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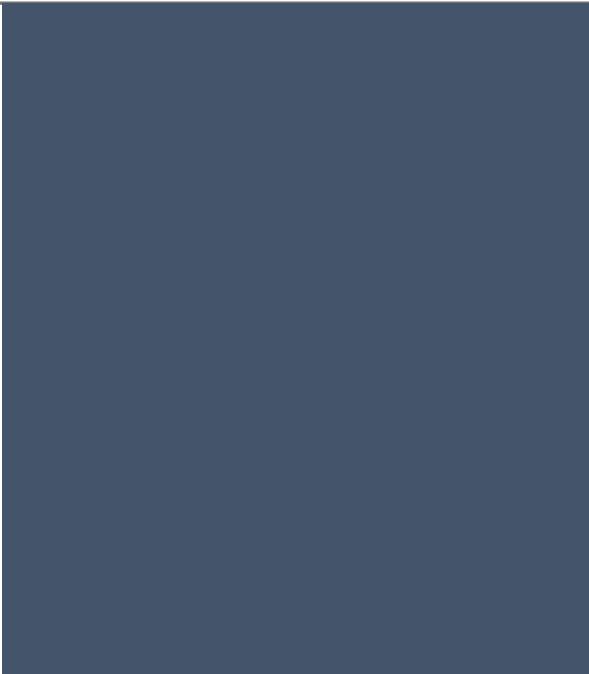
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Ethics and Aesthetics  
in Muriel Spark's  
Authorial Strategies

Ana Isabel Altemir Giral



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**Ethics and Aesthetics in Muriel Spark's Authorial Strategies**

**Ana Isabel Altemir Giral**

**Supervised by**

**Carlos Villar Flor, PhD.**

**A Thesis submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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**2020**

*To my father*

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

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## 1.1 A SPARK OF INTEREST

I must confess that the reason why I started to write a dissertation on Muriel Spark was a matter of chance. In fact, it was Spark herself who came to me, so to speak: as I was studying the first phase of my Ph.D. courses, I came across some of her novels and so discovered a fascinating author whose work opened a wide range of possibilities within the literary field I was interested in.

Muriel Spark rushed into the British literary scenario of the 1950s with a fresh style that challenged the traditional tendencies of fiction by questioning the basic conventions of narrative. Therefore, her work might be considered as a radical change in form representing a middle step between Modernism and the subsequent Postmodernist debate in British fiction.

There are numerous reasons which led me to choose this author. Firstly, her original prose, devoid of redundant elements, makes her novels dynamic and enjoyable to read. Secondly, the economy displayed in that sort of novellas endows her work with vivid intensity that provokes the reader into a second reading through self-reflexive techniques spread all over the texts. She often reveals or insinuates the endings in the early part of her novels, focusing the readers' attention more on the form than on the content. By using an almost irritating omniscience, Spark creates the illusion of a second reading even if one is really reading her novel for the first time. The way Spark writes confronts the problems posed by the constraints of selfhood and authorial presence in her narrative. Her main characters display the

different types of creative experience, exposing a certain anxiety to reflect the authorial presence through the aesthetics of the text.

This dissertation will be focused on Spark's authorial self-awareness with regard to stylistic foregrounding and the problematic of authorial selfhood and, hence, identity. It will develop an in-depth analysis of the writer's authorial strategies which alternate between postures of self-affirmation and self-effacement. On the one hand, her experimental narrative technique breaks the narrative levels by introducing a cast of characters who struggle between freedom and restriction. On the other, Spark forces readers to consider and react to the ethics of her fiction and the different ethical responses that her stories bring about in the form of moral choices and the collision between good and evil. In this sense, this dissertation aims to show how the aesthetics of Spark's narrative engages readers on a more personal level urging them to reflect on ethical dilemmas.

In order to depict the basic lines that construct her fictional world, we will divide her novelistic production into three periods which not only encompass her career, but also evince the evolution of both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of her fiction. Each period will be studied through a profound analysis of a representative novel: *The Comforters* (1957), her first novel, *The Driver's Seat* (1970), the author's favourite, and *The Finishing School* (2004), the last novel she published.

## 1.2 STATE OF THE ART

Curiously enough, there is a relatively small number of works which exclusively analyzes Muriel Spark's fiction. This fact is more surprising if one takes into account that some of the most brilliant British writers of her time praised her novels from the very beginning of her career. This is the case of Graham Greene, or Evelyn Waugh who, reviewing *Voices at Play* in the *Spectator* (7 July, 1961), declared himself "proud to have been one of the first of her fellow-writers to spot her". Among the most important monographs on Spark is worth citing Ruth Whittaker's *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (1982), in which the author offers a complete study of some of Spark's most publicly acclaimed novels through an analogy between her narrative and her religious belief. This book concludes with the thesis that Spark's work progressively becomes more secular to focus on international socio-political themes, but without leaving her Catholic point of view as a valid sub-plot for all her novels.

Another insightful study on Muriel Spark's fiction, of a high interest in the development of this dissertation, is *The Art of the Real: Muriel Spark's Novels*, written by Joseph Hynes in 1988. Here the author sets Spark's work against the concerns of conventional realists and suggests that her novels take on an epigrammatic status, showing within their restricted limits some distinctive features that populate her fiction; some of those features are distillation, suppression of all matter which threatens perfection of form, and a preference for partial to total truth.

Rodney Stenning Edgecombe is the author of an important book on Spark's work titled *Vocation and Identity in the Fiction of Muriel Spark* (1990). In this study, the critic defends the idea that Spark's novels are best viewed as extended epigrams which comprise her experimental narrative form and the Catholicism that is present in the background of her fiction. As he puts it:

The unemotive spareness of the Christian creeds and catechisms, by virtue of similar qualities, might also be said to bear an epigrammatic relation to the body of dogma they represent, and they are quoted by Spark at crucial nodes of her stories to bring the contingent detail of the narrative into the focus of the divine "epigrams" that underpin them. (Edgecombe, 1990: 4)

Edgecombe, therefore, suggests that Spark's "novellas" take that characteristic authorial mark comprising the "necessary facts with strongly restrained emotion" from those epigrams now transformed "into art-form" (Edgecombe, 1990: 5). Following this idea, the author claims the influence of Spark's Catholic faith in his theory about the form in her fiction. He goes on to say that "as long as Catholicism is present in the background of her fiction, it provides ballast and weight for her epigrammatic procedure" (Edgecombe, 1990: 5). However, when Catholicism seems less present in Spark's novels, as in the middle-period fiction, he suggests that the unpleasant influence of those dangers implied in that epigrammatic method – triviality, heartlessness, flatness – start to appear. This influence can be observed in Spark's treatment of characters, in which critics and readers might be inclined to note a detachment in her attitude toward her creations. Edgecombe argues that this is understandable since these characters are seen in terms of the designs into which Spark wants them to fit. He concludes admitting that "those designs are essential

for the success of some of the early novels, and that the Catholicism that suffuses them, far from impairing their universality, actually gives them substance” (Edgecombe, 1990: 6).

Another interesting book is Norman Page’s *Muriel Spark* (1990), in which the author traces a study of Spark’s career as a novelist emphasizing the development of her fiction through the eighteen books published over a period of more than thirty years. After a biographical introduction, her distinctive themes and techniques are explored through an examination of these texts in chronological order: from her first writings in the fifties, that he calls early comedies and parables, with their remarkable experiments in narrative method, through her more realistic and most substantial novel, according to Page, *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), to her later portraits of cosmopolitan society and her latest return to a sort of nostalgic autobiographical mode. Page describes in his study Spark’s self-severance from traditions of fictional realism and how she combines it with her intense moral commitment. In the author’s own words, “Muriel Spark is a novelist who sets out to *make it new* in the long-established and, by the 1950s, slightly fatigued genre of the novel” (Author’s emphasis) (Page, 1990: 121).

*Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, edited by Martin McQuillan in 2002, approaches her novels from the field of contemporary critical theory, focusing on Deconstruction theories developed by Derrida and his followers. This study also offers new insights into Spark’s fiction from the point of view of postmodernist theories of gender and race. The book concludes with an interesting interview with Muriel Spark in which McQuillan tries unsuccessfully to



minimize the importance of Catholicism in Spark's fiction. The editor's words in the front flap of the book give an overview of the aims of the book:

*Theorizing Muriel Spark* is the first serious attempt to engage the writing of Muriel Spark in a sustained theoretical reading. It has a particular emphasis on gendered, psychoanalytic, post-colonial and deconstructive reading strategies. The collection of essays analyses Spark's work in relation to French feminism, queer theory, autobiography, cultural hybridity, migration, nationalism, spectrality, economics and materialism. (McQuillan, 2002)

This book offers an innovative critique of Spark's fiction from a wide scope of perspectives. It deals with themes of great relevance for my study such as narcissism, otherness, conversion and liminality. *Theorizing Muriel Spark* approaches other compelling studies on Spark's work as well. This is true of critical accounts of Spark from Bradbury, Kermode, Sproxton or Page. As Martin McQuillan suggests,

there remains a need to read contemporary writing (...) in a theoretical mode. The persistent absence of such readings is particularly odd given that contemporary writing seems at pains to engage with theoretical ideas and postmodern epistemology. (...) The history of Spark's writing is the history of post-War literature in English; it is indissociable from the history of post-War thought and the "postmodern" opening. (McQuillan, 2002: 7)

Contrary to what happens with the existing works focused exclusively on Spark's fiction, there are numerous essays and articles dealing with different aspects of her novels. Among them, it is worth citing Frank Kermode's essays because he was one of the first critics to write on Spark and also because of the great number of articles he has written. Some of them are "The House of Fiction", in the *Partisan Review*

(1963), “The Prime of Miss Muriel Spark”, in *The New Statesman* (1963), and three important reviews in *The Listener*: “God’s Plots” (1967), “Sheerer Spark” (1970), and “Foreseeing the Unforeseen” (1971). Frank Kermode describes Spark as “an unremittingly Catholic novelist committed to immutable truths” (Kermode, 1970: 268). Kermode calls our attention about the difficulty of analyzing Spark’s work:

Henceforth, perhaps, we must not mind if her novels at first bewilder and disappoint us. We shall have to hang on to the idea that she is a much more difficult and important artist than her reputation as an entertainer has allowed many people to believe, and hope in the long run to catch up with her. (Kermode, 1970: 426)

Ruth Whittaker wrote an inspired essay in Malcolm Bradbury’s (1979) *The Contemporary English Novel* entitled “Angels Dinning at the Ritz: The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark”. Here the author analyses some aspects of Spark’s fiction as a balanced combination of worldly knowledge and Catholic belief as a means of reaching some kind of vital truth. Joseph Hynes’ “Muriel Spark and the Oxymoronic Vision” (1993), included in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, edited by Robert E. Hosmer, follows a similar line of argument to that of Whittaker’s essay defining Spark as a writer who “has faith and believes that there is a reason for what happens, whether we know the reason or not” (Hynes, 1993: 178). According to Hynes, Spark tries to reflect in her fiction the way she understands her conversion and the scope of freedom a Catholic has once she is aware of being another character in God’s plot.

The most recent essays and articles on Spark’s fiction show the new influences of postmodernist reading strategies. This is the case of Postcolonial approaches such as Abdel-Moneim Aly’s “The Theme of Exile in the African Short

Stories of Muriel Spark” (2001). Here the author discusses the trauma of exile in a series of short stories which bear strong resemblances to Spark’s account of her own experience in Africa in her own autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992). Spark was brought up in Scotland as the daughter of a Jewish father and an Anglican mother, and was educated in a Presbyterian school, which caused that sense of hybrid upbringing. Her exile identity was triggered off by the self-awareness of living a life “shaped by a sense of alienation and lack of roots” (Aly, 2001: 94). Nineteen-year-old Muriel Camberg married Sidney Oswald Spark, and soon followed him to South Rhodesia where her only son, Robin, was born a year later. She had a sort of love-hate relationship with Africa. Spark herself details this feeling in *Curriculum Vitae*:

There had been an atmosphere of unreality about Cape Town. The Community was divided into three: coloured, black and white. The coloured comprised Malays, Indians and people of mixed blood. There were three entrances to the cinemas, and other public places, labelled “Coloured”, “Black” and “White”. I thought this quite amusing when I didn’t think it tragic. (Spark, 1992: 140)

Muriel Spark left both her husband and son in 1940 and went to London in 1944. After living in New York, in 1966 she moved to Italy and settled in Rome a year later. According to Aly, this permanent physical and mental exile is clearly observed in her short stories. Thus, in “The Portobello Road” (1953) Spark makes use of the postmodernist technique of the “double”. In this story the authorial voice has a twofold representation: she seems to play the role of Needle, the protagonist, and that of a ghostly narrator. This device can also be observed in some of her novels, especially those of her last period. The use of the supernatural element

throughout Spark's work helps to emphasize the transcendental trait of her narrative and has become a recurrent theme in modern criticism on her novels. Some recent postmodernist debates on Gothic literature approach Spark's novels and establish a set of connections between her fiction and the aesthetics which characterize the genre.

