importance of these concerns is reflected in the continued focus on writer characters throughout her career.

The coterie of writers who inhabit Spark's novels wield both observational and influential power over those they encounter, though not always with positive results. The chaotic Dougal Douglas, potential demon of Peckham; the sharp-eyed Sandy, Miss Brodie's downfall; the poetry-murmuring Abbess of Crewe, despotic mythomaniac; impoverished Fleur, whose fiction

mystifyingly becomes truth -- all possess the poetic vision which allows them to manipulate their surroundings. Their presence in Spark's fiction invites questions about the role of the artist in society, while more clearly pointing to Spark's belief in the influence the artistic mindset can have. By writing about writers, Spark also adds a layer of transparency to her medium, highlighting her authorial role in directing the action and encouraging a more active reading style instead of a passive reception of the text. Spark's non-linear and metafictional techniques can be seen as "sabotaging her own creation of an autonomous, fictional world" (Gregson, *Character and Satire* 100) and exposing the author's role, encouraging the alertness and analysis in reader response that she would later identify as one of the goals of art.

Another familiar aspect of Spark's novels is her sense of exile. Born in Edinburgh in 1918, Spark would always regard the city of her birth as a central, yet distant, force in her life. She would go on to live in Rhodesia, London, New York, and Rome and finally settle in the hills of Tuscany.[3] Spark argues that you "get a better perspective by living abroad, of human nature altogether" (Saá 10), and believes that her exile has "ceased to be fate, it has become a calling" (Spark, "Edinburgh-Born" 21). This sense of exile pervades her novels, in which nomadic characters recurrently appear in unfamiliar or foreign spheres. It also informs the style in which she writes, providing a detached critical view of the otherwise familiar. Spark's constant travel also served a more practical purpose, as she continually sought a calmer environment in which to work by abandoning first London, and then New York: *"The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* had become a play on the West End and I really couldn't get on with my work. There were too many

---

[3] Despite these varied addresses, Spark retained her Scottish roots. In her essay "Edinburgh-Born," she concentrates on the pervasive sense of a home town that she carries with her, conveying affection and gratitude while at the same time acknowledging her inability to return to Scotland's restrictive environment. Hynes aptly points out the "nevertheless principle" which Spark imbibed from the older women of that city: the sense "that any position taken or point made has another side" (Hynes 2).

distractions and people" (Saá 1038). Her writer characters often share this state of exile, of not being entirely a part of the world they inhabit, emphasizing Spark's belief that writing best plays a coolly critical, rather than immersive, role.

With their elements of detective fiction, mystery, social satire, and fantasy, coupled with their distinctive style and elusive themes, Spark's novels refuse to fit tidily into genre labels. Identified with postmodernism, the *nouveau roman*, social realism, gothic, metafiction and modernism, her work frustrates any attempt to place her squarely into a particular literary movement. Spark openly acknowledges this complication: "[it is] very difficult to put my work in any genre and under any label—very very difficult ... It bothers people" (Brooker 1). This unsettling is more than a mere by-product but an intended part of Spark's attempt to create more active readers. Her ambiguous endings and morally complicated characters refuse to grant any easy answers to the critiques her satires produce, and present a difficulty that she deliberately creates: as an interviewer points out "People don't want to live with mystery", to which Spark implacably replies "No, but they have to, because life is a mystery, ultimately" (Hosmer 143). Spark's background as a critic (she has worked on the Brontës, Mary Shelley, and John Henry Newman) makes her particularly suited for playing with the conventions of literary classification.

Like so many aspects of Spark's work, her complicated genres and the moral ambiguity of her plots do not meet with universal approval. She has been accused of being "A fantasist, a trifler" (Kermode, "Mandelbaum" 179), and sometimes critics wish for a novel which "covers a broader and less eccentric canvas than some of her excursions into fantasy or the occult" (Mayne 54). The critical division over Spark's impact is strong enough that Hynes devotes an entire section of his collected essays to Spark's "Opposition." The play on genres, and the detached

tone, provoke complaints, but also demand the type of active critical engagement that Spark hopes to encourage. As Patrick Parrinder observes,

> It is, perhaps, unusual for such a divided critical response to be acknowledged by a novelist's most ardent defenders. What it suggests, I believe, is that Spark is a genuinely disturbing writer -- one who disturbs our deepest convictions and prejudices about novel-writing, and about more fundamental matters as well -- and that her case is by no means easy to judge. (75)

Although the "bluntly and acidly stated [...] case against Muriel Spark" is, as Harrison points out, that "surface and fashionable enigma have finally won out: there is nothing to be seen but what is to be seen, and that is precious little, though terribly stylish" (133), she remains committed to her sparse and biting style. Spark, instead of bowing to critical pressure, continued to distance herself from large, realist novels: "An awful lot of people are telling me to write big long novels – Mrs. Tolstoy, you know – and I decided it is no good filling a little glass with a pint of beer" (Kermode 30). Instead of expanding her books, Spark, especially after *Mandelbaum Gate* [1965], wrote more stylized, more compact, and more experimental novels.

Spark freely attributes her attention to style and structure to the influence of the *nouveau roman*, and she increasingly replaces subjective emotions with a more distanced objectivity. Despite her work's similarities to modernist and post-modernist styles, her religion sets her apart from many postmodern writers, the majority of whom lost faith in an omniscient god; however, her conversion grants her an added layer of distance and objectivity, for, as Gregson points out, other postmodernists lack "a coherent moral system, such as Spark's Catholicism, to rely on when distancing themselves from the culture they indict" (*Character and Satire* 104). With the distance garnered from her conversion, Spark confronts issues of culture not through the engaged

arts of sentimentality, emotion, and empathy, but through the detached arts of satire, ridicule, and mockery.

I believe that the comic tone of Spark's novels is as integral to her method of confronting evil as her Catholicism. The following chapters will examine Spark's artistic goals through her use of satire and ridicule, as well as through her more distanced narratorial style. Chapter One looks at her 1971 speech "The Desegregation of Art," in which she clearly identifies satire as the only effective method for art in our times. I go on to compare Spark's belief in a more intelligent and unemotional confrontation of violence to Henri Bergson's theory of disciplinary laughter, as well as appraising current theoretical views on satire and dark humour as effective social tools.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four each examine a separate novel, identifying figures of authority and moral ambiguity, to explore how Spark employs the tools of ridicule and laughter against authority. I will be analyzing Spark's use of ridicule on two levels, in relation to both her authorial choice of form and style and the ways in which her characters themselves react to laughter and ridicule. In Chapter Two, I look at the carnivalesque in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* [1960], and show how Dougal Douglas can be read as a carnivalesque fool character who represents laughter as a kind of emotional release that fights against the mechanization of industrial society. Chapter Three examines *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* [1960], a novel which plays with parody on a variety of fronts and deals with fascism on a personal and local scale. Sandy, the character granted poetic vision and the ability to recognize the ridiculous, is the only one capable of resisting the pseudo-fascist manipulations of her teacher, Miss Brodie. Both novels emphasize the influence and impact that ridicule or laughter can have on communities, and attempt to encourage active and satirical reading habits.

Chapter Four looks at a later novel, *The Abbess of Crewe* [1974]. Written after Spark's declarative "Desegregation of Art," it adopts a more familiar style of moral satire, in a parody of the Nixon Watergate scandal. Instead of presenting a character who employs ridicule to combat authority, *The Abbess of Crewe* creates a micro-dystopia without laughter, where nuns are told to "be sober, be vigilant" and become passive beings incapable of recognizing abuse. Though Spark novels recognize the complications and difficulties of employing ridicule as a tool for social change, *The Abbess of Crewe* concludes that communities incapable of laughter become excessively vulnerable, and that only through a lively appreciation of the absurd can they protect themselves from abusive authority.

Chapter One

Spark's Comic Manifesto

With cunning wit and wry humour, Spark's fiction deftly exposes the absurdities inherent in twentieth-century life. Her novels are openly humorous, easily eliciting laughter through comic situations and a biting narrative voice. Yet despite numerous comic elements, her novels do not fit tidily into simple classifications of comedy. Spark's novels do not begin in disorder and end in the tidy resolution of marriage and celebration, successfully reintegrating the protagonist into society. Instead, her endings often fail to provide any stable sense of closure, leaving readers to form their own conclusions. Nor do her novels deliver a clear picture of vice pitted against virtue, for in contrast to easily judged caricatures of comedy, Spark's characters are morally ambivalent, difficult to identify as villain or hero. Within the complex dualities of comedy and satire, Spark advocates ridicule as a tool against oppressive authority. Ridicule, laughter, satire, and absurdity become increasingly evident as integral elements in her vision of art's role in society.

Spark's background as a critic emphasizes the meticulous attention she gives to her stylistic choices, and her deliberate choice of a comic tone to deliver her message. In an interview ostensibly about her conversion to Catholicism, Spark returns to the importance of style instead of focusing on the ever-popular topic of the presence of religion in her writing. She emphasizes the necessity of conscious style when delivering a message:

> Anybody with a good style, a good technique, is worth reading to see how far he can persuade you. He might have the most wonderful message under the sun to preach, but it's not a bit of good unless you can persuade and give delight and pleasure. ("My Conversion" 27)

This comment highlights Spark's core assumptions about the primary elements of literature: message, persuasion and "delight and pleasure." Her sharp wit provides more than adequate "delight and pleasure" in her novels, and also plays the role of entertaining persuasion. But I argue that Spark's use of ridicule and satire goes beyond superficial packaging and is in fact inseparable from and integral to her message.

Determining that message, however, can be a convoluted and difficult endeavour, especially since Spark refuses to fit her work easily into genre classifications and insists on creating novels filled with unanswered questions, open endings, and morally ambiguous characters. Spark's choice to provoke laughter, her admiration of comic authors[4] and her satirical subject-matter all point towards a comic goal, but her novels avoid any clear-cut declarations of intent. However, Spark's critical observations quickly remove any doubt about the importance she attaches to ridicule and satire. In 1971, she delivered a speech to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters entitled "The Desegregation of Art" in which she clearly set forth her comic manifesto, detailing her hopes for the future of literature. In this impassioned piece, Spark explains her vision of the role and duties of the artist in society and places ridicule at the heart of her vision.

In "Desegregation," Spark emphasizes the critical role the arts, and especially literature, perform in society:

> it contains that element of pleasure which restores the proportions of the human spirit, opens windows in the mind. By means of art and literature our wits are

[4] Spark praises Max Beerbohm, a parodist and caricaturist from the turn of the century, made famous in *The Yellow Book* of the 1890s and still heard on the BBC as late as the 1950s. He ranks among her greatest influences, along with Proust and Newman. Though she admires his sense of style, she also invokes him when answering deeper questions about authority and self-identity. Spark's inclusion of Beerbohm in her list of influences emphasizes her respect for witty authors, and her belief that important messages can still be conveyed in a comic style.

> sharpened, our intellect is refined, we can learn to know ourselves, how to appraise life with that pleasure which is the opposite and the enemy of boredom and of pain. ("Desegregation" 36)

The importance of "delight and pleasure" remains central to Spark's definition of the purpose of art, but they are not present merely for the sake of entertainment. Spark identifies the pleasure generated by art as vital to keeping the mind active and engaged with the world. Arguing that literature "should fertilize our minds," she highlights the power that words can wield, how they can "influence the minds of people even at second, third, and fourth hand" ("Desegregation" 34). Nor does she believe that this pleasure should be confined to the intelligentsia, arguing that it does not belong in "a special department set aside for the entertainment and delight of the sophisticated minority" ("Desegregation" 34). Spark defines art as having a wide-reaching and highly influential power, but argues that if the pleasure of art is to be more than entertainment, then it needs to be judged not merely on aesthetic grounds but also on its ability successfully to open and influence the mind.

Spark acknowledges that focusing more on the effectiveness of art's message takes a potentially propagandistic view of literature, but argues that "in a sense all art is propaganda since it propagates a point of view and provokes a response" ("Desegregation" 36). Though she acknowledges the value of socially-conscious art which confronts the injustices of the time, Spark demands that "ineffective literature must go" ("Desegregation" 34). Her definition of ineffective art might surprise some readers; instead of attacking poor writing, or art that avoids social commentary, Spark asks that we abandon sentimental portrayals of injustices, no matter how appealing:

> I only say that the art and literature of sentiment and emotion, however beautiful in itself, however striking in its depiction of actuality, has to go. It cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity. ("Desegregation" 35)

Spark fears that sentimental art does not produce a lasting effect on its audience, that the sense of involvement and awareness it produces is merely transitory. The more emotional pieces "succeed only for the duration of the show, of the demonstration, or the prayer meeting, or the hours of reading" ("Desegregation" 36), and after the show, after a catharsis of horror and pity at the injustices in the world, audiences return to their lives with the feeling that "their moral responsibilities are sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions that they have been induced to feel" ("Desegregation" 35), but without sufficient impetus to change. Spark fears that sentimental art becomes part of the abusive system it exposes, encouraging the cult of the victim and "such being human nature, there will be an obliging cult of twenty equivalent victimizers" ("Desegregation" 35). Spark's ideal role for literature in society blends the pleasure of entertainment with a lasting instigation of social awareness and mental acuity. She puts forth a plan for how to achieve this influential blend of change and enjoyment: sacrifice the ineffective art of sentiment and replace it with the art of ridicule.

Spark advocates the use of ridicule, which she calls "the only honorable weapon we have left" ("Desegregation" 35), as the most effective and lasting method for bringing about change. She states that

> the only effective art of our particular time is the satirical, the harsh and witty, the ironic and derisive. Because we have come to a moment in history when we are surrounded on all sides and oppressed by the absurd. ("Desegregation" 36)

Spark specifically levels the weapon of ridicule against violence, arguing "we should all be conditioned and educated to regard violence in any form as something to be ruthlessly mocked" ("Desegregation" 35). She considers the use of ridicule against violence and oppression a more intelligent and less emotional response than sentimental activism, and seeks "a less indignant representation of social injustice, and a more deliberate cunning, a more derisive undermining of what is wrong" ("Desegregation 35). Just as art can penetrate and influence the mind of readers, ridicule "if it is on the mark -- and if it is not true on the mark it is not art at all -- can penetrate to the marrow. It can leave a salutary scar. It is unnerving. It can paralyze its object" ("Desegregation" 36). It is this paralyzing weapon that Spark wants artists to unleash against oppression.