A valid example is Christopher MacLachlan's "Muriel Spark and Gothic" (1996), where the author claims for a Gothic reading, as opposed to an exclusively Catholic context, of Spark's novels dealing directly with the supernatural, making an obvious connection with her Scottish origins (and those of the author himself). As he puts it:

The metaphysical fears which (...) are of central significance to Spark's work are neither confined to Roman Catholics nor exclusively to be defined and expressed in terms derived from any dogma but are, as the comparison with that large and pulsating body of writing labelled "Gothic" I hope shows, deep concerns of many modern writers and readers. (MacLachlan, 1996: 142)

Other works dealing with a Gothic reading and similar elements as the occult, the *uncanny*, or even magic realism are Frank Baldanza's "Muriel Spark and the Occult" in *Modern British Women Writers: An A-to-Z Guide* (2002), and John Glavin's "Muriel Spark's Unknowing Fiction" in *Women Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15 (1998).

There are also two interesting variations on the Gothic approach that establish a relevant relation between the *macabre* elements in Spark's novels and her Catholic faith. Martin Stannard's "Nativities: Muriel Spark, Baudelaire, and the Quest for Religious Faith" in *The Review of English Studies* (2004) focuses on

Spark's poetry and its analogies with some elements in Baudelaire's work, from which Spark even borrows two characters. Stannard's essay puts special emphasis on her poems "The Nativity", "The Ballad of the Fanfarlo" and "Edinburgh Villanelle" (1952). The last one is an early poem where Spark, as Stannard highlights, dramatizes her alienation in and from that city, echoing Poe's Gothic refrain of "nevermore" in the repeated phrase "never mine".

Other techniques that Spark uses in her poems are numinous characters in the form of ghosts or seraphs that make her arguably a pioneer among British writers in the elaboration of magical realist texts. She, therefore, turns out to be one of the first writers in experimenting with intertextual fictional games "confronting and confounding our sense of the irrational" (Stannard, 2004: 103). Thus Stannard's essay attempts to contextualize Spark's intellectual and creative development during the transitional phase, when she experienced the alienation from her native Edinburgh and her memories in Africa. As Stannard goes on to say, "the link with the poetry suggests a relationship between the style Spark was to adopt as a writer of fiction, her struggle to clarify her own voice, and the relevance of both to her long journey towards religious faith" (Stannard, 2004: 91).

Richard Kane's "Didactic Demons in Contemporary British Fiction" in *University of Mississippi Studies in English* 8 (1990) also analyses Spark's fiction taking into account the combination of *demonic* elements and what he describes as *didactic*, that is, the recognition of her novels as a series of parables where moral lessons are frequently coloured by the demonic. As Kane suggests:

A particular phenomenon emerging in several post-war British authors is the odd combination of the moral and the macabre. Demonic personalities dominate a

fiction charged with strong didactic currents. Searching for the good within the realms of the grotesque, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles make significant moral statements by using a variety of demonic elements. (Kane, 1990: 36)

Post-war British authors combine, according to Kane, the demonic and the didactic to react to a permissive post-war society creating a “hellish imagery to jolt readers into an awareness of real evil” (Kane, 1990: 56).

It is easy to observe how contemporary criticism analyses Spark’s fiction within the relevant role it has played in the shift experimented by the traditional novel in British literature from the fifties onwards. She deserves a special place in that radical change which severed the contemporary British fiction from its traditional label of realism, but that does not mean that her fiction abandons the real world. To borrow Patricia Waugh’s words, explaining the characteristics of metafiction, “what it does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers” (Waugh, 1984: 18).

Another recent publication about Muriel Spark is *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (2010), edited by Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley. This volume offers new insights into Spark’s literary production. The international specialists that collaborate in the volume trace the history, impact, reception and major themes of Spark’s work.

The publication of Gardiner and Maley’s book and that of David Herman were concomitant. Thus, in 2010, Herman published *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, a collection of critical essays which, as its publisher explains

in the preface, aims to provide students and faculty specialists, “with a one-stop resource gathering information about Spark’s writing, its sources, and its legacies, while also offering current, theoretically informed but accessible interpretations of individual texts that can open up new ways of exploring and engaging with Spark’s work” (Herman, 2010: vii). This volume revises Spark’s legacy as an author whose writing reshapes different approaches to the scope and nature of fiction itself. The contributors suggest the continuing relevance of Spark’s work “for the narrative traditions, representational projects, and broader cultural formations of the twenty-first century” (Herman, 2010: 1). The book focuses on Spark’s characteristic style which combines self-reflexiveness, metafiction and investigations on the human conduct. This text has been of great help during my research not only because of its range of innovative perspectives on the Scottish writer. Finally, Martin Stannard’s *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (2009) provided personal information about Spark and shed some light on many postulates issued in my dissertation. In Spark’s world, nevertheless, the words biography and autobiography stand for more complex processes that their traditional definitions show. Stannard is conscious of Spark’s “chameleon tendency” and her prowess in the art of fiction, because for her, “[m]anipulating the truth in defense of a higher truth, in self-defense, in opposition to the world’s legions of fact-mongers, was the artist’s business” (Stannard, 2009: 407). This last reflection inspires some of the ideas of this research. Finally, artist Penelope Jardine, Spark’s longtime companion and literary executor, collected 63 works of nonfiction in a volume titled *The Informed Air: Essays*, and published in 2014.

### 1.3 METHODOLOGY

Spark's fiction is difficult to categorize. According to Marina Mackay, Spark might be labelled as "an amphibious figure" (2010: 95); she is half-way between anti-modernism and postmodernism which, as David Lodge states, are "the two responses to modernism" (Quoted in Herman, 2010: 1). There is, however, one point where most critics agree: her writing is highly metafictional and shows an almost obsessive tendency to explore and expose the very nature of fiction and the complex relationship between life and art.

This dissertation tries to find a satisfactory answer to a problem that Muriel Spark poses in her work *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography* (1992). Quoting Spark's own words, David Goldie laments that the writer's only autobiographical book contains "nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses" (1992: 11) and that this assertion, favorable as it is for the purposes of factual scholarship, "ignores exactly the complex issues that animate her fiction" (Goldie, 2010: 14). Spark confesses in the introduction to *Curriculum Vitae* that she compulsively collects documents and "loves details" (11) so she narrates meticulously the events of her life from her childhood in Edinburgh to the publication of her first novel *The Comforters* in 1957. Goldie observes a paradox in Spark's way of narrating her autobiography since she offers us a crystalline and delightful depiction of her younger self but without the rich contradictions that she usually infuses her characters.

She renounces, in other words, the messiness of life as it is lived for the clear certainties of the documentary word, constituting herself author and official keeper



of her own life: a position her fiction-writing self – the witty, paradox-loving creator of Caroline Rose, Jean Brodie and the Abbess Alexandra among many others – would surely have mocked for its impossible presumption. (14-15)

Spark decided to write her memoirs after the height of her popularity when she was a famous writer, 74, placidly living in Tuscany. However, her autobiography ends with the publication of her first novel, *The Comforters*. Curiously enough, the last paragraph of *Curriculum Vitae* is devoted to the amusement she felt the day she received the favourable reviews on the publication of *The Comforters*. She remembers her editor's words when he said that that was "the shape of things to come" (1992: 213). And then, Muriel Spark ends her memoirs repeating the last words of her 1981 novel *Loitering with Intent*: "I took great heart from what he said, and went on my way rejoicing" (1992: 213). This phrase occurs several times in the novel with the same hint of autobiography: "Having entered the fullness of my years, from there by the grace of God I go on my way rejoicing". That novel has been described as an "autobiographical novel" (Bold: 110) and introduces, like many other Spark's works, a heroine who is writing a novel. In this case, the protagonist, Fleur, resembles Spark: she is a young woman living in a small flat in Kensington in 1950 – Spark is careful and exact about dates and places – who is writing an autobiographical novel "without any great hope of ever getting it published, but with only the excited compulsion to write it" (2001: 25).

Spark creates a parallelism between the fictional author Fleur Talbot who, at a much later stage of her life, is writing the biographical account of the young Fleur, and Muriel Spark the real author who, at a much later stage of her life, is

writing the biographical account of the young Spark. Thus, a number of complex relationships have been set up: of the young fictional author to the older (Fleur), of both to the fiction-writing self, Spark, and of autobiography to fiction.

Looking back to *The Comforters*, Spark, that fiction-writing self, is urging the (ideal) readers of her ‘Volume of Autobiography’ to explore the nature of fictional ‘truth’, the relationship of reality to fiction, “the connection between fictional characters and the real-life persons on whom they may be based, or who, alternatively, may be found to, or may come to resemble them” (Page: 101). Spark seems to depict a truer version of herself through the fiction-writing self of her novels. Obviously, a work of fiction can be enjoyed and interpreted in the absence of knowledge of its author. But, Goldie explains that “hers [Spark’s] is an *oeuvre* that is so deeply concerned with issues of identity and authority, and so closely identified with the persona of its author, that to attempt to understand it without taking Spark herself into account is to miss a rich, perhaps the richest, element of its intriguing, playful complexity” (2010: 15).

With the publication of *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography*, Spark seems to invite her readers to look back into her work and “complete” a *second volume* of her autobiography. On this occasion, however, instead of compiling data and assembling the details from her real life, (ideal) readers are encouraged to look for clues and patterns hidden in her narrative; in other words, to discern a kind of truth out of fiction. This way, Spark *authorises* her readers to construct an image of that fiction-writing self who takes a lot of different names

between the pages such as Caroline, Fleur, Alexandra, Lise, Rowland or Chris, but always the same on the cover: Muriel Spark.

This thesis will analyse Spark's authorial strategies that *force* the reader to look for patterns and parallelisms between the protagonist characters and Spark as *the fiction-writing self*, close to the *ideal author* proposed by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Due to the lack of agreement about what the term *ideal author* actually designates and the critical debate it has aroused, this dissertation uses the term 'fiction-writing self'. Indeed, Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller also see inconsistency in Booth's formulation of the concept which "leaves open the question of whether the implied author is (1) an intentional product of the author in or qua the work or (2) an inference made by the recipient about the author on the basis of the work" (2006: 7-8). In the first case, a further question is left open, that of whether the implied author represents a faithful or distorted image of the real author.

This dissertation tries to solve this problem through Dan Shen's approach to the concept of the implied author originally suggested by Booth. She distinguishes between the two aspects of the concept: *the encoding*, author, and *the decoding*, implied, where the former consists in the author writing "in a certain manner" and the latter consists in the reader's inferences of all the choices made by "the person who has written the text in a certain manner" (2008: 2). The "encoding aspect" may be defined by James Phelan's narratological theory regarding the implied author as constituting "a streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author's capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties

that play an active role in the construction of a particular text” (2005: 45). Shen’s “decoding aspect” will consist of the real reader’s “intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole” (Booth, 1983: 73). Spark invites the reader to ‘decode’ her own fiction-writing self through the text the real and historical Spark has ‘encoded’. This does not mean, in Spark’s universe, that one is more accurate than the other. According to Phelan, “the implied author is not a product of the text, but rather the agent responsible for bringing the text into existence” (2005: 45). Thus, Spark considers that the very act of writing fiction may be her way of approaching a truer version of herself, a way of going *on her own way rejoicing*.

Spark’s style is characterized by a stripped-down restraint and a lack of sentimentality, which tries to avoid the supposed error of judging or evaluating a text on the basis of its emotional effects on a reader (*affective fallacy*). Conversely, we may feel tempted to fall into the *intentional fallacy* judging fiction by assuming the intent or purpose of the artist who created it. In contemporary fiction, nevertheless, there is a tendency to focus on the writing process itself, the role of the author and the relationship with their characters, and the role of language as a structure that establishes limits to human existence. Authors, suddenly uneasy about their “implied” role in narratives, try to redefine it by standing back and reflecting on their own and all previous texts, written or spoken, that have conditioned their writings. Indeed, Booth faced a lot of resistance when he stated that fictional narratives were seen as acts of communication whose aesthetic qualities were

intertwined with their ethical effects on individual readers.<sup>1</sup> Booth responded to those objections in the Afterword to the 1983 second edition. He considers his ideas in relation to technique and morality as fully consistent with his conception of fiction as rhetorical action, although he admits two obstacles in his argument: he mixes his personal beliefs into his analyses and underestimates the difficulties of ethical criticism. Consequently, this research understands the difficult problem of the relation between ethics and aesthetics in Muriel Spark's fictional production. Moreover, Spark was well aware of the fact that the authorial original intention is not fully recoverable, and the real author is not the main source of meaning of a text.