Though "Desegregation" speaks directly to artists, Spark advocates ridicule "from the most sophisticated and high achievements to the placards that the students carry about the street" (35). Spark conceives of ridicule becoming the weapon against absurdity not only for the intellectuals, but for the masses, as art's influence filters through society. She views satire and ridicule as the most effective agents for lasting change and hopes they will become the default weapons wielded against oppressive and absurd violence.

Spark's endorsement of ridicule and satire sets her apart from many theorists of humour. The idea that ridicule can play a productive and beneficial role in society has been marginalized in most modern theories, which tend to condemn any taint of hostility in laughter. Most of the current psychological and self-help books revolve around the positive and healing powers that laughter possesses. Michael Billig points to the wide-range of current literature that promotes dealing with stress through laughter, thinking humorously, and laughing to become more productive and live a healthier life. Billig's book, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social*

Critique of Humour, questions the merit of this "'ideological positivism' that represents an optimistic, can-do outlook in a society that offers its inhabitants the dream of constant, positively productive pleasures. The cruelties of this social order are overlooked, as if there is an imperative to wish away negatives" (Billing 10). Ignoring the uglier and more powerful aspects of laughter, such as ridicule and mockery, modern theories do not leave room for the type of effective art Spark argues for in "Desegregation." Spark does not advocate ridicule as a feel-good panacea of laughter to lighten life's burden, but as a weapon to be wielded ruthlessly in the defense of awareness and against oppression.

But although disciplinary theories of laughter are no longer in vogue, advocating ridicule as a disciplinary tool is not unprecedented. In 1711, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, viewed ridicule as a test against dangerous enthusiasm, to be used to distinguish folly and extravagance from sound common sense, and considered it a vital weapon for defending liberty. However, Shaftesbury was not "arguing in a relativist, sociological manner, suggesting that all societies use ridicule to establish what they consider to be reasonable and socially acceptable" (Billig 79), but asserting that only the inherently ridiculous could be ridiculed, and that good sense was immune to ridicule. It wasn't until Henri Bergson's book *Le Rire*, published in 1900, that the disciplinary aspect of laughter was fully explored in terms of sociology theory, identifying how "ridicule has a useful function for all social groups, whatever their codes of morality" (Billig 79).

Bergson borrowed an evolutionary term and sought the "function" of laughter: "To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one" (Bergson 65). He based his theory around three points: that laughter was inherently human; that it required an

absence of feeling; and that it was a social or shared experience. Instead of looking at psychological or physical causes of laughter, Bergson analyzed the function of laughter in its social role. Diverging from theories which focused on laughter's tendency to evoke feelings of superiority, or on the inherent humour in incongruous elements, Bergson saw laughter as a disciplinary method, used to shape wide-spread standards of acceptable behaviour. To Bergson, laughter and ridicule became nearly synonymous as necessary elements in maintaining a flexible and adaptable society, preventing the undesirable mechanization of human actions.[5] Ridicule, instead of being pushed to the sidelines as a peculiar though intriguing human trait, unworthy of deeper study, is seen by Bergson as playing a reinvigorating role in maintaining social viability.

Bergson's theory argues that "a comic impasse occurs wherever a human being ceases to behave like a human being -- that is, whenever he 'resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically,' but incapable of *living*" (Sypher xii). Humour acts as a fail-safe in maintaining the key survival skill of adaptability. Without the adaptability or awareness that laughter ensures survives, society would stagnate:

> What life and society require of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence. (Bergson 72)

Bergsonian ridicule corrects a tendency towards rigid and automatic responses through the fear of embarrassment. Or, as Sypher put it in his introduction to Bergson's work, "Comedy banishes

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[5] Alongside Bergson's work, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the publication of Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, integrating laughter with his theory of repression. The idea of repression provided an excellent model for explaining how laughter can act as a disciplinary tool without the awareness of the ridiculers themselves. Though the two theorists would both have a wide-reaching effect on comic theories, Spark's comedic goals align much more strongly with Bergson than with Freud.

'monstrous monotonousness.' It teaches us to be responsive, to be honest, to interrogate ourselves and correct our pretentiousness" (Sypher ix). Though Sypher's use of the term "comedy" is inconveniently vague, he emphasizes the vitality that laughter possesses to encourage awareness and thought.

Spark's definition of art's purpose is nearly identical to Bergson's analysis of the benefits of laughter; both point to the importance of alertness and aptitude in adjusting to the environment. Spark singles out the repetitive movements of "Hitler and his goose-stepping troops" and "the strutting and posturing of Mussolini" as proper targets of ridicule. The blind servitude and mass conformity of these marching armies fit Bergson's analysis that ridicule's rightful place is to mock "puppets" and "lifeless automata and marionettes," attacking wherever people cease to be persons and become instead machines (Bergson 80-83). Though his examples rest more on the absentminded professor who dips his pen into the glue pot, unable to adapt to an altered environment, than on fascist regimes, Bergson's language of puppets and mechanization is aptly suited to Spark's attack, fifty years later, on totalitarian violence and those who accept it without question.

Like Bergson, Spark sees ridicule as an instrumental tool in social discipline, successfully discouraging undesirable acts. But where Spark specifically advocates the use of ridicule against violence, Bergson puts all laughter in a disciplinary role, where it acts as an enforcer for general social mores. For ridicule, or laughter, to act as an incentive for change, the target must want to avoid the uncomfortable feelings and embarrassment ridicule produces. Often laughter is separated into two groups: "positive" laughter, which brings people together and causes no harm,

and "negative" laughter, which attacks and bullies its victims.[6] This division is necessary only if a theorist is trying to explain away ridicule, with its attendant hostility and aggression, as a "less desirable" element, instead of recognizing it as a powerful tool.

In studies that examine the role of ridicule in child rearing, the directive that parents should "gently" mock children instead of cruelly ridiculing them to inform them of linguistic or behavioral missteps is of paramount importance (Billig 222). The fear is that mocking laughter comes from a place of hostility, an idea out of step with most ideal visions of parenthood and most "positivist" spins on humour. But ruthlessness is key for Bergson and Spark's disciplinary laughter:

> Laughter is above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness. (Bergson 187)

Far from warning against its dangers and negativity, Bergson points to the effectiveness of harsh laughter. Indeed, Spark has no qualms in taking pleasure in the mocking of violence, arguing for more ridicule, so long as it is aimed at the appropriate target. She does not ask her readers to use ridicule gently, but to mock violence "ruthlessly" in all its forms. Far from worrying about the crueler connotations of ridicule, Spark embraces them in her attack on violence. Instead of trying

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[6] Modern and popular psychology differentiate between "genuinely funny humour" and "hostile humour" (Billig 22). Billig also points to similar distinctions between "good" and "bad" humour that have appeared in previous theories. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, draws a distinction between "buffons or vulgar fellows" who cause pain with their "raillery" and "gentlemen" who would "show wit, not buffonery." Thomas Hobbes viewed all laughter as suspect and based in a sense of superiority or the denigration of those less fortunate, while Joseph Addison sought the difference between "true" and "false" wit, where "true wit consists in the resemblance of ideas, and false wit in the resemblance of words." The third Earl of Shaftebury too differentiated between "true" and "false" raillery, based primarily on issues of class and "good breeding" (Billing, Chapter 2).

to remove or downplay the aggressive nature of ridicule, Spark's manifesto in "Desegregation" seeks to redirect it against societal ills:

> We should know ourselves better by now than to be under the illusion that we are all essentially aspiring, affectionate, and loving creatures. We do have these qualities, but we are aggressive too. ("Desegregation" 36)

In Spark's campaign against violence, a little unkindness seems a small price to pay for change. Neither Spark nor Bergson are in the business of redeeming laughter as a great and kind unifier, regardless of how many studies show how "laughter forges ties between people, binding those who laugh together to one another" (Speier 1357). Instead, they are more interested in what laughter unifies people against. Bergson's theory introduces this closing of the ranks against transgressions as the social function of humour, while Spark takes this mocking weapon and urges its use against life's absurd oppression.

To achieve this vitally important mockery, both Spark and Bergson agree that emotion and sentimentality must be set aside. Sentimentality is merely ineffective in Sparkian terms, but to Bergson it is specifically antithetical to laughter: he points out that "Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (Bergson 63). Bergsonian laughter is primarily disciplinary, pointing out the missteps of its target. Identifying with the target, feeling the pain of slipping on a banana peel or the discomfort of being ridiculed, changes the situation to one of empathy and encourages sympathy instead of ridicule, tears instead of laughter. For an event to remain comic as opposed to tragic, the watcher must maintain a level of emotional distance. Bergson claims that "the comic demands something like the momentary anesthesia of the heart" (64) and this distance is crucial to Bergson's disciplinary use of ridicule.

Spark's own detached and unemotional style reiterates the importance of distance in ridicule. At every step, she actively cultivates a sense of emotional distance, keeping us from identifying or sympathizing too strongly with any single character. In Spark's development of this emotional distance, she was influenced by the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet, "and the *nouveau roman* he wrote which was rather devoid of emotions" (Hosmer 135). She expresses open admiration for insouciant distance in other comic authors as well: "What I like about Max Beerbohm is his attitude of not caring a damn about any of it, but under this he had a real style, a real humility. He didn't worry too much about what's not worth it" ("My Conversion" 28). Even the length of her novels, or rather novellas, helps foster this sense of distance, for she believes "it is bad manners to inflict a lot of emotional involvement on the reader – much nicer to make them laugh and keep it short" (Gillham 412). The laughter distances the reader from emotional attachment, while at the same time maintaining the detachment that allows us to laugh.

Spark's use of detachment informs not only her writing but is also integral to her sense of identity and religion: "I used to worry until I got a sense of order, a sense of proportion. At least I hope I've got it now. You need it to be either a writer or a Christian" ("My Conversion" 28). The "sense of proportion" acts not only as a necessary element for writers and Christians, but is also one of Bergson's key elements of laughter; he argues that the "comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled" (Bergson 63). Spark's "calm and unruffled" soul seems to come from her conversion to Catholicism. She attributes much of her style and her self-possession to her religion: "I didn't get my style until I became a Catholic because you just haven't got to care, and you need security for that" ("My Conversion" 27). Catholicism provided Spark with a moral system and a

place of security from which to criticize societal weaknesses and distance herself from emotional involvement.

In the place of emotion, Bergson sees intelligence as the necessary component of laughter: "Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple" (Bergson 64). Spark's wish to "see less emotion and more intelligence in these efforts to impress our minds and hearts" ("Desegregation" 35) could have come directly from Bergson's treatise on ridicule. Bergson presents intelligent distance as the opposite of emotional involvement:

> In a society composed of pure intelligences there would probably be no more tears, though perhaps there would still be laughter; whereas highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter. (63)

Both Spark and Bergson identify sentimentality as the enemy of ridicule, and both link intelligence to the ability to laugh at absurdity. Spark makes the connection between ridicule and intelligence even more explicit in one of her interviews: "Satire and ridicule will always be understood by a more sophisticated mind and it is - I can only say that it is a matter of education" (Hosmer 155). Spark and Bergson link ridicule with a populace that is more educated and more aware, but instead of seeing it as dividing the educated from the ignorant, Spark hopes that ridicule and satire will encourage awareness and feed intelligence in her readers.

Though she is often praised for her distinctive and satirical style, Spark's choice of a comic tone has nevertheless received a mixed critical reception. Even her supportive critics do not always agree on the merit of Spark's satirical tack as its successful detachment can frustrate and unnerve readers seeking emotional attachment. Whittaker is particularly concerned with Spark's refusal to deal explicitly with emotions:

> Attention is drawn less and less to the absence of love and human pity, although satire and comedy abound, usefully distracting our attention and making us laugh. But the reader eventually senses that the distractions are merely entertainment, and that the ironic or satiric stance is in danger of becoming frozen. (Whittaker 16)

The lack of emotion which allows satire and comedy to flourish leaves Whittaker "with a feeling of unease," perhaps because it points out the uncomfortable level of absurdity that Spark sees in social circumstances. Whittaker nevertheless acknowledges the strength behind Spark's minimalist technique:

> Denied the expressions of shock, despair or authorial moralizing that usually attend death in novels, the reader is forced to think instead of feel, to exercise a personal moral intelligence in each case, without explicit guidance from the author. (Whittaker 13)

This demand to think instead of feel attempts to force readers into the necessary distance for viewing the events with ridicule, while also cultivating an active intelligence. Whittaker feels unsettled by Spark's emotional distance, but that is arguably the correct response. As Kermode puts it, "There is a certainly a remoteness, a lack of ordinary compassion, in her dealings with characters, but this is a part of the premise of her fiction" (174). Spark wants to unsettle her readers, to force them to examine assumptions and consider carefully their responses. It would be impossible to judge the characters as ludicrous if the reader were more intimately involved with them, and Spark views the absurdity of post-war life as something that should concern its witnesses.

Though critics may sometimes balk at Spark's unemotional style, she follows all of Bergson's definitions of ridicule: its emphasis on intelligence instead of emotion, its targeting of rigid thought, and its social role. Focusing on ridicule's disciplinary capabilities, her stylistic choices encourage her readers to view the world with the comic detachment that she believes will bring about social change.

In "Desegregation," Spark calls not only for the use of ridicule, but also for the use of satire in her campaign for effective art. The complexities of Spark's novels, their moral ambiguities and fluid genres, lend themselves to the complicated genre of satire. The definition of satire has been perpetually problematic. Debates about whether "Horace versus Juvenal, comic versus tragic satire, raillery versus chastisement, vice versus folly" (Griffin 24) should be the defining characteristic of satire appeared throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, alongside arguments on the proper targets of ridicule and whether it should be expressed in a high or low style.[7] Though the definition of satire has gone through numerous permutations through the centuries, when Spark delivered her speech in 1971 the critical and historical consensus held that:

> Satire is a highly rhetorical and moral art. A work of satire is designed to attack vice or folly. To this end it uses wit or ridicule. Like polemical rhetoric, it seeks to persuade an audience that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous. [...] Finally, satire usually proceeds by means of clear reference to some moral standards or purposes. (Griffin 1)

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[7] See Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, for an excellent overview of previous satirical theory from its classical origins up through Dryden, Donne, Swift, and Pope. See Peter Petro, *Modern Satire: Four Studies*, for a discussion of satire in the novel by contrast with poetry.