In narratology, the basic voice question is "Who speaks?"- A narrator is obviously the voice of the narrative discourse and voices, according to Jahn, can be textual (narrator), intratextual (characters) or extratextual (implied author) (2003: 1.7). In addition to these figures, narratology differentiates three types of audiences, actual audience, the authorial audience and hypothetical audience (Rabinowitz: 20-1, 95). Phelan points out that Rabinowitz has a fourth type of audience: 'the ideal narrative audience', an audience which the narrator wishes she was writing for (1996: 140). The default position of this *ideal narrative audience* is not neutral, but closer to actual audience. As Phelan observes, readers have a dual perspective inside the fiction:

we step into and out of the enunciatee position, while we remain in the observer position and discover what the narrator assumes about our knowledge and beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Booth included this idea in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, chapter 13 "The Morality of Impersonal Narration", commenting on Nabokov's *Lolita*. Booth admits that Nabokov has marked Humbert as an unreliable narrator and complains about the morality of *Lolita*.

in the enunciatee role. Furthermore, moving into the enunciatee role means that we move into the ideal narrative audience – the narrator tells us what we believe, think, feel, do – while in the observer role we evaluate our position in the ideal narrative audience. (1996: 144)

Thus, the ideal reader, as Phelan proposes, refers to “the actual audience’s projection of itself into the observer role within fiction” (1996: 145). Following these arguments, we agree that authors do not have total control over the act of writing, nor do readers have total control over the act of interpretation. Spark’s novels precisely experiment and play around with the relationship between the author’s, narrator’s and characters’ voices and the way readers may decode this aesthetic game. She constantly breaks the narrative levels always giving the impression of transcending the physical limitations of the pages. In so doing, Spark creates the illusion of involving her readers in the ethics of her fictional world through a complex aesthetic technique.

Following these ideas, the ethics and aesthetics of a text are important when analysing Muriel Spark’s novels. This thesis claims that Spark’s texts are written as a study on the nature of fiction as art and its relation to real life. Spark’s personal and innovative conception of fiction “out of which a kind of truth emerges” (Spark, in Kermode 1963: 80) celebrates plurality and difference in favour of a multifaceted conception of the self. In each novel Spark constructs, this thesis aims to show, her fiction-writing self through a set of two main characters whose opposing characteristics paradoxically work as a unifying force. By means of a close reading of Muriel Spark’s works, this study analyses the *Double Motif* in her fiction and its development throughout her work. The author uses this literary device to transcend

the narrative levels by following a metafictional pattern. We use this term according to Patricia Waugh's postulates on *Metafiction*, a term given to self-conscious narratives which pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. Metafictional writings set "mutually contradictory 'worlds' against each other. Authors enter texts and characters seem to step into the 'real' world of their authors" (Waugh, 1984: 102). Following this premise, we will aim to prove that Muriel Spark, as a metafictional writer, experiments with fictional doubles to recreate an aesthetic version of reality. The most relevant characters, many of them with remarkable similarities to the author herself, undergo some kind of traumatic experience which is negotiated in terms of doubling and hybridization. Thus, throughout her work this game of doubles evolves by identifying different stages in her work.

Following the trope of the double motif in Spark's novels, this study identifies a pattern out of which three different periods can be established along her literary production. These three stages mark a development in Spark's fiction: first, an initial preoccupation with form in the novel is evinced as well as the problems posed by her attempt to leave an indelible but, at the same time, an almost invisible authorial imprint where characters resent the authorial control; secondly, a middle period where her characters enjoy an apparent 'free-will' to write their plots and eventually are given a lesson in authorial intrusion; finally, the novels of the last part stand out because the main characters are men instead of Spark's traditional leading women. In the first two stages, Spark had constructed her fictions by means of two types of characters: a fictional double of the author who shared all of Spark's

real features and characteristics (appearance, health, occupation, preoccupations) and a 'hybrid character' used by the author to violate the diegetic levels and intrude and interfere in the narrative. However, as this research shows in the third part, Spark's authorial voice has developed to the point of not needing to violate the narrative levels. Although her main protagonists are now men instead of women, she has accomplished to be present in her own fiction not by intruding, but by a paradoxical identification with her two main male characters. In her last novel, the fictional double and the hybrid character encompass the authorial identity through a game of doubles which complement each other and even seem to intermingle at the end of the narrative perfecting Spark's twofold conception of the authorial self.

Spark became a novelist soon after her conversion to Catholicism, which came together with a period of physical and psychological crisis. Spark herself attributes this breakdown to her conversion: "I had a feeling while I was undergoing this real emotional suffering that it was all part of the conversion (...) I think there is a connection between my writing and my conversion (...) Certainly all my best work has come since then" (Spark, 1961a: 59-60). Spark is an author with religious, Catholic, concerns, but her direct treatment of Catholicism in her novels occurs, apparently, through secondary characters portrayed as either extraordinarily virtuous or wicked. However, these depictions of morality and immorality constantly break, in her metafictional constructs, the narrative levels through characters who may suffer or may act as harbingers of a higher and omniscient authority. Much of Spark's fiction shows a satirical portrayal of a society whose excess of secularity brings about spiritual dissolution. In interviews and essays,



Spark states that faith and art are connected in their concern to look for what she refers to as an “absolute truth”:

I don't claim that my novels are truth – I claim they are fiction – out of which a kind of truth emerges. And I keep in my mind specifically that what I am writing is fiction because I am interested in truth – absolute truth – and I don't pretend that what I'm writing is more than an imaginative extension of the truth – something inventive. (Kermode, 1963: 80)

Her fiction is constructed at the crossroads between the modernist drive for order, characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century, which brought about the conversion to Catholicism among numerous intellectuals and her interest in the socio-political contexts of artistic expression from the 1960s on. For Spark, therefore, faith and art share functions and can no longer be detached from contemporary problems. In her 1970 lecture to the Academy of Art and Letters, “The Desegregation of Art,” she questions the moral and political intention of “socially-conscious art,” art which depicts with pathos suffering and victimization and criticises the relaxed attitude of those readers who fulfil their moral responsibility by the emotions they have been induced to feel. Literature, Spark suggests, must relinquish any sentimental attachment to reality. She demonstrates the ability to avoid exposing her fiction as the expression of religious vision; yet she ridicules materialist society and “lays bare, uncannily, a sense of the way in which our contemporary metaphysics of materialism underpins not only a loss of embeddedness in the world but also an emptying out of the feeling of presence and self-presence” (Waugh, 1984: 64). In Spark's fiction, therefore, there is a preoccupation with issues of presence, self-presence and absence which mirrors her

own process of conversion and the identity crisis she suffered as a new Catholic. In a world increasingly devoid of a transcendental vision where there is no room for the sacred, Spark's fiction is concerned with the traumatic absence of God. Similar to other authors including Graham Greene and Flannery O'Connor, Spark's fiction aims to uncover the traces and portents of God's grace "embedded" in life. In her narrative, these signs of God's presence are negotiated by the suffocating intrusion of authorial portents that haunt the main characters who, ironically enough, are authors as well.

The three novels we have chosen, *The Comforters*, *The Driver's Seat* and *The Finishing School*, reveal a relationship between identity crisis and spiritual distress. The process of '*knowing myself*', after undergoing a religious conversion, is reflected by means of artistic expression in Spark's fiction. As the author has stated on several occasions, her religious conversion to Catholicism forced her to face the relationship between her and God and the obvious link between the novelist and the novel. Consequently, Spark's fiction shows an almost obsessive fascination with plot-making, with "plot and plotters" (Whittaker, 1982: 91). Manipulation seems to be the rule for many of her main characters who, at the same time, may feel manipulated:

Besides revealing how a novelist constructs a plot, Mrs Spark's fiction contains a host of other manipulators: blackmailers, lawyers, film-directors, teachers, who may succumb to the temptation of imposing their plots on people in real life. (Whittaker, 1982: 97)

Many of her novels present in detail the traumatic experiences of those characters who are aware of the plot-making world of the author's narrative. Spark's fiction,

therefore, shows a relationship between the identity distress caused by her religious conversion and trauma. Peter Sinclair explains that although trauma theory has been rarely applied to Spark's fictions, the emergence of trauma theory in literary studies "continues to break down strict categorizations of experience, making the boundaries between religion, culture, and human experience permeable realms" (2018: 2).

Cathy Caruth, arguably the founder of trauma theory and whose scholarship draws amply from deconstruction, surprisingly links trauma studies and theology: "In a world 'after the end' of redemption, theology encounters literature in the tattered remnants of recognizable meaning, in figures that haunt the world they once redeemed through a language that writes, or remains, after the end" (Caruth 2010: 1089). For Caruth, "trauma theory exceeds its own secularity—it is not simply psychological, not psychoanalytic alone . . . but also a discourse that communicates beyond itself" (936). Shelly Rambo has examined the relationship between religion and trauma in literature. In her work *Spirit and Trauma* (2010), she argues that theology must address the period between birth and resurrection, what she calls *middle space*, during which we hope for a new life and suffering endures. Thus, the victim of trauma, unable to rationalize a past whose events defy reason with a future that promises redemption from suffering, lives in a perpetual middle space, a present of enduring suffering. This is the *enigma of suffering*. Trauma, as Rambo describes it, is a liminal space between life and death, a remaining middle space that is yet not life. Rambo introduces a theological pneumatology that she calls "Middle Spirit":

A unique pneumatology arises. I call this the ‘middle Spirit.’ This understanding of Spirit is not so clearly aligned with life. Instead, this Spirit occupies a more tenuous position between death and life. The Spirit remains and persists where death and life defy ordinary expression; death is neither completed nor in the past, and life is neither new nor directed toward the future. This middle Spirit is often elided in the association of the Spirit with new life and resurrection. I am to retrieve it, developing the contours of this Spirit by reviving biblical concepts that speak to pneumatology in this different key. (2010: 114)

Thus, Rambo’s theological response to trauma theory is the middle spirit, the remaining of God’s presence in the liminal space that is neither fully life nor fully death: “This middle spirit rests on an understanding of the Holy Spirit not as a life-giving presence, but rather as a witness to the truth that in Christ, life persists through death” (2010: 121). This study analyses how in Spark’s fiction, this discourse of presence “continues to haunt literature just as literary theory remains haunted by God’s absence” (Sinclair, 2018: 3). Her characters, both creators and victims of a plot-making drive, inhabit a liminal space where they try to deal with the mystery of their own existence. This process, both in life and literature, is not linear but rather, according to Rambo, “in trauma, ‘death’ persists in life” (Author’s emphasis) (Rambo, 2010: 156).

Finally, Rambo evokes the theological norm of love. Love, she argues, remains in the space between life and death, the Holy Saturday<sup>2</sup>, the space where the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, dwells and witnesses to the trauma of others: “It is the promise of God’s continued presence with the disciples in the physical absence

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning that Muriel Spark’s funeral and burial was on a Holy Saturday. (She had died on Thursday April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006).

of Jesus” (2010: 103). According to Rambo, the love of God remains and the Spirit acts as witness to human suffering both between the effects of the idea of death and the reality of the love that persists in the middle space of trauma. Just as Mary Magdalene and Peter suffered the trauma of Holy Saturday, that day when Jesus was silent in the tomb and the Spirit became an invisible but persistent witness: “If the middle describes the space in which persons find themselves in the aftermath of trauma, the middle Spirit provides a vision of God’s presence in the abyss” (2010: 113).

The depiction of Spark’s characters’ fictional awareness reflects this trauma of absence. At the same time, the therapeutic effect of plot-making through the liminal traces of authorial presence allows her to discern some kind of truth about what she called “the only problem”, the mystery of remaining suffering as an understanding of love: “This persistence [of the Spirit], this abiding, is the witness not just to death’s remaining but to love’s survival” (Rambo, 2010: 160)

From Rambo’s theological point of view, trauma is based on our understanding of the Paraclete, since in trauma studies the source of fear is often represented by a sense of haunting. Fear, grief, rage and anxiety are projected as ghosts: “Ghosts signal unsettled memories coming forward [and also demand attention to action:] a something-to-be-done” (Rambo, 2017: 37-8). In this sense, *recognition* is that something that must be done. In Jacques Derrida’s *hauntology*, there will remain a haunting within our being, a ghost that demands attention and can define our identities. To Derrida, a ghost signals an “always-already absent present” and “nostalgia for a future [where time is] out of joint” (1994: 61).

Sociologist Avery Gordon insists on the importance of studying our ghostly aspects, as we are often defined not by what we can see of ourselves, but what lingers around the edges since “haunting is a constituent element of modern social life” (1997: 7).

As has been explained above, some critics have seen in Spark’s fiction a contemporary revision of Gothic traits and tropes which, in the interest of this research, are meaningful when discussing ethical issues implicit in her novels. There is also a postmodern preoccupation with issues of identity as a fragmentary and unstable idea of the self that is complemented by Gothic elements, since this genre was characterized by an in-depth analysis on the fears of identity (de)formation. Spark’s writing, then, will be analysed as both “therapy and art” (Stanford, 1963: 62). In the light of these ideas, there is a clear link between the theological conception of the Holy Spirit and the gothic trope of the ghost that reaches its highest level of aesthetic representation in the sacramental Catholic imagination. This Catholic imagination tends to see reality as a sacrament. Andrew Greeley puts it this way:

Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace. [...] This special Catholic imagination can appropriately be called sacramental. It sees created reality as a “sacrament”, that is, a revelation of the presence of God. (Greeley, 2000: 1)

According to Greeley, the Catholic sensibility entertains the presence of God in every single detail of our daily life. Therefore, the Catholic theme permeates through all of Spark's fiction and, as this study analyses, affects her way of writing and her idea of establishing a direct connection between the creative role of an author and the presence of God in a world where the Creator seems absent but inherently present. In her fiction, Spark finds the perfect terrain to discuss moral issues – the problem of good and evil – that have to do with the relationship between humans and God and between humans themselves by means of her aesthetics. Her Catholic dimension makes her understand reality as the result of the creation process of an almighty God whose grace can be perceived throughout his work. Similarly, Spark's authorial presence can be elicited throughout the lines of her narrative. Following the Catholic pattern, her work could be understood as the product of Spark's Catholic imagination. This idea gives us the key to her authorial imprint marked by an almost obsessive self-reflexiveness.