Based on Spark's goals for art set forth in "Desegregation," her novels should fit neatly within this definition. She advocates the use of ridicule and satire, argues that all art is a form of persuasion, and demands moral responsibility and social change from effective art. She argues that all violence should be presented as something to be mocked, identifying a clear target of ridicule, another defining characteristic of satire. Her firm religious foundation gives her a stable set of moral standards from which to work. However, regardless of her clarity of purpose in "The Desegregation of Art," Spark's novels are far from simple satiric works. Their complexity of action and motive makes it difficult to ascribe to her the classic satirical tools of exaggeration or caricature. They usually lack a clear condemnation of a specific vice and support of a specific virtue and her morally ambiguous characters are difficult to identify as objects of scorn or as moral models. So while Spark's declarations in "Desegregation" may fit neatly into a simple, moralistic definition of satire, her novels require a more complex interpretation of satire's goals.

Griffin highlights how recent scholarship on famous satirists such as Swift and Pope reveals that many of the most successful satires do not fit tidily into a simple and didactic definition. Satire attacks the "reader's complacency, seeks to disorient or unsettle" (Griffin 52), and this is often best accomplished by refusing to provide a clear and obvious solution to the situation being satirised. Instead of presenting satire as a proscriptive method of presenting one specific viewpoint, Griffin identifies how "a rhetoric of inquiry and provocation enables us to see more clearly that satire is often an 'open' rather than a 'closed' form, that it is concerned rather to inquire, explore, or unsettle than to declare, sum up, or conclude" (95). This widened definition of satire brings the genre from Spark's idealized manifesto into her novels, where she encourages alertness and critical thought instead of providing simple moral answers.

Though Griffin applies his theory of an unsettling satire primarily to verse works written before 1900, his extended definition of the genre leads into the issues of dark humour that appear in satiric novels of the twentieth century. Dark humour, yet another critical category associated with Spark's novels, confronts issues of "alienation, uncertainty, instability, mechanization, and fragmentation" and

> is characterized by the very concerns of Modernism. It is generally defined by ambivalence, confused chronology, plots that seem to go nowhere, and a conflicting, or even unreliable, narrative stance. It represents violent or traumatic events and questions the values and perceptions of its readers. (Colletta 3)

These trends, which Colletta identifies in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* and Ivy Compton-Burnett's *A House and Its Head* as emblematic of dark humour, also appear in later post-modern works. Works like Martin Amis's *Money* or Will Self's *How the Dead Live* "question the liberal humanist emphasis on the individual; they focus instead upon institutions. They share a concern with the ontological impact of capitalism and deploy caricature to indict the commodifying and mechanizing of human beings" (Gregson, *Character and Satire* 5). Bergson identifies mechanization, or stiltedness, as the very source of laughter and Spark's novels often explore the impact of institutions on communities: factories in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, boarding school in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and an abbey in *The Abbess of Crewe*.

While conventional social satire mocked vice with the hope of correcting it, twentieth century satire saw a shift: "in the dark humour of Modernist satire, the social content remains but its social purpose all but disappears" (Colletta 2). Increasingly, laughter ceases to be a didactic tool and becomes a form of self-defense:

> all seems absurd, all seems inscrutable, and there is little else to do but laugh. This response may appear resigned, but it is in fact a powerfully assertive and aggressive reaction, for the dark comedic imagination casts off pain and suffering and refuses them their power to overwhelm and destroy. (Colletta 7)

Gregson sees a similar bleakness in Spark's writing, arguing that

> [She] holds her own characters at a disdainful arm's length: their lives are unalleviated by their fictional relationships because they are mostly incapable of the self-transcendence required to grow or develop in response to others. Spark's satirical vision is directed not so much at specific targets as at human beings as a species. (*Character and Satire* 102)

However, though Spark's satires contain many of the elements of dark humour, her religious views mark a profound difference between herself and the more typical modern or postmodern satirists who function in a world without stability or faith, where "individuals negotiate a social order that is important precisely because it is meaningless, unstable, senselessly violent – and more importantly – understood to be all there is" (Colletta 24). Far from seeing the world as lost, and the only response to absurdity the self-protection of laughter, "Desegregation" argues emphatically for social change. Though Spark employs the tools of dark humour, her novels present ridicule as a powerful force for change and awareness.

Spark may boldly claim ridicule as a weapon against fascist leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini, arguing that with the use of ridicule "those tyrants wouldn't have had a chance" ("Desegregation" 35), but there is significant debate about satire's capacity to produce political change. Dryden, Pope and Swift each expressed doubt that satire could actually encourage change, fearing that vice could ignore ridicule's attack (Griffin 38). Hans Speier, in his article

"Wit and Politics," examines ridicule in the political world, looking at "whispered jokes," the dangerous jokes told against powerful enemies, as well as numerous examples of "the jokes used by totalitarian governments as weapons of propaganda" (1390). Speier argues that satire and humour are not useful tools for bringing about lasting change, and believes that "humour does not change the circumstances that it illuminates, although it is able to lessen the discontent and even the despair that these circumstances produce" (1358). He subscribes to the idea that laughter provides only a transitive influence and release: "indeed, throughout history, whispered jokes have been safety valves, enabling men to reduce the frustrations inflicted through taboos, laws, and conventions" (1395). Joking can be seen as enabling people to "live more easily with nagging, half-conscious insights about accommodation or one's own failure to revolt" (Speier 1395) instead of acting as a vehicle for change.

There is constant tension in analyzing the political impact of transgressive or rebellious literature: does it encourage change, or merely make the status quo more bearable? Does it provide the impetus and inspiration for revolution, or "simply help us to tolerate injustices, sublimating our transgressive impulses into literature while pursuing a course of political quietism in the real world" (Booker 15). This fear of quietism parallels Spark's dissatisfaction with sentimental art's sympathetic release that then absolves the viewers or readers from action. But though Spark's call to laugh at tyrants seems more likely to end in a hail of bullets than the Nazis slinking off-stage in a fog of embarrassment, it is not devoid of merit. Though satire might not be simplistically capable of immediately fixing the world's ills, it can still have a profound effect on its environment. As Griffin suggests,

> By conducting open-ended speculative inquiry, by provoking and challenging comfortable and received ideas, by unsettling our convictions and occasionally

> shattering our illusions, by asking questions and raising doubts but not providing answers, satire ultimately has political consequences. (160)

Satire prevents complacency. By adding violence to the list of vices deserving mockery, Spark combats the respect and solemnity that violent leaders demand, making their position potentially less desirable, and at the very least providing a coping mechanism to avoid victimization.

Spark's unsettling satire combines both rebellious and disciplinary comic strains. Her rebellious humour appears when the powerless use ridicule as a defense and weapon against the powerful. Both Freud and Hobbes viewed humour as a potentially rebellious and destabilizing force, and Bakhtin lauded laughter's capacity to mock authority. The violent events of World War II and Spark's intimate knowledge of the fight against fascism make the violence of Hitler and Mussolini obvious targets for her ridicule. Dangerous and fascistic authorities figure prominently in her novels, exposed by the satirical author to the ridicule of the reader. In the debate about whether satire should criticize only the minor vices or confront larger atrocities as well,[8] Spark emphatically argues that satire should be used as a weapon against more than minor social failings. Instead of identifying the extremes of violence that powerful figures of World War II represent as too important to be mocked, Spark sees respectful reverence as part of the problem, and fears that it perpetuates violence's powerful position in society instead of undermining its strength.

Spark's pervasive application of ridicule need not be conflated with taking jocular jabs at current political forces. It has as much in common with disciplinary parent/child mockery as with the contested rebellion of whispered jokes within totalitarian regimes. Adults use ridicule to teach children correct social actions, using embarrassment to discourage the transgressing of

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[8] This debate goes back to whether Horace or Juvenal should act as the model for all satire. Horace chides minor failings while Juvenal attacks higher crimes (Griffin 13).

behavioral boundaries (Billig 222). In the process, not only do parents teach their children what is funny and deserves to be laughed at, they also teach ridicule as an appropriate tool for deterring inappropriate actions. Spark identifies violence as something to be systematically ridiculed, encouraging a laughing response as opposed to an equally violent one.

I hesitate to ascribe the term "comic theory" to Spark's application and advocacy of ridicule, as it is not part of an over-arching investigation of human behaviour. Despite her declarations in "Desegregation," her concepts are not part of a concentrated or comprehensive study of laughter. Unlike Bergson, she is not a philosopher, but a novelist, and a popular one at that.[9] While her manifesto may be a call to arms, it is her novels that we turn to for examples of how she believes ridicule can act against corrupt forms of power. Even if it is not a fully developed psychological theory, Spark's use of ridicule as a weapon provides an intriguing window into her fictional choices.

Though she is consistent in her goal to mock violence and pettiness, exposing their absurdity and undesirability, Spark's use of ridicule varies from her essay to her novels. "Desegregation"'s clear and unambiguous demand for disciplinary ridicule builds mockery directly and transparently into our social system as a weapon against violence. But Spark's books work on a much smaller and more ambiguous scale. Beyond violence, her novels mock the blind subservience of those who follow abusive leaders and Spark presents the ability to recognize the ridiculous as the vital element for awareness of and defense against abuse. Those that can see the absurdity around them and mock it have the ability to change their surroundings, whereas those

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[9] Popularity often increases the potential for a work to be dismissed as mere "entertainment." Bergson's *Laughter* received similar treatment: "In the eyes of professional philosophers, the topic, not to mention the book's popularity, suggest a *divertissement* rather than serious metaphysics" (Billig 115). Both Bergson's *Laughter* and Freud's *On Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* are often overlooked in criticism of their work.

who cannot are trapped by their circumstances or by the manipulations of others. Spark's characters employ a form of rebellious humour, using their ability to see the ridiculous to fight restrictive systems of authority, refusing to become victims. Instead of presenting ridicule as an obviously political weapon, one employed in formal rebellion against the government, Spark's vision of ridicule is integrated into the everyday, used to combat manipulation and abuse in smaller communities, perhaps with the hope that this will filter through to larger, national attitudes.

Spark's exploration of ridicule is more obvious in some books than others, going beyond a general satirical tone to employing characters who actively use ridicule or laughter to change events. Not all the books support Bergsonian notions of ridicule as clearly as "Desegregation" does; instead, they explore numerous aspects of comic theory, as if evaluating different methods. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, one of her earliest novels, contrasts a carnivalesque attitude with the mechanization of life in an industrialized community, emphasizing laugher's influential power but finally arguing that without the backing of concentrated ridicule and satire, laughter can become simply a dangerous and temporary emotional release. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,* one of her most famous novels, questions fascism on a smaller scale, comparing it to the petty insecurities of a girl's school. In this novel, a student's ability to recognize the absurd allows her to successfully challenge a pseudo-fascist authority and reveals that ridicule is a crucial ingredient for actualization and rebellion. Finally, *The Abbess of Crewe*, the most classically satirical of the three, looks at a micro-community where laughter is banned and a powerful Abbess runs rampant, exposing the dystopia awaiting a society which has banned both laughter and ridicule and has lost its capacity to recognize the absurd. In each novel, ridicule plays a substantial yet subtle role, all within Spark's characteristically detached style. Critchley defines

the true joke as one which "challenges the existing order by making the familiar seem unfamiliar"(5), and with each book Spark approaches her own manifesto:

> To bring about a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge, a sense of the absurd and a general looking-lively to defend ourselves from the ridiculous oppressions of our time, and above all to entertain us in the process. ("Desegregation" 37)

Chapter Two

Destabilizing Laughter: The Festive Carnival in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*

Based around the dishonest writer Dougal Douglas's arrival in Peckham in South London, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* presents a distanced and non-linear account of temporary destabilization in an industrialized and stratified community. The action of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* exemplifies a time of carnivalesque release, triggered by the arrival of Dougal Douglas: bands of toughs threaten residents, a business manager murders his mistress, laughter and tears abound, and Humphrey leaves Dixie at the altar. Popularly identified as a demon, Douglas embodies the ideals of the carnival fool, acting outside social boundaries and revealing disquieting truths through his ridiculous actions. Douglas moves through the novel as a powerful figure, bringing tears and laughter in his wake, but ultimately carnivalesque laughter fails to provide the lasting impact that Spark hopes to see from more directed satire.

Though Spark had not yet put forth her comic manifesto of "The Desegregation of Art," she was already cultivating a deliberate sense of distance in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye.* Her choice of title prepares the astute reader for a detached tone, for ballads are defined by distance from their subject:

> dramatic, condensed, and impersonal: the narrator begins with the climactic episode, tells the story tersely by means of action and dialogue (sometimes by means of dialogue alone), and tells it without self-reference or the expression of personal attitudes or feelings. (Abrams 18)

Accordingly, the opening of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* reveals that Humphrey Place has left/will leave Dixie at the altar and that Dougal Douglas has been/will be run out of town, preemptively exposing the climax and undermining suspense. The novel relies primarily on

dialogue and observational information, refusing to tell the story from within the mind of any of the characters. Instead of exposing emotions, Spark deliberately uses the impersonal tone of the ballad to maintain a sense of distance in the narration: "I wrote one book without any expressed feelings and thoughts, that was *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, although nobody has noticed that because feelings and thoughts are very much implied and understood" (Hosmer 147). Though the feelings are implied, the distance Spark employs embodies her ideal of "less emotion" in art, as set forth in "The Desegregation of Art." The lack of internal dialogue and narratorial direction creates the role of the impersonal, yet uncertain, observer. By presenting the events without emotional inside-knowledge, Spark forces readers to deduce for themselves the inner lives of the characters. This lack of narrative certainty demands an alert attention to nuance, but also puts every assumption of motive in doubt.