Simultaneously, she denounces a clash of values emerging in the British scenario of the fifties. Spark's stories tell "the irrationalities of a world where everyone has forgotten God through the stylized creation of fictional worlds where absolutely no one, and certainly not the reader, is allowed to" (Waugh, 1984: 121). Spark's Catholic condition adds extra meaning to her metafictional writing and portrays most of her characters aware of being trapped within the novelist's script, as if suggesting that, in 'reality', people are part of the book written by the hand of God.

This dissertation will analyse three relevant novels, each one representative of a different stage in Spark's career. The division of Spark's narrative into three distinguishable periods conjures up the classical structure of a story: introduction, development (body) and conclusion (ending). However, and taking into account Spark's Catholic conversion, these three stages could also mirror the Christian pattern of the Divine Trinity. Stannard informs us about Spark's serious considerations on the Divine Trinity which impinged not only on her Faith but also on her writing: "The Old Testament God the Father had always presented her with a problem. God the Son required selfless charity. As an artist, the Holy Ghost was to her the most important element of the Trinity" (2009: 159). Spark alludes to that Holy Mystery in a letter to Stanford in 1954. In this letter she criticizes some Catholics' indifferent attitude to that great unknown which she considers as the very essence of Catholic Faith and doctrine, "Catholics are scared stiff of the Holy Ghost, and that's the truth, though the Church teaches far otherwise" (Spark to Stanford, 1954). Accordingly, the two first stages in which we divide her work must be contemplated as naturally tending to the last one. We will deal with every single stage separately in order to understand the development of her work as a whole.

Kelleher observes that, "[H]er Roman Catholicism is much more than an item of biographical interest: it is a potent force which has profoundly affected the shape of her art" (1976: 79). In her essay 'How I Became a Novelist', Spark states that after her conversion, "I began to see life as a whole rather than as a series of disconnected happenings" (2014: 45). Following these remarks, Ruth Whittaker explains, "this view intersects with that of the novelist, seeking imaginative sense



out of apparent randomness.” In other words, “her sense of coherence means that she sees the external visible world not as distinct from the spiritual world, but as a manifestation of it; not as two worlds, but one” (1979: 162). Furthermore, as a Catholic, her work “is primarily concerned with the relationship between God and man” (Whittaker, 1982: 151). However, Whittaker goes on to explain, her fiction also deals “with the relationship of the novelist with the novel” (1982: 151). Both God and the novelist share the power to create “a world which they then people with characters simultaneously free and limited” (Whittaker, 1982: 126). The relationship between life and fiction and plot-making fascinated Spark. So this aspect of her writing can be linked to her religion, because “[a]s a novelist who is also a Catholic she is aware that her own fiction-making activities take place within what could be called ‘God’s plot’,” the latter “being a metaphor for the Christian belief in a divinely ordered universe” (Whittaker, 1982: 91).

Consequently, the first stage this dissertation introduces would correspond to Spark’s early incursions into Catholicism and her first steps into the literary scene. This may be considered as Muriel Spark’s most experimental period. We must not forget that her conversion caused Spark to suffer from a period of spiritual upheaval which coincided with the writing of her first novel, *The Comforters*, published in 1957. This makes it a propitious novel to exemplify those works comprised between 1957 and 1963. During this first period in Spark’s writing career, the relationship between the so-called “hybrid characters” and the protagonist of her works is established in terms of rejection and opposition.

The second period in Muriel Spark's work would encompass those works from 1965, when she published her novel *The Mandelbaum Gate*, to 1979, the year her work *Territorial Rights* came to the fore. When *The Mandelbaum Gate* was published, Spark was living in New York and two years later she decided to move to Rome, Italy, where she published *The Driver's Seat* in 1970. By the time she wrote *The Mandelbaum Gate*, Spark had been a Catholic for over ten years, and this novel can be seen as a relevant shift in her career and, as some critics including Page have stated, it marks the division between the first and the second stages of Spark's work. Among the novels from this period we have chosen *The Driver's Seat* to exemplify this stage of "selfless charity" in Spark's work. It poses some questions on authorial control and free will within the novel. The author's fictional double and the hybrid character come closer during this period.

Finally, the third stage of her work comprises those novels published from 1981 onwards. This last period is characterized by works where Catholic signs and symbols seem to have disappeared from stage in favour of more mundane motifs and stories. Nevertheless, our theory is that although Catholic concerns seem invisible at first sight, they are intrinsically present in Spark's last novels, undermining the plot in a subtle way. Similarly, the authorial presence seems to have receded in Spark's last works; however, as we will demonstrate, her apparent absence portrays the fiction-writing self as intrinsically present. This period opens with the publication of *Loitering with Intent* in 1981 which, as she herself states in an interview with Victoria Glendinning, has "the form of an autobiography (...)" which sort of sums up my life" (Glendinning, 1979: 47-8). Therefore, "in *Loitering*,

for the first time, she was using herself, directly, as a subject” (Stannard, 2010: 443). Therefore, this novel marks an important point of inflection which introduces the last stage in Spak’s literary production.

This last stage displays a tendency towards the prominence of male characters in the leading roles reaching its climax in the last two novels, where the plot revolves around masculine figures. Another relevant characteristic of this last stage is the unfolding of the protagonist figure into two characters; these are portrayed as opposite identities which seem to intermingle as complementary parts of a whole. Spark’s last novels masterly display explicit games of doubles which insinuate the Sparkian twofold conception of the self. This is the case of *The Finishing School* which, not only encapsulates this last stage, but also serves as a kind of epilogue of Spark’s literary production. The boundaries between the protagonist and the “hybrid character” seem to blur. Their relationship develops from jealousy to attraction, insinuating a sexual relationship between them at the end of the story. The result is that both the author’s fictional double and the hybrid character appear as two halves of the same identity. Both types of characters can only be understood as complementary parts of a whole. A new conception of the self is introduced at this final stage in Spark’s work where hybridization seems to be the norm.

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## **2. AUTHORIAL STRATEGIES**

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## 2.1 CONTEXTUALIZING SPARK

Spark's plots present a kind of reality modelled on the fictional pattern; although they aim at telling truths, these seem to buckle under the strain of fiction; they are textual realities which point to a world beyond fiction. The continuous relationship between reality and fiction empowers her texts with a strong subversive autobiographic tone and paves the way for a second reading. Thus, the author involves the reader in her creative process and makes the act of creation a vivid experience. Spark's message is hidden from public interpretation and only revealed through fiction. Consequently, we consider Spark's work essentially "hybrid" since it seems to be half-way between reality and fiction. For Spark, writing was a therapeutic exercise and a way to discern some truth out of a fictional world that not only mirrors the real world, but also transcends it. We must not forget her writing career developed on a par with her religious conversion and her inherent metafictional interest in the form of the novel.

One of the most intriguing critical debates on Spark is the analysis of her style. Indeed, she started to write at the end of the 1950s in a transitional socio-political period marked by the 'post-war dream' of a new and better society. British literature was defined by realism, and Modernism was being revised. Spark's initial preoccupation with the form of the novel could be a normal problem for any beginner. For Spark, however, it becomes an obsession triggered by her personal process of conversion. These initial events might have merged to eventually establish her innovative style.

Thus, for many observers, post-war English fiction was articulated through new social groups and classes voiced by the cultural power of the novelists and playwrights of the time. But, in practice, the scene was varied and authors bringing a much more speculative mode into post-war English fiction were emerging. Therefore, after the Second World War, this innovative group of writers were influenced, as Bradbury suggests, “by a changed social climate, which bred a new aesthetic climate” (Bradbury, 1979: 11). The Education Act of 1944 changed the education system for secondary schools in England and Wales. Traditionally, the British cultural scenario was made up by authors belonging to higher classes because education was restricted to them. Therefore, the Education Act of 1944 had a great repercussion on the British citizens and, consequently, the cultural scenario of the fifties. The result was an emerging generation of writers from a different background, whose new-found articulacy led to an innovative way of writing. This group of mostly working and middle class British playwrights and novelists included Kingsley Amis, Colin Wilson, John Osborne or Alan Sillitoe. They were labelled as the “Angry Young Men” and became prominent in the fifties. This catchphrase is thought to be derived from the autobiography of Leslie Paul entitled *Angry Young Man*, which was published in 1951. Following the success of Osborne’s play, the label “Angry Young Men” was later applied by British media to describe young writers who were characterized by a great deal of disillusionment with traditional British society. They tended to avoid radical experimentalism in their literary style. According to their use of technique, they did not fit the modernist criteria. For a long time, the post-war British novel had been associated with

“realism” and “anger”, in direct allusion to the Angry Young Men, and seemed a fiction out of touch with contemporary developments in the novel in other countries.

The British novel, thus, changed radically during the fifties. That sudden achievement was brought about by writers such as John Fowles, Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing or Muriel Spark among others, who focused their fiction on new technical experiments and the subsequent distinctive attempts to preserve a measure of realism in a more experimental way. As Bradbury goes on to explain, “there can be no doubt that the realistic mode was becoming harder to negotiate in a world of hard materialism and liberal disorientation” (Bradbury, 1979: 13). This tendency in literature originated in the debate begun by the British literary journalistic establishment, which decided that it was time for a change to the post-war, Welfare-State atmosphere of the country. In other words, as Richard Todd suggests, “what was being challenged was an upper-middle-class cosmopolitanism which had characterised British Modernism during the first three decades of the century” (Todd, 1986: 99). This tendency seemed obvious at a time when Britain inexorably ceased to be an imperial and colonialist power, and the British Labour Party, with which most of these writers were sympathetic, came to prominence in opposition during the fifties.

At the risk of offering an oversimplification of the post-war situation in Britain, one must admit that as was generally agreed at the time, “[the British fiction in the fifties] described an aesthetic which was, indeed, resolutely anti-modernist” (Todd, 1986: 99). At its very origin, modernist texts might have been superseded by a small-scale, inward-looking parochialism in the years immediately following

the war, “partly as a consequence of a new mood of provincialism that seemed to have entered English culture separating it from developments elsewhere” (Bradbury, 1979: 10). According to this interlude between British modernist fiction and the course it would follow, many critics kept on emphasising a return to realism and formal modesty whose main theme was the representation of English society. This can be deduced from such works as those of Frederick R. Karl’s *A Reader’s Guide to the Contemporary English Novel* (1959), James Godin’s *Post-war British Fiction* (1962), and Rubin Rabinowitz’s *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel: 1950-1960* (1967), in which the mainstream of the post-war English novel is represented by the provincial and angry novel of the fifties.

However, as Todd argues, “we may observe diverse attempts of fiction writers from the 1960s onwards to confront what came to be seen (...) as a serious anxiety underlying the movement aesthetic” (1986: 101). Considering this movement as an aesthetic which was, indeed, resolutely anti-modernist, Bernard Bergonzi was the first to note a stronger focus on experiment in the British fiction during the fifties and sixties. Bergonzi’s *The Situation of the Novel* (1970) proposes that an existential or post-modernist regime in the novel is growing in other countries. Then, this new tendency to focus on the form of the novel and on narrative experimentalism paved the way for a brand-new movement labelled as Postmodernism which inherited the critical and angry tone of the previous literature but introduced an original touch characterized by a liking for novel literary techniques.



Muriel Spark's fiction has often been classified as sharing characteristics of both Modernism and Postmodernism. Both movements seem to have some characteristics in common. Both arose from a period of crisis and disbelief when the need for a change was an evident tendency. Postmodernism, as Modernism itself, can be understood as a socio-cultural movement which tried to undermine the roots of the long-standing conception of society through art. Thus, as Patricia Waugh states, "Postmodernism can be seen to exhibit the same sense of crisis and loss of belief in an external authoritative system of order as that which prompted Modernism" (1984: 2). In academic terms, we may say that while Modernism seems to be concerned with principles such as identity, unity, authority, and certainty, Postmodernism is often associated with difference, plurality, textuality, and scepticism. It highlights the role of language, power relations, and motivations within narrative. In addition, it seems to reject the use of sharp dichotomies such as male versus female, straight versus gay, white versus black, imperial versus colonial, death versus life, and in academic literary terms fiction versus reality.

This led to a new conception of the subject and its link with the world around them which gave birth to new representations of characters in literature. From now on, the subject, following the precepts set by Postmodernism, can be understood as a multifaceted work-in-process, continually recreating itself while, simultaneously, recreating the social context that shapes their identity. Human agents, thus, would play the role of "investors" in constructing their own version of reality. Therefore, the human subject seems to be depicted as a "role-maker", an agent who can occupy

different situations and may act contingently in relation to others to affirm or negate their representations.

Thus, Postmodernism seems to reenact the characteristics of Romanticism such as the like for aesthetics and the representation of human fears and anxieties through excess and the grotesque at a time when cultural and economic changes threatened to transform society forever. Thus, according to Todd, British contemporary novel must be understood,

in terms of its having steadily evolved a number of strategies across a broad spectrum for confronting the problems posed by the constrains of selfhood, as the mode of naïve social realism came increasingly equated with solipsistic closure, and to prove steadily less satisfactory as a vehicle for the expression of contemporary reality in fictional terms. (1986: 103)

This innovative and experimental writing was increasingly self-aware and much more concerned with the nature of fiction. Fowles, Murdoch and Spark, whose work anticipated the presence of post-modernism in the literary and critical British discourse, undermined the traditional social novel and established a parodic mode of narrative through a multi-perspective novel. They carried out a powerful subversion of the established cultural scene which mirrored the socio-political convulsive situation of the time. As Bradbury puts it, “the confident provincialism of some writers in the 1950s began to collapse in an era of uneasy internationalism, a world of new politics and new styles” (Bradbury, 1979:13).

Critical discourse on British fiction, however, has been reluctant to accept that shift, as Bradbury puts it: “in a time of changing forms we have a theoretics of a situation which is in many respects contradicted by the practice; ‘postmodernism’

has in some ways become a critic's term without ever quite being an artistic movement" (Bradbury, 1983: 326). Indeed, one may observe among British critics including Bradbury, Lodge, and others, the thought that contemporary British fiction suffers from inadequate definition through being steadily reduced to almost exclusively realistic criteria. Whether British postmodern fiction is continuous with Modernism, or whether it represents a break with it, is not our concern here. It is, however, of high relevance for the purpose of this dissertation to approach some satisfactory understanding of the shift that took place in British fiction during the fifties and which made Muriel Spark's aesthetics deserving of a relevant and closer analysis.

From the sixties onwards, criticism of British fiction has slowly challenged the post-war writing situation which considered that the only way in which Modernism could be superseded was by a return to naïve social realism. According to Todd, this "can now be seen as a critically "monist" activity, a reduction of a complex totality to a single statement in order to fit a prevailing ideology" (Todd, 1986: 102). This tendency precisely fails to partake of that pluralism which Todd assumed to be the essence of postmodernist critical discourse. Thus, only gradually did it come to be realized that naïve social realism of the early post-war fiction aesthetic "could be tantamount to a potentially crippling form of solipsism – crippling, that is, for the healthy development of fiction in a world needing increasingly to be perceived in pluralistic terms" (Todd, 1986: 102).

Iris Murdoch was one of the first to understand this, as her most theoretical works suggests. Having found the post-war aesthetic deeply disturbing, she argues

that the Welfare State has played an important role in the tendency taken by contemporary writers to create “far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality” (Murdoch, 1961: 23). Thus, Murdoch observes the inability of most contemporary writers, in Welfare State democracies, to confront imaginatively “a renewed sense of the (...) opacity of persons” (1961: 30). Moreover, she realizes the difficulty to deal with “otherness”; an artistic problem she connects with morals, arguing that contemporary writers share a common preoccupation about the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the “extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (Murdoch, 1959b: 51). For Murdoch, art’s greatest challenge is the existence of “whatever is contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly to be explained” (Murdoch, 1959a: 260). Murdoch’s affirmation might as well be a good definition of postmodern sensibility.

In Spark’s case, this ‘postmodern sensibility’ might be understood as the necessity to explore the essence and mechanism of the creative process. Muriel Spark explains this point when she recalls the origins of her first novel in an interview published in 1963:

I was asked to write a novel and I didn’t think much of novels – I thought it was an inferior way of writing. So I wrote a novel to work out the technique first, to sort of make it all right with myself to write a novel at all – a novel about writing a novel, about writing a novel sort of thing, you see. (Kermode, 1963: 79-80)

Muriel Spark cannot be easily identified with usual literary categories. As Ruth Whittaker states, “she was considered primarily a realist for her precise observation and witty transcription of current modes and behavior” (Whittaker, 1982: 1). Realism can be described as the depiction of the true nature of reality. And that is

precisely what Spark seems to do in her work: she apparently tells stories of everyday life where human nature is put into the fore, but no judge or critical comment is provided. However, her experimental writing, where the boundaries between fiction and reality tend to blur, soon deviated from realism. Paraphrasing Patricia Waugh, “Spark’s distance from realism also marks her resistance to sentimentalism as an adequate response to the mechanistic picture” (Waugh in Herman, 2010: 78). Surprisingly enough, although she dealt with war and its effects and even though she expressed certain protest in her works, she can be hardly referred to as an ‘angry young woman’. This expression is taken from Patricia Hodgart’s review of Spark’s first novel, entitled *No Angry Young Women?* Hodgart entertains the idea of Muriel Spark and her fellow writer Iris Murdoch expressing their disagreement and reflecting their dissatisfaction with a progress of British society just after the Second World War, in the same way as John Osborne did (1957: 10). However, this did not eventually happen. According to David Herman, Spark’s fiction embraces,

the modernist emphasis on technique while also projecting complex social worlds – worlds in which (...) characters are impinged on by powerful historical and political forces, their psychologies and interactions shaped by entrenched educational and religious institutions, ideologies of gender, and more or less dominant assumptions about the possibilities and limitations of human agency. (Herman, 2010: 2)

Spark’s reflexive literary production focuses on narrative form and its engagement with experience and historical contingencies. Her work presents a balancing point for innovation and representation. She introduces a third alternative between the

two responses to modernism which David Lodge has called Anti-modernism and Postmodernism. According to Lodge, Anti-modernist writers such as Kingsley Amis and Evelyn Waugh would operate under the assumption that practices of realism “modified to take account of changes in human knowledge and material circumstances” were still “viable and valuable” (Lodge, 1981: 6).

The Angry Young Men movement could also be included in this group. However, postmodernists such as Samuel Beckett and John Barth continue “the modernist critique of traditional realism, but [try] to go beyond modernism, which for all its formal experiment and complexity [holds out] to the reader the promise of meaning, if not of a meaning” (Lodge, 1981: 12). Spark’s novels include characteristics from both movements since they are influenced by antimodernists advocating a midcentury return to realism and by postmodernist authors who reject objective truth and work on the idea of making the world around us appear real.

Whittaker describes Spark’s work as follows:

Her novels have an ethical and a realistic bias, but of a strange kind. They also have a feel of moral obliquity and a distinctly contemporary hardness; indeed, they have a sharp stylistic authenticity brought about through techniques which are peculiarly postmodern. (Whittaker, 1979: 158)

From the very beginning, therefore, Spark explores and experiments on both the nature of fiction and its form, which gives us the key to her authorial label marked by an almost obsessive self-reflexiveness. Self-reflexivity often becomes the dominant subject of postmodern fiction. Patricia Waugh, in her book *Metafiction* (1984), defines this self-reflexive tendency in literature as follows:

In short, self-reflexiveness in modernist texts generates “spatial form”. With realist writing the reader has the illusion of constructing an interpretation by referring the words of the text to objects in the real world. However, with texts like T.S.Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1922), in order to construct a satisfactory interpretation of the poem, the reader must follow the complex web of cross-references and repetitions of words and images which function independently of, or in addition to, the narrative codes of causality and sequence. The reader becomes aware that “meaning” is constructed primarily through internal *verbal* relationships, and the poem thus appears to achieve a verbal autonomy: a “spatial form”. (1984: 23)

Joseph Frank also deals with self-reflexivity in his *Spatial Form in Modern Literature* (1958), and states that,

since the primary reference of any word group is to something inside the poem itself, language in modern poetry is really reflexive [...] instead of the instinctive and immediate reference of words and word groups to the objects and events they symbolize, and the construction of meaning from the sequence of these references, modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity. (1958: 73)

Therefore, according to Patricia Waugh, we can state that for postmodern writers “the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one’s ‘reality’. Writing itself rather than consciousness becomes the main object of attention” (Waugh, 1984: 24). Accordingly, we might postulate that the world, in the same way as fiction, is categorized through the arbitrary system of language. If the writer’s experience of the world, which will shape their perception of “reality”, is determined by language, ultimately, the postmodern writer’s mind will depend on language as well.

[F]or contemporary writers, the mind is not a perfect aestheticizing instrument. It is not free, and it is as much constructed out of, as constructed with, language. Contemporary reflexivity implies the awareness both of language and metalanguage. Writing is, therefore, a self-conscious act which questions and negotiates the process. (Waugh, 1984: 24)

Postmodern writers, thus, seem to involve the reader in their self-reflexive game by making them aware of how reality is arbitrary and subjectively constructed. In doing so, postmodern narratives differ from modernist perspective because “the text shows a preoccupation with how it is itself linguistically constructed” (Waugh, 1984: 26). As Waugh goes on to say, “[t]hrough continuous narrative intrusion, the reader is reminded that not only do characters verbally construct their own realities; they are themselves verbal constructions, *words not beings*” (1984: 26).

The rhetoric of the “self” and its perception need to be renegotiated. This widespread climate of uncertainty led postmodern writers to conform, in Whittaker’s words, “a distinctive type of protagonist. This was the hero in search of his identity, an identity no longer defined clearly by his place in society and a code of unquestioned values” (Whittaker, 1982: 3). Identity crisis and a loss of values are concurrent themes in Spark’s narrative which is characterized by a skeptical tone in the treatment of external authority and an almost obsessive self-reflexive tendency. In so doing, Spark’s fiction uses numerous tropes and strategies that may help critics put her fiction in context. Given the conscious autobiographical impulse of her fiction, Spark introduces real data and a myriad of details such as the different places where she has lived, her family relations and



childhood experiences and her religious background leaving the vivid imprint of the authorial presence.

## **2.2 AUTHORIAL EXILE**

Apart from her mixed religious background and the influence of masculine figures in the construction of her identity, the different places she lived in has also contributed to her sense of otherness and to the twofold conception of herself and the world around her. Throughout her life, Spark visited various countries. She also found a temporary or even permanent home in some of them. Generally speaking, she spent most of her life abroad. It almost seems that she felt more comfortable out of her country. These places were so inspiring for her that she used some of them as settings of her novels. Muriel Spark lived, for instance, in Zimbabwe, India, Italy or France.

Among these places, the city of Edinburgh, Scotland, has a greater transcendental meaning since it is the place where she was born but where she once departed and never wished to return. Therefore, Edinburgh fosters significantly her sense of duplicity in spatial terms. Spark herself makes reference to this impersonation of the city and its great impact on her subjectivity: “Edinburgh is the place that I, a constitutional exile, am essentially exiled from (...) It was Edinburgh that bred within me the condition of exiledom: and what have I been doing since then but moving from exile to exile? [...] It has ceased to be a fate, it has become a

calling” (Spark, 1970: 151). Stannard describes Spark’s contradictory feeling about Edinburgh when she is back attending her father’s deathbed:

Above everything loomed the castle, erupting between the Old Town and the New. This brutal caesura [...] seemed to her somehow symbolic. There was a link, as yet still an abstraction, between Edinburgh and [...] her mind. [...] It was the city itself rather than her family that had nurtured her as an artist. (Stannard, 2009: 2)

Edinburgh imposed on her a diasporic feeling which would last forever. From *The Comforters* to *The Finishing School*, her work is characterized by a deep-rooted sense of displacement. Stannard goes on to say: “Nevertheless, Edinburgh was the home which had made her independence possible, and, for her, all the positive qualities of ‘home’ centred on her father” (Stannard, 2009: 3). Accordingly, in April 1962, when her father died, Spark felt, metaphorically speaking, homeless since her sense of a supportive family disappeared. With her father’s death, Spark seemed to lose her hometown roots.

As Stannard argues, “she knew that the last shadow of its unqualified love had faded. From that point, she was on her own [...] It was the hinge of her life, the point at which the second half of her existence began to rewrite the first” (Stannard, 2009: 4). The idea of Edinburgh and her father as the representation of home vanishes when her father passes away. A brand-new existence seems to be merging. As Stannard adds, “She belonged nowhere, was determined to belong nowhere and to no one” (Stannard, 2009: 2).

## 2.3 MASCULINE INFLUENCE

There is a feeling that the most relevant events of Spark's life before becoming an artist have always been marked by some masculine figure. This varied line-up of masculine relations upon which she seems to have built her personal system of values affects Spark's perception of herself. She builds her identity in terms of opposition and differentiation. This also has a high impact on her work. As for her familial ties, she was born five and a half years after her brother Philip and they never got on well with each other. Martin Stannard develops this idea as follows:

[Philip] welcomed his new sister guardedly. As they grew up together this emotional distance increased. And they remained night and day to each other for the rest of their lives, uncomplementary (and sometimes uncomplimentary) opposites. 'My brother', she remarked to me, "is like a Chekhov short story. When you meet him you'll know what I mean." (Stannard, 2009: 1)

These early disagreements with her eldest brother from the very beginning of her existence seem to pose this masculine fraternal figure as *the other* against which Spark constructs her identity in terms of contrast and opposition.