At the centre of the novel is Dougal Douglas, a perplexing character whose arrival in Peckham heralds mental breakdowns, increased absenteeism at the factory, and, eventually, murder. Douglas does not appear bound by the conventions of polite society: openly laughing and crying in public, making outrageous gestures, and provoking fights. Douglas's emotional outbursts are frequent and utterly foreign to the dependable inhabitants of Peckham. Shortly after Douglas receives a letter from his girl Jinny ending their relationship, he causes a scene at the canteen where he "put his head on his arms in full view of these few girls, and wept" (41). This display garners a variety of reactions from the girls: Elaine combs his hair, Dawn strokes his shoulder, Milly brings him tea, and Annette giggles "most heartlessly" (41-42). Like the characters in the novel, the reader is equally unsure of the correct reaction to Douglas, uncertain if his outbursts of emotion are genuine or merely acts of disruption directed at a vulnerable audience. The passage provides little evidence as to the authenticity of Douglas's heartbreak,

presenting his actions without any of the accompanying emotional information that would unequivocally explain his feelings. We are left to wonder if he is truly upset, or whether, as Humphrey later explains to Dixie, "'That's just his game. You don't know Dougal. I bet he wasn't crying really'" (57). With no guarantee of his motivation, it is unclear whether he is in genuine pain, simply looking for feminine attention, indulging in a fit of whimsy, or manipulating those around him, and it becomes impossible to feel sympathy without suspicion. Spark's detached recounting of the event allows for a more analytical reaction to the characters, forcing us to judge morality and intent without aid from a narrator or first person knowledge, but it also means that Dougal Douglas's motives are constantly suspect.

As the writer character in the novel, Douglas holds a particular position of power and insight. A self-proclaimed "man of letters," he supplements his income by ghost writing an autobiography for Mrs. Cheeseman, and at the end of the novel Spark tells us that later in life "he gathered together the scrap ends of his profligate experience—for he was a frugal man at heart—and turned them into a lot of cockeyed books, and went far in the world" (142). In "The Desegregation of Art," Spark declares that the duty of art is "to bring about a mental environment of honesty and self-knowledge" (36), and Douglas is pivotal to numerous epiphanies and life-changing decisions in other characters. While Sandy, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* written in the same year, will use her writer's insight and ability to recognize the ridiculous as self-defense against her teacher's selfish and fascistic destruction of identity, Douglas's laughter and tears appear to destabilize chaotically the community around him.

This destabilization raises numerous questions about both Dougal Douglas's motives and his origins. In her previous novels, Spark had already begun to introduce supernatural elements into her writing (the ghostly narrator in *The Comforters* and the unidentified phone calls in

Memento Mori, for example) and these supernatural events occur with little preamble in books that otherwise seem far from science fiction or fantasy. By titling her work a ballad, Spark offers some warning that events may not fall entirely within the realm of the real and "offers us a title that triggers various associations with the odd, the supernatural, the fantastic – for ballads are quite readily compatible with ghosts, devils, extraordinary powers" (Hynes, *Art of the Real* 51). There are no overtly supernatural events surrounding Douglas, but he is constantly associated, or associating himself, with the demonic. He asks people to feel the two small lumps on his head, where he claims he used to have horns before they were surgically removed, and he plays up his demonic features, accentuating his deformed shoulder and identifying himself to Humphrey as "one of the wicked spirits that wander through the world for the ruin of souls" (77).

Most critics agree that Dougal Douglas represents a supernatural and evil element, naming him the "devil in south London" (Kemp, "On the Ballad of Peckham Rye" 114). Alan Bold identifies Douglas as "the evil character most 'in his element'" (*Capacity* 139) and Patrick Swinden describes him as "the agent of a Satanic plot against the other characters" (65). But despite his demonic associations, Douglas's actions seem far from unambiguously evil. His arrival may coincide with murder, mental breakdowns, and an increase in absenteeism in the Peckham area, but aside from the dishonesty of holding two jobs simultaneously, doing little work at either of them, and a tendency to get into fights, Douglas performs no overtly "evil" actions. Without insight into his thoughts, it is impossible to know if he deliberately and maliciously creates disorder, or is merely a catalyst for the variety of events he inspires in Peckham.

As a catalyst, Douglas brings about not only the negatives of madness and disaster, but also provides a type of general alertness. He brings attention to small details that the everyday

workers have overlooked, pointing out fixtures that his walking companions have never noticed despite years of familiarity, such as the pram "stuck out on a balcony" that advertises a baby-carriage works: "'From the style of the pram, it can't be new. In fact the pram has been there for twenty-five years. You see, you simply haven't noticed it'" (33). There is a general air of rejuvenation that surrounds him, as Miss Coverdale seems to rediscover her youthfulness and "gave him a hefty push such as she had not done to a man for twenty years" (34). Older citizens relive their life stories with him, and he researches the lost history of the area, bringing a sense of vitality back to an industrialized area obsessed with efficiency.

Spark lauds alertness and awareness in her speech "Desegregation," but Douglas's presence and his tendency to awaken emotions in those he encounters release havoc in the lives of the community, disrupting carefully balanced control. Humphrey leaves Dixie at the altar with Douglas's own words, old Nelly is threatened for associating with him, and Mr. Druce lashes out in sudden violence against Miss Coverdale. Douglas himself recognizes the duality of his nature, that he acts with both positive and negative impacts on those who surround him. When accused of driving Mr. Weedin, his supervisor, and Mr. Druce, his employer, mad, Douglas argues:

> "I have the power of exorcism," Dougal said, "that's all."
> "What's that?"
> "The ability to drive devils out of people."
> "I thought you said you were the devil yourself."
> "The two states are not incompatible." (102)

Douglas views himself as both a healer and a devil, and the process of driving "the devil out of people" often results in violence, as Douglas forces ignored emotions to the forefront. This release is represented on a smaller scale throughout the novel as the tears and laughter which Douglas inspires. Laughter, in many guises, surrounds Douglas as he breaks conventional boundaries of behaviour, but it is less the controlled and unemotional laughter that Spark will

advocate in her argument for more ridicule and satire and more the frenzied release of emotions associated with carnivalesque laughter. Dougal Douglas, with his hunched shoulder, inappropriate actions, associations with the demonic and catalytic presence, strongly resembles the powerful figure of the carnival fool.

The fool is a central component of carnival and a favourite literary figure in comedies and satires. In recent years, he has become a popular focus of study as scholars trace the history of the fool from medieval madmen tolerated in villages, to court-jesters who entertain their masters, to the wise fool of Shakespearean plays. [10] Set apart from the general population by his outrageous actions or physical deformity, the fool possesses a peculiar freedom, able to voice criticisms through witticisms without the censorship a regular citizen would be subject to. The court fool has a rich tradition of pointing out the mistakes of his master through jokes, speaking criticism that regular court members could not voice without fear of severe repercussions. Originally intended as a scapegoat and harmless entertainment, the non-threatening and dependent fool wielded influential power through laughter, while remaining on the margins of institutionalized power.

Dougal Douglas shares many, if not all, of the traditional characteristics of a fool, defined as someone who is:

> distinguished from the normal group member by a deviation in person or conduct which is regarded as ludicrous and improper. He is usually defined as a person lacking in judgment, who behaves absurdly or stupidly. The antics of the fool, his

[10] For further information on the history of the fool, see Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1966 and Barbara Swain, *Fools and Folly During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1932.

> ugliness, gracelessness, senselessness, or possible deformity of body represent departures from corresponding group norms of propriety. (Klapp 157)

Douglas constantly brings attention to his deformed shoulder, accentuating it through various poses instead of attempting to hide this physical abnormality. He openly and frequently breaks rules of propriety, dancing in an elaborate and disruptive way at Findlater's Ballroom (57), or crying in the canteen over the loss of his girl (41). Regardless of the extremity or inappropriateness of his actions, his status as "different" or "foolish" protects him, as acquaintances defend him by exclaiming "'You're ignorant. Can't you see he's handicapped?'" (42) or "'Can't you see he's deformed? . . . Making a game of a chap like that, it's ignorant'" (45). The fool is safe from blame because he cannot be held accountable for his actions: "He is a fool because his extravagancies are supposed to be due not to intention but to some deficiency in his education, experience or innate capacity for understanding" (Swain 1). Douglas's spontaneity and utter disregard of proper social etiquette are distinctive characteristics of the fool, as he cries and laughs openly in public and caters purely to his own whims, in the tradition of the village fool or idiot: "The idiot performs his natural functions naturally, without sophistication or the usage of custom: when he is sad, he cries; when he is happy, he laughs; when he is hungry, he eats" (Kaiser 6). He is an object of laughter and scorn, and in Peckham change and disruption revolve around him.

Linking Douglas to the fool character does not negate his demonic affiliations, but it does integrate them into a more balanced role. The fool has a wide range of moral associations, depending on the century or the locale in which he is encountered. To strict disciplinarians of order, the fool was a sinner who brought disorder. In early morality plays,

> The greatest of all fools is the great tempter himself, Satan, and it is his surrogate, the Vice, who has the fool's role in the moral interlude. In the war between God and the Devil for the soul of man, it is he who tempts man with the indulgences of nature to surrender to the Prince of Darkness. (Kaiser 197)

The fool can appear as a figure of temptation and dissolution, placed in opposition to the wise man, who followed the rules of society and thrived. On the other hand, the fool's naturalness could be seen as associating him more closely with God, giving him a type of purity:

> the fool's affinities to the natural order often appeared to indicate a special affinity with God. This seemed especially so of the fool's speech which, for all its ignorance, at times managed to pierce through the veils of convention and propriety to the profound simplicity of a Christlike truth. (Kaiser 8)

In numerous folk stories and fables, folly triumphs over wisdom and becomes a wisdom of its own, praising freedom from arbitrary social constraints and a return to the natural. The dual nature of Douglas's intentions, his ability to bring disorder and rejuvenation, lends itself to the complicated history of the fool. Douglas often offers surprising insight, knowing more than he should and gaining the trust of those he encounters. Though Douglas associates himself with demons, Spark presents him more ambiguously: "Dougal posed like an angel on a grave which had only an insignificant head-stone. He posed like an angel-devil with his hump shoulder and gleaming smile" (30). While angels and devils seem polar opposites in a purely theological sense, the history of the fool encompasses them both.

During festivals, the fool played a more active role of leadership in the community. Medieval festivals, survivors of pagan Saturnalia and Kalend rites, presented a time when "for a short while masters and slaves changed places, laws lost their force, and a mock-king ruled over

a topsy-turvy world" (Welsford 201). This king was the Lord of Misrule, who presided over the carnival and who, during this temporary time of release, embodied licentiousness and freedom. Douglas's arrival in Peckham seems to herald a time of carnival, with him as the ringleader. Spark's choice of the titular ballad, a poetic form rich in oral and folk culture, also evokes the folk festival of carnival. The inclusion of "Rye" in the place name draws attention to this central green space, the common area where the carnival would have taken place, which is still the site for fights, romance, and general nightlife. Neither the fights nor the romance reach a successful conclusion, interrupted by either Dixie's lack of interest or the passing police, but the Rye is still the scene of the carnival elements of violence, sex, and a mildly illicit freedom. Even the timing of the novel reflects a carnival atmosphere, as the fourth chapter documents the events of midsummer night, a customary time of release and celebration. On this festive night, Douglas invades and disrupts a local dance hall, inspiring "the many different sounds of mirth, protest, encouragement, and rage" (60), all common audience responses at a carnival. The crowd's reaction to Douglas's carnival performance of mime and dance is fragmented and contradictory, half approving of his antics and half simply wishing he would disappear. Douglas, the carnival interloper, exposes forgotten elements of carnival in Peckham's past, referencing the mermaid from an "account of the fair up the road at Camberwell Green" (27) that he unearths in Colburn's *Calendar of Amusements 1840.* He unearths the emotions and festivals of Peckham that its inhabitants had forgotten.

Hired to lower rates of absenteeism in the factory, Dougal Douglas is instead a physical representation of truancy, extolling the virtues of taking a Monday off to strangers and friends alike. As Bakhtin observes, "Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges,

norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin 10). Douglas easily associates himself with every part of the "classes within classes in Peckham" (29). From the factory manager to the typing pool, down to the workers in the canteen and the crazed religious proselytizer Nelly, Douglas unsettles or charms everyone regardless of their social rank. "This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life" (Bakhtin 10), and Douglas stirs up long ignored emotions and realizations in those he talks to, just as he brings them to laughter and tears. He considers this situation entirely natural, and even imbues it with a sense of whimsy: "The boss advised me to mix with everybody in the district, high and low. I should like to mix with that mermaid" (28). Spark constantly highlights Douglas's ability to insinuate himself into different class levels, as upper and lower class alike seem fascinated and repelled by him. Douglas's influence on various social strata underlines how carnival is not isolated to specific groups, but reaches out to the masses and the upper-crust alike. Spark returns to this wide-reaching effect in "Desegregation," where she argues against art becoming a segregated activity enjoyed only by the intelligentsia, and advocates ridicule as "the art that everyone can share in some degree" ("Desegregation" 36).

Though the fool is a figure of ridicule, he is just as likely to be the butt of the joke as the joker himself. This was especially true of the simple idiot, the village fool or madman who stands at the very root of the fool's origins. But the wise fools of plays and literature used ridicule and their position of privileged insubordination to criticize or advise those in power. Walter Kaiser points out this shift from the childlike innocence of the natural fool to the role of the fool with insight in literature:

> the license of the natural fool was appropriated for the artificial fool; his nonconformity was turned into iconoclasm, his naturalism into anarchy, and his

> frankness into satire. Whether in the court or on the stage, he was able to criticize the accepted order of things and to voice daring indictments of the church or the throne or the law or society in general. (Kaiser 7)

It is never clear if Douglas is meant as an innocent fool with no control over his actions or as a manipulative influence using his physical handicap and ludicrous actions for protection. From the detached observational narration Spark employs, the reader has no direct information regarding Douglas's motives. Douglas often appears to be artificially enhancing his deformity for sympathy, shock, and effect, raising "his right shoulder, which was already highly crooked by nature" (15) and striking elaborate poses. It is unclear if he genuinely deserves Dixie's analysis that "He's just different. Says funny things. You have to laugh" (25), or if he is taking advantage of his status as handicapped. In the role of the fool, Douglas gains a surprising amount of protection, even using his deformity to intimidate others, successfully cowing Dixie into submission at the bar: "He heaved his shoulder and glittered his eyes at her, and she did not dare to correct him" (38). But regardless of whether Douglas's actions are spontaneous or planned, he possesses a breadth of action far beyond the regular inhabitants of Peckham.

The fool can be particularly effective in the role of social critic, employing ridicule against established institutions. Though Dougal Douglas acts as the central catalyst of the novel, the ballad itself is not named for him but for the community itself, and we must turn to the community to find what Spark has set her carnival fool to disrupt. Characters in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* constantly place an over-emphasis on work, casually replacing personal identity with a strict system of class based on job titles. Instead of physical descriptions, characters receive only their job designation: "Dawn Waghorn, cone-winder, Annette Wren, trainee-seamer, Elaine Kent, process controller" (13). The lines between the classes are solid, based on their

position in the company: "[Dixie] addressed the men, ignoring Elaine as she had done all evening, because Elaine was factory" (43). Dixie worries only about making money, Humphrey constantly quotes union laws, and even the entertainment is reduced to the watching of television to avoid conversation. There is no passion or awareness in the community, and Douglas's presence highlights the mechanization of Peckham, revealing the sterility of the inhabitants' lives and disrupting it. Peckham's inhabitants recognize him as a force of change, but Douglas's freedom does not seem able to break through the boundaries they have set up around themselves. Miss Coverdale ignores Douglas's sensible advice, still trapped by the rules of money and an inability to change:

> "Dougal", she said, "I was counting on you to help me to get away from Mr Druce."
> "Get another job," he said, "and refuse to see him any more. It's easy."
> "Oh, everything's easy for you. You're free." (98)

Bakhtin has an especially positive view of the carnival that Douglas embodies: "All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" (11). Douglas brings about awareness, which Spark identifies as the goal of art, but the realizations he brings do not necessarily leave his companions better off: "Merle began to laugh from her chest. Suddenly she sat down on the Rye and began to cry. 'God!' she said, 'Dougal, I've had a rotten life'" (98). As Merle admits, "'You've unsettled me Dougal, since you came to Peckham. I shall have a nervous breakdown, I can see it coming'" (98). In the restrictive environment of Peckham, Douglas's carnivalesque release of emotions can bring about murder and uncertainty, or merely prove ineffective.

Douglas, though his association with the fool and laughter link him to ridicule and awareness, lacks the focus of satire. Instead, the carnivalesque produces an uncontrolled

outpouring of emotions and a loss of impulse control that can as easily result in violence as in laughter. Dougal Douglas, as a writer and a ridiculer, has the insight and capacity to alter the lives around him, but, unwittingly or deliberately, uses it irresponsibly. His destabilizing presence causes the brutal murder of Miss Coverdale by Mr. Druce, who "came towards her with the corkscrew and stabbed it into her long neck nine times, and killed her. Then he took his hat and went home to his wife" (136). Douglas does not use ridicule to direct awareness against societal ills or to combat aggressive authority, but instead selfishly and carelessly runs through his life without consideration of his impact on others. Without direction, the laughter and emotions he unleashes are beyond control.

Unlike the lasting change that Spark argues ridicule and satire can produce, the carnival is only a period of temporary release. Douglas may encourage violent reaction, but once he leaves Peckham quickly reverts to normal: Humphrey marries Dixie as he originally planned, and the people only vaguely speak of the late Miss Coverdale. Her horrific murder is glossed over as "poor Miss Coverdale's pool that was" (5), as if speakers are completely unwilling to remember the violence of the event. The novel is filled with inaccurate retellings of events, as different versions of events are presented only a few pages apart and gossip swiftly alters their interpretations. Douglas's encounters become a local story, with only a small kernel of truth surviving: "But at all events everyone remembered how a man had answered 'No' at his wedding" (143). The decentralized laughter of the carnival, though it may encourage alertness and outbursts, does not provide the lasting effect necessary for change as the community swiftly returns to normal.

The Ballad of Peckham Rye introduces the detached and unemotional style that Spark uses so effectively later on that year in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and for the rest of her

career. Instead of being a purely demonic character, Dougal Douglas becomes particularly intriguing as a fool archetype, a figure of ridicule and laughter but also of disorder and chaos. In contrast to Sandy in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,* whose ability to recognize the ridiculous allows her to combat dangerous authority, the carnivalesque laughter Douglas embodies highlights the dangers of uncontrolled emotional release and the ineffectiveness of Douglas's undirected influence. Spark's exploration of the carnivalesque examines laughter as an emotional release as opposed to a tool of discipline and ridicule, and expresses how laughter's power, when used irresponsibly, can lead to violence and disorder. Ten years before "Desegregation," *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* already demonstrates a preoccupation with the impact of ridicule and laughter on a community, but though the carnival release reveals the fault lines of the community and reawakens its members, it cannot control the changes it encourages, nor maintain them. In Spark's later novels, it is sharply controlled ridicule and the ability to see the absurd which will enact change, not the temporary, though powerful, emotional release embodied by Dougal Douglas and the laughter of the carnival.

Chapter Three

Absurd Fascism: Ridicule in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

Adapted into a play, a movie, and a television series, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is arguably Spark's best known novel. The book's titular charismatic teacher captured the interest of audiences and readers, consolidating Spark's international reputation. Complete with a favourite teacher, a close set of friends, internal politics, and betrayal, the novel has all the classic hallmarks of a conventional British school story. However, Spark's non-linear storytelling, Miss Brodie's moral ambiguity, and the near-constant parodic elements immediately indicate that this is no simple school tale. Miss Brodie's attempts to control and dictate the lives of her "Brodie set," coupled with her fondness for fascism, add a sinister edge to her appealing character. Spark reveals early on that Sandy will betray her teacher, shifting the focus of the novel from "whodunit" suspense to an exploration of the inner motives of actions. Sandy, capable of seeing Miss Brodie as ridiculous, is the only one able successfully to oppose her charming teacher's selfish organization of her students' lives. The ability to see Miss Brodie's manipulations and megalomania as absurd allows Sandy to act against Miss Brodie's authority and also serves as a subtle undermining of the fascist ideals which Miss Brodie supports.

While *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* looks at the impact of the carnivalesque on a stagnant community through a style based on the emotional distance of balladic poetry, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* employs the distancing qualities of parody to examine charisma and megalomania. The two novels use many of the same methods to maintain a sense of distance from the characters:

> The narrative method of the novel, in contrast -- the jumps forwards and backwards in time, the pointed interventions of the authorial voice-- constantly

> check any inclination we may have to "lose ourselves" in the story or to sink into emotional identification with any of the characters; it detaches us from the experience presented and makes us think about its meaning, or meanings. (Lodge 157)

This deliberate undermining of emotional attachment encourages the awake and aware mindset that Spark lauds in "Desegregation." In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Spark coupled these techniques with a factual and observational narratorial style, excising the internal and emotional reactions of the characters. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,* Spark uses multiple parodies of familiar literary genres to encourage critical thought and prevent over-sentimentalization.

Parody adopts a particular style, altering it to comic effect. It encourages this critical alertness as it can only function when the audience is aware of its presence and focusing on similarities between texts or events instead of being preoccupied with the emotional life of the characters. This awareness is rewarded by providing the pleasure of the "inside joke" to those who catch the references. From the outset, Spark signals the influence of British school stories in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, introducing the Brodie set by identifying each of six girls by an attribute and the distinctive way they wear their school uniform hats. But though the method is familiar, none of the girls is distinguished by conventional talents: Rose is famous for sex, Monica for her anger, and Mary for "being a silent lump, a nobody whom everybody could blame" (6). These characteristics are both harsher and less benign than the usual "good at sports," and signal the parodying of school fiction, subtly undermining expectations. Presenting unexpected elements in the familiar school story genre jolts the reader out of complacency and

prepares the way for additional parodies.[11] *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* carries the elements of school fiction into a far more complicated novel, one in which a school story contains a fascist and religious subtext and it is difficult to find one's moral bearings.

In addition to over-arching parodies of plot and setting, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* includes a variety of minor parodies which revolve around Sandy's creative writing and personal daydreams. Sandy is the writer character in the novel, constantly composing romantic fiction with her best friend and engaging in imaginary conversations with fictional characters when she should be paying attention in school. She becomes an inadvertent parodist, co-authoring the unintentionally funny romantic novel entitled "The Mountain Eyrie," which she bases on the story of Miss Brodie's first love. Sandy and Jenny's young literary efforts reveal an adolescent mystification of sex, and poke fun at the classic tropes of romance novels. Parody constantly exposes the tools and stereotypes of its target, and Sandy's naïve writings demonstrate the absurdity of over-sentimentalized fiction. Later, Sandy's obsession with a female police officer introduces language which parodies police stories ("'What about those incriminating documents?' said Sergeant Ann Grey in her jolly friendly manner. She really was very thrilling" [70]), demonstrating Sandy's willingness to shift genres at a whim, and the facility with which genre can alter with a simple shift of style.

This parody of styles reaches a height when Sandy and Jenny compose a letter in which Miss Brodie refuses to marry Mr. Lowther and congratulates him "warmly upon your sexual intercourse, as well as your singing" (71). This letter of renunciation adapts a variety of genres

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[11] As David Lodge points out, "the whole story bears a parodic resemblance to *Jane Eyre*, which, we are often reminded, is one of Miss Brodie's favourite novels" (Lodge 162), and of particular interest to Spark, who had previously done critical work on the Brontës. Miss Brodie rejects her first love Mr. Lloyd because, like Rochester, he is married (the two are also missing arms), and "Mr Lowther, inhibited and intimidated by Scottish religion (he is choir-master and the Elder of his local church) parodies St. John Rivers" (Lodge 163).

and styles, and the jumbled juxtaposition dissolves the girls' earnest attempt at penning a refusal into hilarity. It becomes difficult to consider Miss Brodie's real-life refusal to marry Mr. Lowther outside comic terms and Sandy, though she does not yet recognize it, has already begun to perceive Miss Brodie in the language of absurdity and to habituate the reader to viewing Miss Brodie in comic terms.

Parody is often employed as a tool in satire, adopting the style or content of its target to expose and attack weaknesses. Yet despite numerous instances of parody, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* does not read like a negative attack on school fiction, on police fiction, or even on the fiction of sentimental romance. Spark will argue for the harsh arts of ridicule and satire in "Desegregation," but in this novel, parody appears as a method of keeping the audience aware and quick-witted as opposed to acting solely to mock the genres themselves. Sandy's parodies gently laugh at the errors of amateur writing and, filtered through naïve youth, the comedy and genre clichés becomes endearing rather than biting. Sandy's early offerings are ludicrously bad, but they are introduced with the tolerance most pre-teen creative efforts deserve, a cushioning which transfers onto any criticism of the genres themselves.

This softening of attack is an integral by-product of parody which, unlike satire, does not always set out to attack its target. Parody builds on the style of its subject and is intricately bound to it: "In both its general and specific forms, parody, unlike forms of satire or burlesque which do not make their target a significant part of themselves, is ambivalently dependent upon the object of its criticism for its own reception" (Rose 51). By choosing to write a parody of school fiction, Spark is at the same time highlighting and expressing a certain fondness for the original genre. While *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* exposes the blithe and ignorant innocence of school fiction, where the children seem to live idyllic lives, by contrasting it with glimpses of violence

and sex, it nevertheless embraces and engages the familiar tropes of school-day stories. Spark employs these tropes in more sophisticated storytelling, using their familiarity to underscore potential uncertainties, while creating a new type of school story, an endeavor parody is particularly suited for: "[Parody's] ambivalence may entail not only a mixture of criticism and sympathy for the parodied text, but also the creative expansion of it into something new" (Rose 51). Spark's parodies encourage alertness on the part of the reader and maintain a certain emotional distance, but the literary styles she borrows are not the focus of her attack.

The meta-fictional and inter-textual aspects of parody keep readers aware and vigilant as they identify parodic phrases and enjoy subtly altered clichés. While conventional fiction attempts to enthrall the reader with a story, invisibly employing techniques to create an immersive environment, parody works to expose literary tricks: "since it aims at sharpening the reader's awareness of the literary medium, parody employs the devices of its original while laying them bare" (Shlonsky quoted in Rose 83). Sandy's writing exposes these devices through amateur efforts, but as a writer character herself, Sandy also serves to uncover the devices of a parodist. By using Sandy as a parodist, the novel invites laughter at parody itself, revealing Spark's own parodic and meta-fictional tricks, and inviting her readers to apply the same analytical eye they enjoyed with Sandy's writing to Spark's own more complicated work.

This ambivalence of parody, which both criticizes and embraces its target, continues in Spark's representation of Miss Jean Brodie herself. Spark based Miss Brodie on a real person from her past: Miss Kay, a teacher from Spark's school days "at James Gillespie's Girls' School, fictionalized as Marcia Blaine School in [The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie]" (Bold 87). Like Sandy, the young Spark wrote elaborate stories about Miss Kay's adventures: "I was already writing about Italy because you must remember that I had this extraordinary teacher who was

called Christina Kay in real life and she used to go away for holidays, specially to bring [the stories] back to teach her girls, her pupils" (Saá 5). Spark speaks glowingly of Miss Kay, and Miss Brodie shares many of the characteristics of an inspiring and beloved teacher: introducing the girls to art and opera, taking them on trips to historic parts of the city, and introducing them to the wider world. Yet despite these positive attributes, Miss Brodie plays a deeply ambivalent role in the lives of her students.

At the heart of the critical analysis of this novel is David Lodge's question of whether one "should approve or disapprove of Miss Brodie" (Lodge 158). Miss Brodie is a fascinating and appealing character, but though the reader may admire her for her strength of character, creative verve, and unrelenting spirit, many of her actions carry the taint of selfish manipulation. Miss Brodie blithely encourages Rose to have an affair with the art teacher Mr. Lloyd, the man she herself is in love with, and convinces the student Joyce Emily to run away to Spain to fight, a choice which causes her death on a train. The teacher attempts to control the lives of her students, molding them and proudly boasting "Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life" (7). Given her controlling nature, many critics see Miss Brodie as the villain of the novel. Whittaker identifies Miss Brodie as "Mrs Spark's arch-manipulator. Her motivating image is of her 'prime,' and she is intoxicated by the power of her own personality" (106). Whittaker goes on to point out Miss Brodie's religious failings, how "Sandy's abhorrence of Miss Brodie is not simply for her sexual or political intrigues, but for what they represent. This is her usurpation of God's role in the world, and her arrangement of other people's destinies" (108). Others point to Miss Brodie's willingness "to destroy innocence to flesh out her fantasy world, eager to incite others to acts she dare not commit herself. She is willfully and blindly ignorant of the significance of her actions" (Massie 102). Miss Brodie manipulates and controls those around

her, taking upon herself the right to determine others' fates: she "had elected herself to grace in so particular a way and with more exotic suicidal enchantment than if she had simply taken to drink" (*Prime* 107). But Spark portrays this self-election to grace as not only damaging to those surrounding Miss Brodie, but also as suicidal, an act that hurts Miss Brodie herself. As an exotic enchantment, few, least of all Miss Brodie, have the strength to resist its appeal and she becomes a victim of her own influence.