Her father was an influential figure in Spark's personal development. We can see in Muriel's description of him a trait of admiration and preference together with a tint of transcendence:

My father's sayings were more humorous and savoured of the music-hall. If there was a lull in the conversation he might say, "If this weather continues, we'll have no change." And setting forth for a walk: "Take my arm and call me Lucy." There was also a mysterious person named by my father "Mr Poomshtok", whose chief

characteristic was that he didn't exist, so that a great many happenings could be attributed to him. (Spark, 2009: 39)

We can even elaborate the idea of her father's "Mr Poomshtok" as Muriel Spark's first launch into the notion of *the other* and subsequently *the double*; this literary device, so recurrent in her work. However, although Spark's father appears as a relevant figure in her life, masculine prominence is hardly materialized in Muriel Spark's work until her last novels, since most of her literary production is peopled with determined female characters in the leading roles. This fact has great significance in our study since it shows the evolution in Spark's authorial strategies.

By the time Muriel Spark wrote *The Comforters* (1957) she had become a married woman, later a divorcee, and a mother of a boy. Thus, her husband Sydney Oswald Spark and her son Robin also contributed to her sense of exclusion and otherness. Her marriage when she was only nineteen and her subsequent departure for Africa can be considered the first remarkable event in Muriel Spark's life.

It was in Africa that I learned to cope with life. It was there that I learned to keep in mind (...) the essentials of our human destiny, our responsibilities, and to put in a peripheral place the personal sorrows, frights and horrors that came my way. I knew my troubles to be temporary if I decided so. There was an element of primitive truth and wisdom (...) that gave me strength. (Spark, 2009, 119)

By the time she got married, Muriel had no intention of becoming a housewife. She wanted to escape from Edinburgh and its social claustrophobic microcosm and to concentrate on her poetry, not to mention the call of adventure in a strange continent. Consequently, she decided to marry Sydney Oswald Spark, a teacher of Maths who was thirteen years her senior. Spark laments this unfortunate episode of

her life in *Curriculum Vitae*, “I got engaged to Sydney Oswald Spark [...]I don’t know exactly why I married this man. It was a disastrous choice. [...] I would be free to pursue my writing” (Spark, 1992: 116). Muriel and her husband had a stormy relationship which concluded with the couple’s traumatic separation. The writer, however, did not change her married name:

After my divorce I retained my husband’s name, to be the same as my son. This was generally the custom unless one married again. I was glad of this later when I began my literary career. Camberg was a good name, but comparatively flat. Spark seemed to have some ingredient of life and of fun. (Spark, 1992: 132)

We may state that by keeping her married name, Spark accentuates her twofold nature. At the time, she felt ready to recreate her identity as an independent artist; it was a way to leave behind her former existence. Curiously enough, her married name, Spark, has always had positive connotations for the author in spite of bringing her memories of her disastrous marital relationship.

In 1944, when Muriel and Sydney Oswald split up, and once the war was over, she went back from Africa to the UK, where her son would join her in September of the following year. But Spark would never be the same. Africa had transformed her forever and she was now in the process of constructing her identity as an artist; although this process will last her whole life it will be encouraged at her father’s death. Stannard discusses Spark’s transformation as follows,

And although she did return, divorced, in 1944 [...] they [Spark’s family] never did see again the Muriel they had known. She had left as little more than a schoolgirl. She returned a woman, herself a mother, formidable, self-possessed and immune to emotional blackmail. Africa taught her many things. (Stannard, 2009: 44)

Robin lived with Muriel's parents in Edinburgh from then on. Muriel and Robin had a long-lasting difficult relationship.

## 2.4 RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

The fact that Muriel Spark started to write novels soon after her conversion to Catholicism gave her the background for an innovative way of writing which exemplified Spark's system of values as she, herself, assures: "The Catholic Church for me is just a formal declaration of what I believe in any case. It's something to measure from" (Spark, 1961a: 60). Spark's avowal seems to introduce the theme around which her work develops: "the relationship – shown openly or implied – between the secular and the divine, between man's temporal viewpoint and God's eternal vision" (Whittaker, 1982: 1). Her novels symbolise a show window where the writer displays a personal, aesthetic replica of reality and focus on those secrets hidden behind everyday situations of our daily life and on the human condition. Hence, Spark's fiction deals with eternal truths and "seeks to persuade us that angels and demons are neither metaphoric nor outdated conceits, but existing here and now in convents, classrooms and on the factory floor" (Whittaker, 1982: 2). Spark is not a moralist, although her writing pattern seems to mirror that of the Catholic doctrine; it deals with the scope of freedom Catholics have once they are aware of being characters in God's plot. Thus, she considers the alienating figure of the omniscient Catholic God which can be perceived in her work by means of the

treatment of characters and metafictional devices, including the figure of an intrusive author as the key element in her fiction.

After her conversion, Spark became aware of a new order of experience which posed relevant questions on personal identity. She felt her actions were being judged by the observance of an omnipotent and omnipresent God. This, at first, distressing feeling caused Spark a kind of spiritual crisis; this mental breakdown together with a period of hard work and sleepless nights which she worsened by taking pills and appetite suppressants caused her to collapse both physically and psychologically. Spark elaborated this idea in *My Conversion*,

I decided at last to become a Catholic, by which time I really became very ill. I was going about, but I was ready for a breakdown (...) I had a feeling while I was undergoing this real emotional suffering that it was all part of the conversion. But I don't know. It may have been an erroneous feeling. (Spark, 1961a: 25)

This description of her conversion shows the Sparkian communion between emotional and physical suffering; between spiritual concerns and worldly matters; between the soul and the flesh. This last opposition stands for the Catholic vision of the human being which is hybrid and a necessary composition of life and matter. In *My Conversion* Spark commented on the influence of religion upon identity. Thus, according to Carruthers,

[i]dentity in Spark's fiction is often hybrid, contradictory even, so that it can be difficult to define with any certainty and this reflects her Catholic outlook that life itself is rather wonderfully mysterious and humans should not presume to define it in very limiting ways (Carruthers, 2010: 76).

Carruthers's description of Spark's fiction might also be applied to Spark herself as a *hybrid, contradictory*, extremely interesting author. We can analyse her work as the artistic expression of a search for identity which is brought about by a deep feeling of displacement and otherness; this feeling being fostered not only by her heterogeneous religious background but also by her family ties and personal experiences.

Her father, Bernard (Barney) Camberg, was a Jew; her mother, Sarah (Cissy) Camberg (née Uezzell), a woman of eclectic religious tastes, had been brought up as a Christian but, probably to please him, had married him in a synagogue. It was a liberal-minded, happy-go-lucky family. (Stannard, 2009: 2)

Spark herself says of her childhood that it had “a kind of Jewish tinge but without any formal instruction” (Spark, 1961a: 58). During the course of an interview to the *Observer Colour Supplement* in 1971 she replied, “I don't particularly associate myself with Jewish causes. But I defend them sharply if they're attacked” (Spark-Toynbee, 1971: 73). Ruth Whittaker states that,

In one of her short stories, however, ‘The Gentile Jewesses’, and in the novel *The Mandelbaum Gate* she reveals that her mixed parentage has had a deep influence on her thinking, making her aware of the disparate elements in her make-up, and of the need to reconcile and come to terms with them (Whittaker, 1982: 19).

Spark's school years are revelatory in the depiction of her characters' hybridity. She went to James Gillespie's Girls' School in Edinburgh, which had a Presbyterian atmosphere. It was the equivalent of a small local grammar school. As Spark remembers it in *Curriculum Vitae*,



The official religion of James Gilliespie's School was Presbyterian of the Church of Scotland; much later this rule was expanded to include Episcopalian doctrines. But in my day Tolerance was decidedly the prevailing religion, always with a puritanical slant. Nothing can be more puritanical in application than the virtues. To inquire into the differences between the professed religions around us might have been construed as Intolerance. (Spark, 2009: 53)

This religious conglomerate surrounded Spark's first years. Bryan Cheyette speaks about Spark's "hybrid background – part English, part Scottish, part Protestant, part Jewish" (Cheyette, 2000:10). If we take into account her later conversion to Catholicism, we might say that Spark's spiritual backdrop is arguably a hybrid miscellany with several facets which can be assessed throughout her work. It might be stated that Spark's life and work are characterized by a striking sense of duplicity which may be a consequence of that fragmented religiousness. It seems evident that her hybrid religious origins would leave a mark on her spiritual condition and the way she would understand life and the world.

This hybrid conception of the world can be observed in Spark's fiction in the tension between Calvinist predestination and a Catholic divine providence. As Whittaker suggests, her novels emphasize either "the plots laid by her characters" or demonstrate "how plot functions in a novel". Spark provokes "our perception of a divine or a moral plot behind the obvious one, and the interest is heightened by the tension between the two, and how it is resolved" (1982: 91). Spark highlights a need for human free will in her protagonist characters in a world sustained by moral and art in an attempt to imitate fiction, a Sparkian fictional world constructed on the tension between the ethics and aesthetics of the plotter and the plot.

One aspect of Spark's fascination with "plots and plotters" (Whittaker, 1982: 91) involves the abundant use of manipulators in her novels, an attitude which is increasingly ambiguous as her *oeuvre* progresses. Imitating God's plot, Spark's fiction exposes a desire to control people and events that transcend the diegetic levels. Hence apart from novelists, Spark's novels are also often populated by other "plotters":

Besides revealing how a novelist constructs a plot, Mrs Spark's fiction contains a host of other manipulators: blackmailers, lawyers, film-directors, teachers, who may succumb to the temptation of imposing their plots on people in real life. (Whittaker, 1982: 97)

This effect manipulates the reader's perception, which is caught between the tension of both authorial self-affirmation and self-effacement.

## 2.5 METAFICTION

A revelatory fact about Spark's autobiography *Curriculum Vitae* (1992) is that it ends when she publishes her first novel in 1957. In a famous interview with Robert Hosmer, she comments on writing her own autobiography:

RH: As the author of well-received biographies of Emily Brönte, Mary Shelley, and John Mansfield, how would you compare the process of writing the life of another and that of your own?

MS: Very much the same. Very much the same. I really got out of myself and I really researched my own autobiography. It goes up to the point where I thought that my life spoke for itself in my books, my novels, when I started writing novels

and first published in 1957. And then, I haven't done more; I intend to finish my autobiography. (Hosmer, 2005: 130)

As has been explained in a previous chapter, Spark never resumed the task of continuing her autobiography. However, she left *Curriculum Vitae*, her “first volume of autobiography”, as she labelled it, open with the intention of putting all those memories and perceptions into her novels. She needed to take the necessary distance from her own self and continue to write the ‘rest of her life’ through the successive novels to come. This research deals with that process of self-discovery which led Spark to write innovative fictions where she could ‘enter’ to accomplish her (auto)biography. This aesthetic use of language and, hence, writing is what Patricia Waugh labels as *metafiction*,

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh, 1984: 2)

According to Waugh, if the reader's subjectivity, which is given by the reader's experience of the world, determines the meaning of the narrative, then, a parallelism can be established between the world and the novel. By means of the study of the characters in a novel we can deal metaphorically with the construction of identities in the world outside the novel.

Metafiction contemplates a relationship between the fictional world and the world outside fiction. Linda Hutcheon, who labels this experimental way of writing

as *narcissistic narrative*, says that “in overtly or covertly baring its fictional and linguistic systems, narcissistic narrative transforms the authorial process of shaping, of making, into part of the pleasure and challenge of reading as a co-operative, interpretive experience” (Hutcheon, 1980: 154). The meaning of the novel, as its own technique reflects, is open and incomplete. The reader becomes the co-creator of the novel. Thus, according to Hutcheon’s words “The text’s own paradox is that it is both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader” (Hutcheon, 1980: 7).

This is what metafictional authors reflect by unfolding their work as, to borrow Waugh’s words, “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, 1984: 2). These writers tend to produce a kind of self-conscious writing where the storytelling carries the weight of the narrative, stands out from the action and gives meaning to the novel; a meaning that has to be found between lines in what might be considered as a dialogue between the author and the reader. This emphasis on the storytelling leads the reader’s attention to the author behind the text.

Metafictional writers tend to leave their authorial portrait mirrored in the text, however, taking the necessary distance from their fictional world so as not to get stuck into it. Therefore, as Patricia Waugh puts it:

Metafiction sets mutually contradictory ‘worlds’ against each other. Authors enter texts and characters appear to step into the ‘real’ world of their authors. Words self-consciously displayed as words appear to get up and walk off the page to haunt the author or argue with the reader. (Waugh, 1984: 102)

This line of argument brings us back to the complex process of authorial identification and the troublesome relationship between the author and their characters. Spark introduces in her fictions numerous biographical elements and similarities with her actual persona inviting the reader to identify the protagonist character with the author. However, this complex process relies on the tension between a series of opposing characters through which Spark, the real author, causes the reader to construct an image of Spark's fiction-writing self. As Schmid observes,

Contrary to the impression given by the term "author's image", the relation between the implied author and the real author should not be pictured in such a way that the former becomes a reflection or copy of the latter. It is not unusual for authors to experiment with their world-views and put their beliefs to the test in their works. In some cases, authors use their works to depict possibilities that cannot be realized in the context of their real-life existence, adopting in the process standpoints on certain issues that they could not or would not wish to adopt in reality. (2010: 50)

At the same time, the concept of the implied author helps readers "describe the layered process by which meaning is generated" (Schmid: 50). This process, my research aims to show, is a conscious move on Spark's part. She constantly draws our attention towards the nature of fiction and the ethics of the different plotters in the text. However, these meanings that the text produces acquire their ultimate semantic intention on the level of the implied author. As Schmid goes on to say, "The presence of the implied author in the work, above the characters and the narrator and their associated levels of meaning, establishes a new semantic level arching over the whole work: the authorial level" (50).