Instead of unambiguously casting Miss Brodie as an evil force, Spark identifies her as a dangerous innocent whose actions have unrealized consequences. Lacking the boundaries that would prevent immoral actions, Miss Brodie perpetrates immoral acts without realizing their impact: "Just as an excessive sense of guilt can drive people to excessive action, so was Miss Brodie driven to it by an excessive lack of guilt" (83). Spark presents the religious possibility that Catholicism might have kept Miss Brodie on the right path: "She was by temperament suited only to the Roman Catholic Church; possibly it could have embraced, even while it disciplined, her soaring and diving spirit, it might even have normalized her" (83). But Spark's religious support is as tempered by ambiguity as her portrayal of a beloved teacher. Sandy, upon entering the Catholic Church, found "quite a number of Fascists much less agreeable than Miss Brodie" (123), proving that not even Spark's chosen religion can remedy all ills.

If Miss Brodie's moral standing is infinitely debatable, her intense impact on her environment is abundantly clear. She wields an impressive amount of influence over everyone she encounters, for Jean Brodie captivates the men in her life, overshadows the individuality of her pupils and thwarts any and all attempts to remove her from her school position until Sandy undermines her. The concerned and serious headmistress Miss Mackay, who believes in safety first, is utterly incapable of defeating Miss Brodie despite years of attempts. The men of Miss

Brodie's acquaintance, the married Mr. Lloyd, who inadvertently paints her image over and over again in portraits of her students, and the dominated Mr. Lowther, make no attempt to curtail her more extreme actions and seem blind to her faults. Even casually met men, such as Rose's father, fall under her spell, for "on meeting Miss Brodie he had immediately taken a hearty male interest in her, as so many men did, not thinking her ridiculous as might have been expected" (117). All of them seem powerless to deny Miss Brodie her slightest whim. This authoritarian charisma, unchecked, acts as a damaging influence not only on those who fall victim to its wielder, but on the possessor of the power herself, as Miss Brodie's selfishness lessens her effectiveness in positively leading her pupils and leads to Sandy's eventual rebellion.

Against Miss Brodie's boundless manipulations, Spark pits Sandy Stranger, the girl "notorious for her small, almost non-existent, eyes" (5), who ultimately betrays Miss Brodie to the headmistress. Sandy capably avoids Miss Brodie's schemes, usurping the role of Mr. Lloyd's lover for which her teacher had intended Rose and forging an inner life unsuspected by her teacher. She recognizes the moral boundaries that Miss Brodie blithely waltzes over, identifying the "whiff of sulphur" (107) that surrounds her teacher's plans. As a shrewd observer, attention is constantly brought to her eyes, and as an author, Sandy is set up as the visionary character "with insight" who has the capacity to end Miss Brodie's reign. It is Sandy who recognizes the danger of Miss Brodie's destruction of individuality in her students: "Sandy thought this might be an attempt to keep the Brodie set together at the expense of the newly glimpsed individuality of its members" and "had the definite feeling that the Brodie set, not to mention Miss Brodie herself, was getting out of hand. She thought it perhaps a good thing that the set might split up" (100). Since none of the adult characters seem capable of curtailing Miss Brodie's attempts to write her students' fates, Sandy's betrayal acts as the only instance of effective constraint.

Of the six girls in the Brodie set, we know most about Sandy's inner life as the novel closely follows her viewpoint. Sandy, in composing stories about her teacher's travels, resembles Spark herself, who spent her biographical childhood writing about Miss Kay. Standing opposed to Miss Brodie, Sandy seems to hold the moral high ground in the novel, a stance emphasized by her similarities to the novel's author. Sandy's conversion to Roman Catholicism and her future role as published author of the psychological treatise named "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace," as well as her place as primary narrator, all suggest that she acts as a moral compass for the reader. But just as Miss Brodie is not an unambiguously evil character, Sandy does not always appear to be in the right. Whittaker outlines how Sandy may not be an entirely impartial narrator, exhibiting signs of jealousy and remorse, and she argues that "this is not to deny Miss Brodie's megalomania, but rather to suggest that Mrs Spark's attitude to her is not as unambiguous as it first appears" (Whittaker 109) by questioning Miss Brodie's primary antagonist.

Sandy herself admits that there were positive aspects to Miss Brodie's influence: "It was twenty-five years before Sandy had so far recovered from a creeping vision of disorder that she could look back and recognize that Miss Brodie's defective sense of self-criticism had not been without its beneficent and enlarging effects; by which time Sandy had already betrayed Miss Brodie" (84). When asked about the greatest influence in her life, Sandy simply replies "There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime" (125). In interviews, Spark herself does not present Sandy as the uncomplicated heroine of the novel: "I don't put Sandy as the wise woman of the novel, I put Miss Brodie as the wiser - the thing about Miss Brodie is that she has no restraining influence whatsoever, whereas Sandy did" (Hosmer 152). Sandy's betrayal utterly destroys her once magnificent role model, and her clutching at the bars of her nunnery cell indicates some sign of

remorse on Sandy's part, but Miss Brodie's disorder and lack of self-criticism demanded the restraint that Sandy's rebellion imposed.

Sandy rationalizes her betrayal of her teacher as necessary for the survival of identity, a stance many critics agree with: "[Miss Jean Brodie] never lets her pupils go. And takes the consequences. The only way that Sandy can escape her is by destroying her" (Duncker 71). But though Sandy sees destruction as the only way to escape, Brodie's other favourites seem much less entrapped. Rose manages to move on with her life with minimal difficulties, for "she shook off Miss Brodie's influence as a dog shakes pond-water from its coat" (117), and the others move on with their lives with equal balance, hardly seeming to notice the influence that Sandy's betrayal removes. This questions whether Sandy's betrayal was truly warranted, but also points to the blindness of the other characters in regards to Miss Brodie's dangerous manipulations. Like Miss Brodie herself, the rest of the set is unaware of their teacher's willingness to dangerously reorder the lives around her to suit her own fantasies. Acting alone, Sandy is incapable of benignly restraining Miss Brodie (perhaps a role that Spark reserves for religion), but she does possess the power to stop her.

Sandy's ability to see Miss Brodie as ridiculous is what differentiates her from the other characters, and ultimately allows her to escape Miss Brodie's sway. Unlike the carnivalesque Dougal Douglas, Miss Brodie does not seem to possess a sense of humour or appreciation for the ridiculous, and none of her admirers see any humour in her extreme declarations. Only Sandy sees Miss Brodie not only as a powerful force, but also as an object of ridicule. Sandy begins to question Miss Brodie's dramatic statements early on, contrasting her lofty sentiments with the less ideal reality: "'and all of my pupils are the crème de la crème.' Sandy looked with her little screwed-up eyes at Monica's very red nose and remembered this saying as she followed the set in

the wake of Miss Brodie" (7). Sandy sees the comic juxtaposition of "crème de la crème" with Monica's childish and imperfect red nose and her own screwed-up eyes, while Miss Brodie remains entirely unaware of any inaccuracies within her statement. Like Sandy, we can appreciate the humour of lofty sentiments when compared to the more pedestrian reality and begin to scrutinize Miss Brodie's claims, judging them against Sandy's observations.

Though blind to her own missteps, Miss Brodie is not entirely ignorant of the impact comedy and ridicule can have. She often asks Eunice to "come and do a somersault in order that we may have comic relief" (5) and uses laughter to solidify her control over her set, as "she described some of her new little girls and made the old ones laugh, which bound her set together more than ever and made them feel chosen" (77); but as a general rule, Miss Brodie discourages the laughter that she cannot control. She removes Mary's comic book, and "perceiving all eyes upon it she lifted it out of the basket, tore it up beyond redemption, and put it back again" (9). She tries to control what her students see as humorous, dismissing things she does not understand, like mathematical word problems, as "witty" (80), deriding both mathematics and wit itself. She chastises Sandy for any perceived mockery: "'I observe a frivolous nature. I fear you will never belong to life's élite or, as one might say, the crème de la crème'" (21). That Sandy will never belong to the élite is Miss Brodie's greatest threat, and she argues against frivolity in an attempt to stifle and protect herself from Sandy's critical interpretations.

As Sandy's awareness of Miss Brodie's absurdity grows, she becomes increasingly impatient with those who do not share her understanding. In her usurped role as Mr. Lloyd's lover, a position Miss Brodie had intended Rose to fulfill, Sandy becomes "highly interested in the painter's mind, so involved with Miss Brodie as it was, and not accounting her ridiculous" (118). She brings it up on numerous occasions:

She said: "Why are you obsessed with that woman? Can't you see she's ridiculous?"

He said, "Yes, he could see Jean Brodie was ridiculous." (120)

"You have instinct," Sandy told him, "but no insight, or you would see that the woman isn't to be taken seriously."

"I know she isn't," he said. "You are too analytical and irritable for your age." (121)

Although Mr. Lloyd replies that he sees that Jean Brodie is ridiculous, there is no conviction behind his assertion, and all his portraits continue inadvertently to resemble the teacher. Within the novel, only Sandy sees the absurdity within Miss Brodie, and only Sandy has the power to overthrow her.

Though the relative moral placement of Miss Brodie and Sandy may be the unsolvable question of the book, Miss Brodie's authority remains clearly dangerous, and, just as clearly, it is Sandy's ability to see Miss Brodie as ridiculous that makes her capable of resisting her influence. When seen as absurd, Miss Brodie ceases to be an insurmountable force in control of her students' lives, and becomes merely a teacher with some peculiar opinions. Relegating Miss Brodie to a figure of ridicule lessens her impact and gives Sandy the tools to act against her: "Miss Brodie's masterful features become clear and sweet to Sandy when viewed in the curious light of the woman's folly, and she never felt more affection for her in her later years than when she thought upon Miss Brodie as silly" (109). Sandy's ability to view Miss Brodie as both foolish and silly makes Sandy the agent of change in the novel, and reshapes Miss Brodie's influence into something manageable instead of an unalterably overpowering element.

Miss Brodie plays the role of the sentimental artist, telling the tragic romance of her youth to her pupils and reducing them to tears. Her love affairs and exotic trips, combined with her tendency to rewrite her own stories, show how she "is Romantic by taste and temperament,

and exemplif[y] the defects of the uncontrolled romantic sensibility" (Lodge 162). Miss Brodie's sentimentalism is overthrown by Sandy's ridicule, a character re-enactment of what Spark argues for ten years later in "Desegregation" when she asks for more satire and less emotion. Spark, by making Sandy the main narratorial voice of the novel, grants this comic vision to the reader as well. In the novel, critics identify that "the unpredictable and often absurd acts and assertions of Miss Brodie are precisely what amuse us" (Kermode 177) just as they amuse Sandy, yet they serve a deeper purpose than the entertainment Kermode refers to. In exposing Miss Brodie's absurdity, Spark encourages her readers in the same ability to see the ridiculous that she grants Sandy, and holds to her claim that art should improve our ability "to defend ourselves from the ridiculous oppressions of our time" ("Desegregation" 37).

In "The Desegregation of Art," Spark identifies fascist regimes as particularly deserving of ridicule, arguing "If the massed populations of those times and in those countries had been moved to break up into helpless laughter at the sight, those tyrants wouldn't have had a chance" ("Desegregation" 35). In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Sandy gives Miss Mackay the means to fire Miss Brodie not by confirming sexual misconduct, but by directing her attention to Miss Brodie's political opinions, pointing out how Miss Brodie was "a born Fascist" (122). Throughout the novel, Miss Brodie openly declares her approval of Mussolini and Hitler, takes vacations to Italy and Germany, and returns to proclaim that "Hitler was become Chancellor, a prophet-figure like Thomas Carlyle,[12] and more reliable than Mussolini; the German brownshirts, she said, were exactly the same as the Italian black, only more reliable" (95). Miss

[12] Miss Brodie's comparison of Hitler to Thomas Carlyle emphasizes her fascist sympathies and brings the concept of fascist ideals home to Edinburgh instead of leaving them solely in foreign countries: "Admired, even revered, by his contemporaries as a preacher of righteousness, Carlyle now emerges as a prophet with a sinister message for our generation. His views on social and political problems, divested of their moral appeal by the march of time, are revealed to be those of a fascist in their essential implications" (Schapiro 97).

Brodie stands at the centre of her group as a charismatic fascist leader on a smaller scale, and it is Sandy's identification of this type of control as ridiculous that allows her to sidestep it.

Sandy recognizes that the creation of the Brodie set is Fascism in the classroom, "that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie's fascisti, not to the naked eye, marching along, but all knit together for her need and in another way, marching along" (30). To bind her set together, Miss Brodie also employs a variety of subtly coercive techniques familiar from World War II fascist regimes. She unites the group against Mary, using her as a scapegoat for any and all transgressions. Mary's introduction to the reader establishes her place in the school world: "Along came Mary Macgregor, the last member of the set, whose fame rested on her being a silent lump, a nobody whom everybody could blame" (6). Miss Brodie uses Mary as a convenient prop in controlling her classroom:

> Miss Brodie grasped Mary's arm, jerked her to her feet and propelled her to the door where she thrust her outside and shut her out, returning as one who had solved the whole problem. As indeed she had, for the violent action sobered the girls and made them feel that, in the official sense, an unwanted ring-leader had been apprehended and they were no longer in the wrong. (48)

Even Sandy, who recognizes the situation as manipulative, isn't strong enough to treat Mary nicely. Whenever the urge to act differently arises, "The sound of Miss Brodie's presence, just when it was on the tip of Sandy's tongue to be nice to Mary Macgregor, arrested the urge. Sandy looked back at her companions, and understood them as a body with Miss Brodie for the head" (28). At this point she is still unable to disobey, just as when she is unable to risk Miss Brodie's disapproval and join the Girl Guides: "Then the group-fright seized her again, and it was necessary to put the idea aside, because she loved Miss Brodie" (30). Miss Brodie builds her

group on fear and devotion, the hallmarks of a personality-based dictatorship, and carefully directs their anger towards a safe source.