Therefore, the very act of writing becomes a pressing need for some postmodern writers, Muriel Spark included, who see their literary production as an aesthetic pattern of their own lives; that is to say, they elaborate an improving version of their own existence by means of metafictional techniques. Consequently, these authors' creative process results in a liberating experience which poses writing as "both therapy and art" (Stanford, 1963: 62).

The whole process of creating a novel culminates with the reader's personal interpretation of it. The ultimate meaning of the work depends to a large extent upon the reader's subjective experience of the world. Thus, the reader as co-creator also joins in with the work of art's therapeutic effect. According to Linda Hutcheon, "to plan a book is to plan an escape for the reader" (Hutcheon, 1980: 53). Authors ultimately depend on the reader's understanding of their work in order to enjoy the reassuring process of writing which will lead them to a proper knowledge of their own identity. Therefore, authors write for ideal readers who will give shape to their textual production from an extra-textual perspective.

A parallelism can be established between textual and extratextual elements; between fiction and reality. According to Claudio Guillén, we can say that "*All art (...) [is] an inorganic entity of process endowed with formal qualities and expressive virtualities and thus capable of stimulating in turn a kind of experience that is vital (that is "life" too)*" (Guillén, 1971: 28). Postmodern fiction cannot be considered an imitation of reality but an approximation of the different ways of dealing with that reality through art. Thus, the therapeutic effect of writing makes sense.

## 2.6 GOTHIC POSTMODERNISM

The difficulty of representing a defined aspect of both “self” and reality in literature fostered new forms of literary exploration from a social scenario sunk into uncertainty and instability. We may say that the effects of these fears articulated the principles of the Gothic rhetoric<sup>3</sup> which “functions to fulfill the expression of the darkness of postmodernity, while postmodernist aspects operate to establish ontological and epistemological standpoints that query accepted ethical and moral realities, which have long been the focus of Gothic subversion” (Beville, 2009: 16). Thus, Gothic and postmodern fiction explore similar issues such as “crisis of identity, fragmentation of the self, the darkness of the human psyche, and the philosophy of being and knowing” (Beville, 2009: 53). As my dissertation claims, Spark, through the therapeutic effect of writing, negotiated issues of identity after the nervous breakdown caused by both her hallucinations and her difficult process of conversion. To understand her fragmented identity, she constructs metafictional narratives characterized by their vivid intensity, her precise style that uses a short and razor-back language to explore scathingly the human condition, the collision of good and evil and a certain moral relativism in between. She exposes the terrors of a postmodern society that is unable to deal with absolute truths precisely by using postmodern tropes and techniques.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Botting, “the Gothic signifies a writing of excess [...] which shadows the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism and the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence” (Botting, 1996:1).

Consequently, we might entertain the idea of the sublime effects of terror as the primary function of Gothic and postmodernist literary exploration. Significantly, sublime terror might be considered the common denominator which will determine the relationship between both movements under the tenets of what will be labelled as Gothic-postmodernism. The analysis of this distinct literary genre leads us to deal with meaningful shadows and gloom, turbulent landscapes and demonized, ghostly or monstrous characters as the central part of its generic substance, and, according to Angela Carter, of its interpretation of “otherness”: the “subterranean areas behind everyday experience” (Carter, 2006: 133).

We do not refer here to traditional romantic Gothic fiction, but to what María Beville calls *Gothic-postmodernism*, the need to recognize a new use of traditional Gothic tropes in postmodern fiction. For Beville, this is “a distinct literary movement and genre in its own right” (2009: 61). She justifies the invention of the term *Gothic-postmodernism* since she perceives the existence of a “gap in literary criticism” (7), which ignores the presence and use of the Gothic in Postmodernism. However, the survival and the subsequent revival of the Gothic in a postmodern era mirror the fears of a society in need of a redefinition of boundaries. This perspective on terror highlights the idea that the postmodernist scenario does not differ from that in which the original Gothic reached its peak after the French Revolution. Gothic literature emerged in the late eighteenth century as a way of escape from the fears and desires of a society which developed toward capitalism. Gothic terror and anxiety seem to be related to, as Beville puts it, “a



rapidly changing world defined by violence, disorientation and loss of meaning and faith” (Beville, 2009: 23).

Gothic-postmodernism is arguably a defined literary and cultural movement characterized by an insight into the human condition through the experience of darkness, which will offer the reader access to the “other” and alternative realities. Authors manage to construct their texts by means of gothic and postmodern techniques challenging, thus, “the possibilities of writing itself as well as the imaginative capabilities of its readers” (Beville, 2009: 53). It is the concept of the “self” and its relationship to the “other” which seems to inspire Gothic-postmodern literature, in the same way as it occurred with the Gothic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, it seems necessary to analyse the Gothic-postmodernism movement, in the same way as the Gothic rhetoric itself, in terms of oppositions and confrontations. As Maria Beville argues, the Gothic rhetoric confronts opposite couples such as

life and death; good and evil; human and monstrous; male and female; self and other; past and present; fiction and reality and so on (...) [w]hat we find is that as a discursive medium, the Gothic functions to blur the distinctions that exist when oppositions such as these are presented. Thus, the Gothic can be interpreted as an exploration of subjectivity; an epistemological investigation of the “self” and what the “self” can know. (Beville, 2009: 41)

Gothic-postmodern works embody the contradictions and ambiguities of the being evidenced by emphasizing the existing, using Hogle’s terminology, “in-between” spaces (Hogle, 2002: 7). Hence, Gothic-postmodernism contemplates the notion of hybridization as opposed to the practice of sharp differentiations so common in modernist practices. Consequently, according to Hogle,

[t]he Gothic has lasted as it has because of its symbolic mechanisms, particularly its haunting and frightening specters, have permitted us to cast many anomalies in our modern conditions, even as these change, over onto antiquated or at least haunted spaces and highly anomalous creatures. This way our contradictions can be confronted by, yet removed from us into, the seemingly unreal, the alien, the ancient, and the grotesque. (Hogle, 2002: 6)

The Gothic provides us with relevant devices and mechanisms which enable us to deal with our obscure fears and hidden desires. Gothic fictions deal with themes and issues positioned between the conventions of reality and the possibilities of the supernatural; between what we know and the unknown; between what is familiar and what is not familiar. These long-standing oppositions introduce the Freudian notion of the *uncanny* which establishes a necessary and complementary connection between the aforementioned terms and concepts that seemed to be so contradictory at first.

At the heart of this idea is the notion of the *authorial hybrid* character, a label that this research attaches to a type of character used by Spark to intrude and interfere with her own fictions taking the necessary distance from her protagonist and avoiding authorial identification. These characters are described in terms of ambiguity, excess and/or grotesqueness. The Gothic rhetoric provides authors with the necessary material to endow *the other* with a supernatural and even ghost-like halo which eases the way to the expiation of our most obscure secrets. *The other* is portrayed as a monstrous, eerie presence which seems to haunt *the self* in a never-ending game of identification and differentiation. The monster's uncanny resistance to explanation is expressed in Gothic narratives by means of the figure of *the*

*double*. We, as mere spectators, must put ourselves into the writer's hands and decipher the riddle to face the monster. The ritual space and time of the monster narrative of *the other* provides a more or less safe context in which to face and overcome latent anxieties. The figure of *the double*, thus, is the result of a necessity for expiation. This distorted vision of ourselves plays a relevant role in our understanding of human nature and, subsequently, gives us a sense of belonging which helps us to identify the image we project to the world; our personal identity. Hence, we can state that the existence of *the double*, *the other*, *the monster* meets a basic human need. We may think that the world can never be rid of its monsters; we need them in order to get a broader understanding of ourselves.

Gothic-postmodernism can be perceived as a subversive natural movement which eases the way towards an aesthetic version of the tumultuous society of the time and the subject's dismembered conception. Thus, postmodern literature was summarized by Waugh as "a quest for fictionality" (1984: 10). This tendency to fictionalize reality led postmodern writers to introduce complex characters whose double nature is easily recognizable and seems to mirror that of the postmodernist *fragmented self* (Lacan, 2001).

The distress and horror caused by the dualist conception of *the self*, fomented by the uncertain social scenario of the period, paved the way for this revolutionary literary genre labelled as Gothic-postmodernism, whose main conventions, include, as Beville argues,

the blurring of the borders that exist between the real and the fictional, which results in narrative self-consciousness and an interplay between the supernatural and the metafictional; a concern with the sublime effects of terror and the unrepresentable

aspects of reality and subjectivity; specific Gothic thematic devices of haunting, *the doppelganger*, and a dualistic philosophy of good and evil; an atmosphere of mystery and suspense and a counter-narrative fiction. (Beville, 2009:15)

These self-reflexive narratives draw attention to the “aesthetic construction of the text” (Waugh, 1984: 5). The text would mirror *the self*; and the aesthetic construction of the text would ultimately point to *the self*'s desperate search for identity. Although implicit in many other types of fictional works, *self-reflexivity* often becomes the dominant subject of postmodern fiction. Thus, Gothic-postmodern literature explores those shadows generated by the troublesome relationships between the author and his work. One of Spark's narrative intentions was the fictionalization of the relationship between author and narrative, between creator and created. These dichotomies bring about ethical issues that mirror those anxieties that Spark was experiencing at the time she was writing her first novel. She also wrote a biography of Mary Shelley and worked intensely on the mysteries that the *Book of Job* hides in terms of pain and suffering under the attentive stare of an omnipresent and omnipotent God. Her interest and fascination with the Gothic led Spark to establish a connection between her process of conversion and the creation of a classic Gothic tale.

## 2.7 THE DOUBLE MOTIF

Many metafictional writers experiment with the intricate technique of *doubling*. These authors make use of fictional *doubles* or *twins*, which under the

Gothic perspective we will call *doppelgangers*, which allow them to recreate an aesthetic version of themselves. As the author's fictional doubles, they work as aesthetic ways of escape where metafictional authors purge their insecurities and doubts, thus fostering their identification process. In William H. Gass's words, "we select, we construct, we compose our pasts and hence make fictional characters of ourselves as it seems we must to remain sane" (1970: 128).

The use of doubles in literature has been a device that experienced its zenith in Gothic fiction. Both modernism and, especially, postmodernism continued this trope which helps authors to introspect through their narratives. Moreover, doubles are a metafictional resource to analyse the nature of the self and the very process of writing fictions. Spark's work is characterized by a strong feeling of duplicity which seems to respond to a desperate need to cope with issues of identity. The figure of the double as a representation of the other is a common element in the portrayal of the self throughout her fiction. At this point, it seems necessary to make a revision of the figure of the *double* as a literary device for articulating the experience of self-division.

The starting position is found on the assumption that the fictional double is not only a literary motif but a construction of traditional culture, myth, legend and religion. Although this is a motif present in all literary styles, it is always attached to and determined by its social context. Its origins in traditional culture make it a motif liable to semantic changes. Mankind's chronic duality and incompleteness has been a theme commonly represented in literature. In reading prose fiction, it is not uncommon to discover that the *double* is a literary, and specifically a fictional,

device for articulating the experience of self-division. Customarily, the archetype of universal duality reflects pagan beliefs in the primacy of dyadic structure and in the plurality of the Sacred.

The many forms it takes are only facets of one indivisible divine being, symbolizing nature in its creative and destructive aspects. Thus, many superstitions are connected with one's shadow or mirror image, which can be conceived as the first stage of the development of the concept of *the double* which, in turn, keeps a close connection with death. According to Ernst Jentsch, the intellectual uncertainty about the possibility of an inanimate object coming to life, which might be considered as one of the causes of the feeling of the "uncanny", is closely connected to the idea of one's *double* as emerging from a mirror or a shadow, or indeed as being alive in a painting (Jentsch, 1995: 7-16).

The theme of *the double* has also been studied by Otto Rank. In his study *Der Doppelgänger* (1925), Rank deals with different representations of *the double* such as reflections in mirrors, shadows, guardian spirits and the belief in the soul and the fear of death. Rank posits that man's need for self-perpetuation, for immortalizing himself, led to the development of civilization and its spiritual values. Thus, he entertains the idea of the immortal soul as the first *double* of the body. Therefore, *the double* is portrayed as an insurance against destruction to the Ego, an energetic denial of the power of death. Freud and Lacan developed the psychoanalytic theories of the double. In Lacan's words:

The mirror stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental

development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body image. (Lacan, 1953: 14)

Consequently, a parallelism can be established between the Lacanian concept of the mirror and the novel; between our mirror image and our fictional projection; between the development of the individual identity and that of the author through their work. This seems to be the metafictional writers' main goal: to transcend reality through art; to fictionalize the world around them in an attempt to achieve an aesthetic version of reality and, subsequently, of their own existence.