Placing the posturing, methods, and self-importance of fascism in the incongruous context of a girl's school, Spark not only adds a sinister edge to the school, but exposes the original fascism to ridicule. By transporting the fascist actions into the alternate setting, one without automatic fear or awe, Miss Brodie's attempts at controlling her students, and the automatic deference her charisma gains her, can be viewed as humorous instead of frightening. In the school context, the scapegoating of Mary is easily identified as petty and arbitrary, and the grand figures of World War II are compared to much more easily mocked figures of authority: "They were dark as anything and all marching in the straightest of files, with their hands raised at the same angle, while Mussolini stood on a platform like a gym teacher or a Guides mistress and watched them" (30). By transposing the techniques and gestures of fascism to the safer environment of a school story, Spark strips fascism of its pomp and circumstance and exposes it as ridiculous.

Though Miss Brodie's fascist tendencies lead to Sandy's dissatisfaction, Spark carefully refuses to give fascism too important a role in her characters' lives. Spark constantly emphasizes how politics serve only as a background interest, with less importance or impact than sex:

"Why did she get the push?" said Rose. "Was it sex?"

"No, politics."

"I didn't know she bothered about politics."

"It was only a side line," Sandy said, "but it served as an excuse." (119)

Fascism, instead of an all-encompassing obstacle, becomes secondary to sexual politics and gossip, exemplifying Spark's avowed purpose of comic dismissal. Miss Brodie's simplification

of the fascist administrations, her appreciation that "Mussolini had put an end to unemployment with his fascisti and there was no litter in the streets" (30) and her admission that "'Hitler was rather naughty'" (120) emphasizes the dismissive and humorous light that Spark casts on the political regimes and the skewed perspective necessary to support them. Miss Brodie ignores atrocities in favour of clean streets, a ridiculous position to hold and one which underlines the type of blindness necessary to follow fascist dictates.

Spark systematically undermines fascism's authority by placing it in diminutive terms and exposing its followers as ridiculous. Sandy, with her ability to recognize the ridiculous, is ultimately the only one able to overthrow the novel's pseudo-fascistic authority, establishing Spark's endorsement of ridicule as a tool for maintaining identity in the face of charismatic manipulation. Spark keeps her audience alert to the absurdities of the fictional genres and the wider political events that she parodies. Unlike Dougal Douglas, Sandy does not support a generalized and unfocused carnivalesque laughter, but uses her recognition of the absurd as a concentrated weapon against a perceived evil. Instead of providing the comforting illusion of black and white truths, Spark complicates both Sandy's and Miss Brodie's moralities, but stands firm in her indication that ridicule provides Sandy with the necessary protection to acknowledge Miss Brodie's transgressions and to act against them.

Chapter Four

Passive Communities: The Sober Dystopia of *The Abbess of Crewe*

In 1974, three years after her bold statements in "The Desegregation of Art," Spark presents a more sharply satirical novel in *The Abbess of Crewe*. Transposing the events of the Watergate scandal to a nunnery, and directly mocking the familiar figures of the Nixon cabinet, Spark criticizes the overblown media frenzy surrounding the theft of a thimble and creates a Nixonian Abbess who indulges in electronic surveillance. The biting portrayal of unbridled power and blatant manipulation does not sympathize with the Abbess's abused nuns, whose dowries are being squandered as they are forced to eat disguised pet food, but presents their passiveness as part of the problem. Unlike *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Abbess of Crewe* lacks a visionary figure whose ridicule of authority acts as an agent of change. This lack exposes the vulnerability of a community which has outlawed laughter.

Like the two previously discussed novels, *The Abbess of Crewe* has a detached style that maintains emotional distance from the characters. The prose of the novel is primarily dialogue, as if we were reading the recorded transcripts of nunnish conversation. Indeed, Spark reinforces this impression when the Abbess demands that the recorded transcripts from her illegal surveillance be entitled "The Abbess of Crewe," and speaks of herself in the third person, stating that "the Abbess of Crewe continues to perform her part in the drama of *The Abbess of Crewe*" (24). The Abbess, constantly rewriting her version of events, asks her nuns "what is the story according to us?" (80), and acts as both the author and the hero of her tale with complete disregard for the actual events. By suggesting that the novel is in fact transcripts edited by the highly untrustworthy Abbess, Spark reminds her readers to question constructed fictions.

The narratorial voice of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* most closely follows the views of Sandy, the visionary character who recognizes Miss Brodie's megalomania, and her opinions colour many of the scenes, leaving the reader to decide if her interpretations are accurate. *The Abbess of Crewe*'s narration more closely resembles the distanced voice of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, refusing to look out through the eyes of any particular character. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* leaves readers to draw their own conclusions and keeps its prose to a close detailing of events and observations, avoiding obvious advancing of narrator or authorial opinion. But Spark is not so restrained in *The Abbess of Crewe*. Her descriptions of the nuns are far from neutral, revealing a disapproval which cannot be blamed on the Abbess, who may manipulate transcripted conversations and situations but is not responsible for descriptive passages. Spark describes Mildred, for example, as someone who may be "a nourisher of dreams so unrealizable in their magnitude that she prefers to keep them in mind and remain physically an inferior rather than take on any real fact of ambition that would defeat her" (*Crewe* 33). She condemns the entire population of the nunnery: "A less edifying crowd of human life it would be difficult to find; either they have become so or they always were so; at any rate, they are in fact a very poor lot, all the more since they do not think so for a moment" (*Crewe* 51). Spark's harsher satirical tone does not hesitate to share her judgments with the reader and exhibits a more focused disapproval than her previous novels, exposing faults without encouraging a sympathetic response towards the victims.

The Abbess of Crewe is one of Spark's most clearly satirical novels. It contains many of the elements of a classic moral satire, specifically targeting easily identified individuals and ridiculing a specific vice in the hope of eliminating it. The Watergate Scandal provided Spark with ideal fodder for mocking corrupt power, overblown media coverage, and passive

communities. Instead of presenting characters based on archetypes deriving from industrial communities or personal history as in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Abbess of Crewe* parodies a well-known political event and ridicules identifiable political figures. The Abbess Alexandra plays the role of Nixon, obsessively bugging the abbey and even the poplar trees along the front walk. Her fellow nuns resemble the rest of the scandal's cast: Walburga and Mildred play John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, Nixon's advisors; Sister Winifrede represents scapegoat John Dean; Sister Gertrude, the missionary sister, is Henry Kissinger the Secretary of State and Felicity remotely resembles Nixon's opponent George McGovern. The Abbess constantly questions Sister Gertrude on her bronchitis or chest cold, a reference to Watergate informant Deep Throat, and phrases and references from the media scandal and the Watergate tapes are liberally sprinkled throughout the novel. By playing out the fanatical electronic surveillance and obsessive information gathering of the Nixon era in an abbey filled with nuns, *The Abbess of Crewe* exposes the actions as utterly ridiculous. Removed from the world stage, presidential spying, like the fascism in *Miss Brodie*, reveals its inherent absurdity.

The novel satirizes not only the underhanded politicians but also the overblown media circus that the scandal inspired. Spark condemns the public's inability to judge the scale of offense and form an appropriate response: "I thought the Watergate episode was very interesting, it was completely exaggerated. The Americans created a big national thing of it, and I thought, well, if they lived in Europe and knew about corruption – all governments are corrupt – they would realize that it was like a nun's quarrel over a thimble" (Frankel 446). To drive home the absurdity of the frenzied attention paid to the affair, she constructs familiar journalistic comparisons, accentuating their hyperbolic nature: "*Time* compares our public to Nero who

fiddled while Rome burned. *Newsweek* recalls that it was a similar attitude of British frivolity and neglect of her national interests that led to the American Declaration of Independence. They make much of the affair of Sister Felicity's thimble at the time of your election" (*Crewe* 18). Spark directly criticizes America's actions, having the Abbess unsubtly comment on how "Such a scandal could never arise in the United States of America. They have a sense of proportion and they understand Human Nature over there; it's the secret of their success" (*Crewe* 19). By placing her own opinions on the American attitude as the views of the American public on England, Spark employs a self-reflexive inversion which allows for harsh criticism: "They appear to be amused and rather shocked, of course, by the all-pervading bitchiness in this country" (*Crewe* 18). Instead of focusing on "the strikes and the oil crisis" (*Crewe* 18), the media camps out around the abbey, relishing trivial scandal instead of reporting on more wide-reaching problems. The exaggeration of the situation grants the Abbess's conduct a grandeur it does not deserve, and does little to punish or prevent her actions. Spark presents amusement and scorn as more appropriate responses.

The critical reception of *The Abbess of Crewe* tends to dismiss Spark's satire of the Watergate scandal, instead focusing on "deeper" issues. Whittaker points out how "*The Abbess of Crewe* (1974), although inspired by the Watergate scandal, transcends the realistic comparison and becomes a timeless parable about power and corruption" (5), and attributes this transcendent and wide-reaching quality almost entirely to Spark's Catholicism. Joseph Hynes views the satiric elements as the least vital portions of the novel. His complaints about the film adaptation *Nasty Habits* reveal his dissatisfaction with a purely satirical reading: "The film is a vulgar bore. But the point is that this is an indication of what can happen if we take the fiction to be no more than an effort to draw laughs and profits from making us see how funny the Watergaters are when we

imagine them as nuns" (Hynes, *Art of the Real* 110). Patrick Parrinder also downplays her satire, stating that "*The Abbess of Crewe* (1974) was at some level a moral satire on the downfall of President Nixon; but what claimed the reader's attention was a fantastic, skittish and lavishly self-referential account of nunnish megalomania" (75). This analysis, though appearing on the surface to praise Spark's ability to capture the attention of her audience, diminishes Spark's novel to mere entertainment. This is not to disagree that there is legitimately more occurring in the novel than a satire of Watergate, as Barbara Keyser points out:

> Watergate and political corruption, however, form only the skeleton of this brief but biting tale; Spark's real target is the mass media and its all pervasive influence on contemporary life. In the phenomenon of Watergate, with its obsessive examination in the mass media, its verbal and visual clichés, and its unique association with electronic surveillance, Spark has found the perfect vehicle to convey her image of media as the religion of modern man. (146)

However, the critical willingness to dismiss Spark's satire undermines her focus on ridicule and her advocacy of satire as a weapon for change. Presenting Nixon as a megalomaniac nun reveals the pettiness in his actions, and Spark's use of satire argues that mocking dismissal would be a more appropriate response than futile media obsession.

With Alexandra's parody of Nixon, *The Abbess of Crewe* contains the by now familiar Sparkian figure of dangerous and unrestrained authority. The Abbess rules the nunnery with a ruthlessness seemingly at odds with her religious vocation. The Abbess's obsession with supervision links her to previous controllers as "Alexandra's similarity to Dougal Douglas and Jean Brodie is manifest in what is fundamentally wrong with her vision and intent: she wants to control others' lives in order to establish her role as creator" (Hynes, *Art of the Real* 115). But

though the three characters share the tendency to rewrite history to serve their own purposes, with each novel the extremes of manipulation employed by Spark's characters become more blatant and self-serving. Dougal Douglas, a figure with marginal social standing, writes a sanctioned biography for Mrs. Cheeseman and is content retelling and inventing stories of her youth, with whatever fanciful or clichéd snippets he encounters, and pulling double salaries for little work. His motive for his retellings is more the creation of general confusion than planned misinformation, a goal in keeping with the general theme of the carnivalesque that pervades *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. Miss Brodie rewrites her own history, slowly altering stories from her youth to fit the circumstances of her new lovers. Nor does she stop at altering history, but begins to write the future stories of her young students, sending Joyce Emily to fight for Franco and planning an affair between Rose and the art teacher. While Douglas lacks any ambition except that of avoiding work, Miss Brodie is deeply attached to her authoritative position as a school teacher, and enjoys shaping the lives of her "Brodie set." It is Miss Brodie's willingness to dictate her students' fates which leads to Sandy's rebellion. But the Abbess of Crewe takes the extremes of manipulation and control even further.

Changing not only personal backgrounds, but declaring war on history itself, the Abbess boldly states that "as far as I am concerned history doesn't work. Here, in the Abbey of Crewe, we have discarded history. We have entered the sphere, dear Sisters, of mythology" (*Crewe* 16). Alexandra not only wishes to impose her own version of events on the world, but actively seeks to destroy knowledge of the original events, deliberately sowing confusion and misinformation in the hope of making it impossible for anyone to reassemble accurately her actions. Her manipulations put her at the centre of power and appear to be fueled by farther reaching ambitions than those of either the mischievous Douglas or the romantic Miss Brodie. Alexandra

used elaborate schemes to gain the position of Abbess and continues to plot to increase her control over the abbey. She hoards the nuns' dowries for herself, converting them into jewels which adorn a religious statue in her chambers, and using them for bribes or luxury items. She believes her statements supersede reality, that her version of events should be accepted as truth regardless of any evidence to the contrary: "'If you believe your own ears more than you believe us, Winifrede,' says Alexandra, 'then perhaps it is time for us to part'" (Crewe 67). As an analogy to presidential power, the Abbess is a dangerously ambitious and effective manipulator whose obsession with control becomes ludicrous in its transparent falsehood and blatant contradiction of reality; more worrisome yet is the effectiveness of the Abbess's techniques.

Despite Alexandra's mythomaniacal ambitions, the character is far from unsympathetic. The Abbess may be squandering the nuns' dowries on caviar and champagne, but she also stands as a powerful and fascinating figure who murmurs poetry to herself. Like Miss Jean Brodie, Alexandra's appeal is difficult to deny and, despite her less than appealing authoritarian nature, she is impossible to condemn completely as she is by far the most fascinating character in the novel. Although she lacks the innocence of Miss Brodie, replacing it with shrewd cunning, the Abbess is nevertheless a lover of poetry, a position Spark, a poet herself, does not grant lightly. The Abbess constantly quotes Milton and Marvell instead of more accepted scripture and treats poetry as a type of religion, much as Spark herself did as a child. Though Alexandra is inherently devious, her charisma and appreciation of verse make her more appealing than repellant.

Whittaker views the ambiguous criticism of the Abbess as a weak point and argues that "although there are parallels with Watergate of narrative and characterization (particularly the Kissinger-like figure of globetrotting Sister Gertrude), this novel lacks the didactic weight of satire" (103). She points out that the Abbess receives ambivalent and permissive treatment from

the narrator, who does not go out of her way to condemn Alexandra's actions: "the novel does give pleasure, since a serious assessment of Alexandra's megalomania is not attempted, indeed is not admitted in any way by the narrator" (Whittaker 104). But though the narrator does not provide additional vilification of Alexandra's actions, this need not rob the novel of its satiric impact. The Abbess represents the complexities of vice and the hunger for power, revealing both their appeal and their ugliness. Spark forces her readers to judge Alexandra's actions, without simply dismissing an obviously mad villain. Instead of the directly moralistic definition of satire that Whittaker seeks, *The Abbess of Crewe* unsettles the reader, questioning and exploring issues in the spirit of Griffin's extended definition of satire, while refusing to provide a simple solution to the social problems it attacks.

The ambiguity surrounding Spark's treatment of the Abbess complicates the question of which of her actions most deserve our criticism. Set in the religious environment of the Abbey, the novel not only criticizes the political practices of American government, but also the practices of the Catholic Church. As Abbess, Alexandra combines old and neglected religious practices with the integration of new technological education, raising the issue of modern versus traditional policies; she uses electronics classes to help her spy on the abbey, while simultaneously reintroducing mandatory prayer services in the middle of the night. Hynes argues that "much in the *Abbess* would seem to make the Second Vatican Council responsible for weakening religious and moral force in the Church" (Hynes, *Art of the Real* 112), but Alexandra's conflicting ideologies make it difficult to determine whether Spark condemns conservatism or the modern integration supported by the Council. The combination of old and new presents the possibility that it is neither the traditional nor the modern which is inherently evil, but that extremes on either end should be avoided. Spark argues for careful analysis and

consideration instead of supporting one view and denigrating the other. The nuns in the abbey lack this ability to analyze, as they follow Alexandra's rule without questioning her logic or motives and allow her to wield a dangerously unrestricted power.

Among the nuns that the Abbess controls we find another familiar Sparkian figure: the scapegoat. Like Mary McGregor in *Miss Brodie*, Winifrede is identified early on as an easy target for blame: "I suggest it must be Winifrede, the benighted clot, who's been talking" (*Crewe* 17). The Abbess obviously has "plans for Winifrede" (*Crewe* 17) and uses her as an expendable resource, sending her off to make money drops and forcing her to sign confessions. Sister Winifrede is, without seeming to understand anything around her, "in it up to the neck" (*Crewe* 96), and, like Mary, she still blindly follows the leader who so casually abuses her. The presence of a scapegoat highlights how Spark's megalomaniac leaders abuse their power and take advantage of those around them, while also underscoring humanity's willingness to allow someone else, as long as it isn't them, to take the blame. However, unlike Mary, who Spark treats with tolerant indulgence, Spark does not create any empathy for Winifrede while exposing the ruthlessness of her leader. Instead of portraying Sister Winifrede as a sympathetic victim, she scornfully identifies her as an individual too stupid to recognize that the Abbess is taking advantage of her: "Sister Winifrede says, in her whine of bewilderment, that voice of the very stupid, the mind where no dawn breaks, 'But Lady Abbess, we discussed right from the start –'" (*Crewe* 7). It is not only the characters of the novel who identify Winifrede as stupid, but also the narrator who points out her ignorance, and Spark does not hesitate to hold those too stupid to resist the Abbess's megalomaniacal plans as responsible for abusive actions.

The majority of the nuns in the abbey blindly follow the Abbess's decrees, but this is not to say that the Abbess is uncontested in her bid for power. Sister Felicity competes for the

position of Abbess, yet her liberal political position seems as suspect as Alexandra's authoritarian rule: "'If I were the Abbess of Crewe, we should have a love-Abbey. I would destroy that ungodly electronics laboratory and install a love-nest right in the heart of this Abbey, right in the heart of England'" (*Crewe* 40). Despite representing a polar opposite to Alexandra's machinations, Felicity has little moral appeal as she flies into fits of rage, sneaks out of prayer to meet her Jesuit lover and lacks the fascinating charisma of the Abbess. Spark exposes the undesirable and dangerous machinations of the Abbess, but does not present Felicity as an appealing or virtuous alternative.

In addition to playing the role of defeated McGovern in the Nixonian parody, Sister Felicity also represents more generic figures of liberal good intentions, a group that is portrayed as ultimately flawed and more focused on the idea of good deeds than actual usefulness:

> "Felicity will never see the point of faith unless it visibly benefits mankind."
>
> "She is so bent on helping lame dogs over stiles," Walburga says. "Then they can't get back over again to limp home." (*Crewe* 35)

It is Alexandra's supporters who express this judgment, but Spark does little to counteract their representation of the rival nun and her brand of sentimental activism. Felicity is no Sandy, and her efforts to undermine Alexandra seem ultimately doomed to failure. She loses the election after her outburst over the loss of her thimble, and runs away from the abbey to be with her Jesuit and receive psychiatric help. From this outside position she accuses Alexandra of wrongdoings, but her accusations are merely long lists of synonyms, "compiled with the aid of Thomas and Roget's *Thesaurus*" (94), and mocked mercilessly by the Abbess. Unlike Miss Brodie, who is betrayed and defeated by shrewd observation, Felicity's method of attack produces mediocre results and the media circus she unleashes feeds into the Abbess's constant story-weaving

instead of producing contrition or remorse. Ultimately, Alexandra sails away to Rome to confront those who question her methods, but despite this retreat she appears defiant, a far cry from the confused and diminished Miss Brodie.

Felicity's ineffectiveness mirrors Spark's dismissal of sentimental art in "Desegregation," for her methods are those of earnest sentiment and emotion. She preaches the benefits of love, but her romantic ideals make poor weapons against Alexandra's manipulations and her accusations lack subtlety or effect. Felicity appears defiant but weak, and most damning is her refusal to employ Spark's favourite weapons, laughter and ridicule:

> Felicity does not permit laughter. It is written in the Rule that laughter is unseemly. "What are the tools of Good Works?" says the Rule, and the answers include, "Not to say what is idle or causes laughter." Of all the clauses of the Rule this is the one that Felicity decrees to be the least outmoded, the most adapted to the urgency of our times. (*Crewe* 39)

Without the ability to see the ridiculous, Felicity is powerless to act. She has accepted the sober propaganda which has made the abbey so vulnerable to the Abbess, and thrown away the weapon that Sandy wielded so effectively against Miss Brodie.

The Abbess is careful to remove ridicule from her abbey, and controls her nuns more rigidly than even Miss Brodie ruled her classroom. Though Felicity plots rebellion, the environment is far from one of relaxed hierarchy and subversive disorder. Instead, the nuns live a life of specific and constricting rules:

> *Not to be fond of talking.*
>
> *Not to say what is idle or causes laughter.*

Not to be fond of frequent or boisterous laughter.

To listen willingly to holy reading. (*Crewe* 14)

By outlawing laughter, the Abbess guarantees that the nuns will not have the tools to combat her manipulations. The loss of laughter, which prevents the nuns from recognizing the ridiculous and the absurd, allows most of the Abbess's actions to go almost entirely unnoticed by the community. The catchphrase of the abbey is "Sisters, be sober, be vigilant" (*Crewe* 15), a mantra which is repeated constantly through the novel by Alexandra, Felicity, and even the missionary Sister Gertrude. In this microdystopia where laughter is banned, the phrase becomes a contradiction as the nuns' sober attitude nullifies the possibility of vigilance against the Abbess's abuse. The Abbess is quick to exploit such paradoxes, eliminating the ridicule which might be used against her through the self-enforcing series of regulations.

Wrapped up in presenting a quiet and unlaughing exterior, the nuns of the Abbey of Crewe are incapable of seeing the ridiculous abuses heaped upon them. They quietly eat whatever food is put in front of them, unconcerned and unaware that they are diligently consuming pet food: "a perfectly nourishing and tasty, although uncommon, dish of something unnamed on toast, that something being in fact a cat-food by name of Mew, bought cheaply and in bulk" (*Crewe* 37). They are the epitome of a passive audience, listening to orders that require them

Not to gratify the desires of the flesh.

To hate our own will.

To obey the commands of the Abbess in everything, even though she herself should unfortunately act otherwise, remembering the Lord's command: 'Practise and observe what they tell you, but not what they do.' – Gospel of St Matthew, 23. (*Crewe* 14)

and never thinking to question them. Their passivity makes them susceptible to manipulation, which then reinforces the passivity in a cycle that cripples any analytical thought.

Alexandra is smug in her control over the closed community of the abbey, refusing to hide her actions: "'Let it never be said that we concealed our intentions. Our nuns are too bemused to take it in and those who are for Felicity have gone morbid with their sentimental Jesusism. Let it be read aloud. If they have ears to hear, let them hear'" (*Crewe* 49). Alexandra's analysis of her nuns' bemusement is accurate; it would be difficult to find a less inspiring group of individuals. Spark describes the nuns in the most unflattering terms, as they swallow whatever stories the Abbess feeds them just as they swallow the noxious food: "Up pop the forks, open go the mouths, in slide the nettles and the potato mash. They raise to their frightful little lips the steaming beakers of water and they sip as if fancying they are partaking of the warm sap of human experience, ripe for Felicity's liberation" (*Crewe* 51). Portrayed as passive lumps, without personality or character, the nuns become faceless black shadows, a fate to be avoided at all costs. Though invisible to the sober and ignorant nuns, the ridiculousness of the situation is abundantly obvious to readers of the novel. The selected readings at the dinner table jump from holy writings to textbook excerpts on the properties of electromagnetism to Machiavelli, an absurd combination that the nuns do not even recognize as out of the ordinary. Readers are invited to juxtapose their own astuteness with the nuns' gullibility. *The Abbess of Crewe* reveals the vulnerability of a community without laughter, and gives active readers a sense of superiority over such passive characters, encouraging the ability to mock that the nuns lack.

Spark's choice of epigraph emphasizes this focus on mockery and ridicule before the novel even begins. The excerpt from the Yeats poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" bleakly looks towards a disintegrating future:

Come let us mock at the great
That had such burdens on the mind
And toiled so hard and late
To leave some monument behind,
Nor thought of the leveling wind ...

Mock mockers after that
That would not lift a hand maybe
To help good, wise or great
To bar that foul storm out, for we
Traffic in mockery.

This choice for an epigraph draws attention to mockery, questions the role of *The Abbess of Crewe* in society, and foregrounds the lack of ridicule within the abbey itself. "The great" that Spark's novel mocks becomes both Nixon and the Abbess, as they try to leave a legacy behind them regardless of any immorality or wrongdoing. The second half becomes more self-reflexive, as Spark acts as a mocker and appears to ask the reader to join in mocking Spark herself, part of a constant attempt to encourage her readers to read and analyze in an active and critical manner. The nuns' passive ignorance is to be avoided at all costs, for they believe anything the Abbess storyteller says, and in place of this blind obedience, Spark encourages skepticism, even if that skepticism goes against her use of authorial authority. The poem condemns mockers who do not help "bar that foul storm out," and Spark argues that mockery is actually the necessary skill for recognizing and combating the storm of absurd oppression, so long as it is directed against vice or violence instead of acting as a loose disorder, as in the carnivalesque. Unable to recognize

absurdity and banned from mockery, the nuns of the abbey are vulnerable and abused. The overly earnest sentimentalism of Felicity fails to dent the Abbess's mythomaniacal determination, and the overblown media reaction does little other than to give the Abbess a larger stage on which to tell her lies. Spark's satiric novel encourages the adoption of the mocking outlook that the nuns lack as a more effective weapon.

Conclusion

Spark is emphatic that ridicule and satire are the vital weapons necessary to resist oppressive authority. "The Desegregation of Art" reveals a belief in disciplinary ridicule, similar to Bergson's theory of laughter, that explicitly pits that ridicule against the fascist figures of the Second World War. She identifies the violence of oppressive regimes as absurd, and argues that satire grants its audience the skills and the capacity to protect and defend itself, unlike the passivity that she perceives in sentimental art.

The three selected works, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and *The Abbess of Crewe*, each present a separate look at ridicule and the role it plays in the power dynamics of communities. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* reveals a series of destabilizations in the community of Peckham, and highlights how the emotional release of laughter, without the focus of satire, has unexpected results which cannot be sustained. The carnivalesque release surrounding Dougal Douglas does not permanently alter the class stratification and industrialization of Peckham, and appears at some points to be almost demonic. Though a far cry from the "honourable weapon" that Spark identifies in "The Desegregation of Art," the laughter Douglas inspires reveals itself as a powerful influence and introduces the author character as someone at the centre of laughter and ridicule. Douglas, as a writer character, is a catalyst for change and wields enormous power, and his demonic associations act as a warning that this power must be used responsibly. Ridicule and satire rely on emotional distance in the place of sentimental empathy, and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* introduces the detached tone that will follow Spark throughout her career and work so effectively in her more satirical later novels.

In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Sandy successfully uses her ability to see the ridiculous in to combat a pseudo-fascist authority, presenting Spark's argument that recognizing

the absurdity of oppression is the vital step to successfully combating it. As this novel's writer character, Sandy responsibly uses her insight and ridicule to bring about a permanent change. Instead of ambiguous and damaging emotional outbursts, Sandy coolly and calmly brings down her destructive teacher and clearly illustrates how the ability to see the absurd can act as a weapon. Ten years later, Spark's novels argue even more persuasively for the ridicule she advocates in her speech. *The Abbess of Crewe* does not present an influential figure of laughter and ridicule, but reveals the vulnerability of a community that has crippled itself by outlawing laughter. Presenting the victimized nuns as too blind to notice when they are being abused, Spark does not ask that the audience sympathize or empathize with the sisters, exposing their faceless existence as a fate to be avoided.

Though well known for the Catholic influences in her novels, Spark explores the artist's role in society in terms that go beyond her religious presuppositions, and these three novels, among others, exhibit a sustained focus on ridicule's capacity to act as a method of protection and change. After one examines her clear statements in "The Desegregation of Art," the influence and vital importance she ascribes to satire and ridicule become increasingly apparent. The concrete capacity for satire and ridicule to effect sustained political or social change is a perpetual question of comic theory, but Spark's novels persuasively argue that the capacity to recognize the ridiculous keeps the mind active and helps protect its practitioners from abuse.

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