Thus, the figure of the *double* has been a recurring resource in literature and the visual arts to express split personalities or identity crisis. The source of the *Doppelgänger* can be traced, not to a single authority, but to the origins of oral tradition in folklore. Moreover, some scholars hold the theory that the origin of civilization itself shows fraternal and twin kings and cities proving that human personality has been, and still is, difficult to perceive as unified or autonomous. In the *White Goddess*, Robert Graves writes:

In the eastern Mediterranean he (Hercules) reigns alternatively with his twin, as in the double kingdoms of Argos, Lacedaemon, Corinth, Alba Longa, and Rome. Co-kings of this type are Iphiclus, twin to Tiryinthian Hercules; Pollux, twin to Castor; Lynceus, twin to Idas; Calais, twin to Zetes; Remus, twin to Romulus; Demophoon, twin to Triptolemus; the Edomite Perez, twin to Zarah; Abel, twin to Cain; and many more. (2010: 191)

The aesthetic potential of the double has developed from a long history during which the theme has drawn considerable attention in a wide variety of societies. Zivkovic points out that “with respect to form, the double originates in myth and

thus is not a strictly literary motif but a construction of traditional culture” (2000: 123). The double has a heavy symbolism, be it mythological, religious, philosophical or psychological. However, this motif was extensively used and perfected in the Gothic tradition to show the evil nature of human beings as well as the fear for *the unknown*. Throughout the nineteenth century, narratives structured around dualism reveal the internal origin of *the double*. Accordingly, *the double* motif has been progressively secularized; in other words, it is no longer designated as supernatural. From now on, the demonic *double* is portrayed as an externalization of that part of *the self* which stands for the unconscious desire; it reconciles us to our own *heart of darkness*; that part of ourselves which has been silenced by culture. William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are the first of many narratives portraying *the double* motif on a fully human level. Lately, it constitutes a powerful tool in the hands of postmodern writers whose metafictional tendency leads them to create complex characters sharing some of the authors' characteristics. Hence, these authors' fictional projections work as fictional doubles of the writers themselves; as an effective device which may help them to transcend reality through art.

By placing her characters' narratives within the real author's narrative, Spark's texts suggest that the strategies on which realism depends are not pure and they seem to be inhabited by otherness. In Spark's fiction, boundaries between interior and exterior, in perfect gothic fashion, are porous and even break down. Spark's experimental and radical style undermines the conventions realism uses to achieve its illusion of “truth to life” by embedding an autobiography through the



double motif. By presenting autobiography, not as a conscious, self-present subject, but as a kind of literary epitaph marking an absence, Spark's novels work against the foundations of realism presenting both a subject that is not unified and 'fact' and 'fiction' as connected categories.

The best conception of a doubling process is depicted when the self confronts its other, which in Catholicism is carried out by the sacrament of Penance. Indeed, Augustine's *Confessions* set the model for autobiography in the Western literary tradition. Augustine paved the way for future fictions with the illuminating narrative of his conversion. In this sense, Spark's narrative mirrors Augustine's in her attempt to shed some light to her conversion which, in her own words, she "felt it was a natural process" (Hosmer, 2005: 132). Conversion is a process of total and true communication with one's other self and with our Creator. Spark's fiction negotiates this process through a complex doubling of characters that both reflect the authorial control and share a certain hybridity because they live in and out of the narrative. They are subjected to the text but, at the same time, act as vehicles for the author's intentions.

This double process of self-identification completes her fiction as an aesthetic therapy to go through conversion and understand our created nature. In Spark's fiction this process of doubling is constructed through the creation of couples of opposing characters that paradoxically seem to complement each other. This fact creates an effect of fragmented identity and, at the same time, an attempt on the part of the author to complete a fictional, but not less true, version of her own self.

## 2.8 THE *AUTHOR'S FICTIONAL DOUBLE* AND THE *AUTHOR'S HYBRID CHARACTER*

Spark tries to organize her narrative in such a way that the reader's attention focuses on the nature of writing and, ultimately, on the author's strategies. Most of Spark's protagonists are portrayed as artists; some of them are also in the process of writing a novel, and some are Catholics as well. These characteristics make them mirror the author who creates them as *others* in a subtle act of self-effacement. The reader, consequently, is invited to see in those characters a portrait of the author. This process of doubling used by Spark is exposed in the mirroring of events of the author's life in her novels.

We will make an approximation to Spark's fictional worlds and the intricate web of textual representations which populate them. We will also try to describe Spark's personal communication pattern and how she manages to transcend the narrative levels to enter her own work. To do so, we will explore the traditional figure of the double and will identify two apparently opposed kinds of characters in Spark's fiction: *the author's fictional double*, which plays the role of the protagonist, and *the author's hybrid character*, which performs a secondary, but significant role in the narrative.

This set of characters can be found in almost every novel written by Spark. In the novels analysed in this dissertation these characters are Caroline Rose as *the author's fictional double* and Mrs Hogg as *the hybrid character* in *The Comforters*,

Lise and Mrs Fiedke in *The Driver's Seat* and Rowland Mahler and Chris Wiley in *The Finishing School*, respectively.

*The author's fictional doubles*, in most of Spark's novels, are Catholic middle-aged women, with the exception of her last novels; sometimes they are also artists and writers and, most of the times, bear a resemblance to the author. On the contrary, *the hybrid characters* hardly ever share any recognizable trait with the writer except for their desire to be noticed within the plot. The former have a mere fictional nature whereas the latter seem to be half-way between reality and fiction.

These *hybrid characters* seem to have direct contact with the author, appearing and disappearing from the plot in mysterious and even eerie ways, transcending, thus, the narrative levels. Sometimes, this figure is portrayed in an almost ghostly way haunting the text, jumping about the lines of the narrative, conveying information which is hidden to the rest of the characters. While *the author's fictional doubles* play the main role and the narrative revolves around them, the *hybrid characters'* presence lasts as long as it is needed to fulfil the authorial expectations; after that, most of the times, they disappear from the plot. We could state that, while *the author's fictional doubles* are just another element within the plot, *the hybrid characters* "work for" the plot to be brought about. The writer makes use of these antagonistic fictional creations to open virtual corridors which connect reality and fiction. This resulting "porous" narrative enables the author to break the narrative levels and exert her influence and control over the plot. Therefore, these *hybrid characters* are a powerful authorial device to give the impression that the authorial writing self is present in the text. Although these

characters appear as though they perform a supporting role in the story, their side effects influence significantly the resolution of the plot as well as the evolution of the protagonist.

This research will analyse the development of these two sets of characters throughout Spark's novelistic production. The different treatment that the author gives them at different stages in her work, together with the progress in the relationship between them, from being portrayed as opposites in the first period of her production to become complementary characters in the last novels, will be the basis of our study. Another significant aspect in the evolution of Spark's work is that although she usually writes about women, this tendency changes gradually until her last novels where masculine characters play the role of both the *author's fictional double* and the *author's hybrid character*; feminine characters cease to be the focus of attention. In other words, as the relationship between her doubles gets closer, the protagonists' sex changes from feminine to masculine. Moreover, in her last two novels the differences between both masculine characters seem to blur and, sometimes, they even appear to merge into one only character, literally or figuratively. This change in the portrayal of the formerly opposed characters responds to a variation of perspective in Spark's work, which seems to achieve some sort of communion in the relationship between opposites. In so doing, she shows a "truer version" of her fiction-writing self. If her fiction, as Spark herself claimed, is used as a vehicle to obtain some sort of truth, that fictional authorial self might be a truer version than the author behind *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography*.

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**3. BETWEEN SELF-AFFIRMATION  
AND SELF-EFFACEMENT**

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### 3.1 *THE COMFORTERS* (1957)

Spark's first novel, *The Comforters*, was first published in 1957. It was a hard process for Spark who suffered from a period of personal distress during its making. Muriel Spark was nearly forty when *The Comforters* appeared, and although it can be considered an unusual late start for a novelist, "there is a sense in which her creative life could not begin its most important phase until certain stages in her personal and spiritual life had been passed through" (Page, 1990: 7). In her mid-thirties, before her first novel was published, Muriel Spark had already lived the most relevant experiences in her life: she had gone through a tempestuous marriage, she had lived in Africa, she had had a baby, she had got a divorce, and she had converted to Catholicism. The way she managed these personal events and changes would impinge on both her personal development and her literary production. The most influential event was her conversion to the Roman Catholic Church in 1954. Spark explains what led her to Catholicism in her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae*:

In 1953 I was absorbed by the theological writings of John Henry Newman through whose influence I finally became a Roman Catholic. (...) When I am asked about my conversion, why I became a Catholic, I can only say that the answer is both too easy and too difficult. The simple explanation is that I felt the Roman Catholic faith corresponded to what I had always felt and known and believed; there was no blinding revelation in my case. (...) On 1 of May 1954 I was received into the Church at Ealing Priory. (Spark 1992: 202)

This fact entailed a dramatic shift in Spark's personal subjectivity, which together with a period of physical weakness caused her to collapse both physically and psychologically: "Those were days of rationing (...) I was thoroughly undernourished. When I went to Edinburgh for *The Observer* to cover the Edinburgh Festival in 1953 I felt thoroughly ill, and hardly knew what I was doing" (Spark 1992: 200). She worsened this situation taking Dexedrine as an appetite suppressant. Stanford elaborates this idea that, at that time, Spark was "taking pills, prescribed medically, but possibly not according to the doctor's strict instructions," the trouble probably starting from the fact that "she was neglecting herself at the time, eating very little and living largely on excessive potations of tea and coffee" (Stanford, 1977: 189). Eventually, while she was studying T.S. Eliot's work, Muriel mentally collapsed.

As I worked on the Eliot book one night the letters I was reading became confused. They formed anagrams and crosswords. In a way, as long as this sensation lasted, I knew they were hallucinations. But I didn't connect them with the dexedrine. It is difficult to convey how absolutely fascinating that involuntary word-game was. I thought at first there was a code built into Eliot's work and tried to decipher it. Next, I seemed to realize that this word-game went through other books by other authors. It appeared that they were phonetics of Greek, and were extracts from the Greek dramatists. (Spark 1992, 204)

These chaotic associations seemed to have been ordered following some kind of secret code that Spark felt the need to decipher. It is fascinating how Muriel Spark, describing this delirious experience of her own, seems to be anticipating the intricacies of her future narrative. Spark experienced these hallucinations from 25 January to 22 April 1954 until she decided to write about it, as she goes on to say:

“I put into effect the determination I had fixed upon, to write a novel about my recent brief but extremely intense word-game experience” (1992: 205). That experimental novel she decided to write was *The Comforters* which stands for a fictional story of her own experience. Spark’s own account in “My Conversion”, for the magazine *Twentieth Century*, suggests that the causes of the hallucinations may have been more complex:

I think it was the religious upheaval and the fact I had been trying to write and couldn’t manage it. I was living in very poor circumstances and I was a bit undernourished as well. I suppose it all combined to give me my breakdown. I had a feeling while I was undergoing this real emotional suffering that it was all part of the conversion (...) I think there is a connection between my writing and my conversion, but I don’t want to be too dogmatic about it. Certainly, all my best work has come since then. (Spark, 1961a: 59)

Spark, herself, points at her conversion as one of the facts which boosted her writing career. After this first serious collapse she was given psychotherapy by Father O’Malley, Rector of St Etheldreda’s, who prescribed a period of country life. In the meantime, Graham Greene, who was a devoted admirer of Muriel Spark’s work, offered to give her a monthly sum of twenty pounds until she got better. She refers to this fact in *Curriculum Vitae*: “[Graham Greene] really admired my work and was enthusiastic about helping me. With the cheque he would often send a few bottles of red wine – as I was happy to record when speaking at Graham’s memorial service – which took the edge off cold charity” (Spark 1992, 205). This led her to spend some time at a Carmelite monastery, The Friars at Aylesford Priory, a retreat which welcomed troubled Catholic artists. Then she moved to a country cottage in Kent, also owned by the Carmelites, where *The Comforters* was written. The house



was originally called Red Cottage but Muriel renamed it St. Jude's Cottage after the patron of lost causes. It seems as if it was necessary for her to suffer from this period of mental distress in order to be able to write a novel.

Her career as a novelist started in 1954 when she was offered to write a novel. The proposal came from Alan Maclean, the fiction editor of Macmillan. She talks about that crucial moment of her career in *Curriculum Vitae*:

I didn't feel like 'a novelist' and before I could square it with my literary conscience to write a novel, I had to work out a novel-writing process peculiar to myself, and moreover, perform this act within the very novel I propose to write. I felt, too, that the novel as an art form was essentially a variation of a poem. (Spark, 1992: 206)

This experimental novel also aims to define the kind of novel she is prepared to write. *The Comforters* gives an early indication not only of her versatility as a writer but also of the ease with which she fuses different genres of fiction. The novel blends together some elements of a detective plot, biblical references to the *Book of Job*, the rudiments of a ghost story, a satiric portrayal of bigotry in the Roman Catholic Church, and also incorporates metafictional remarks - through the voice of the central character - on the process of writing a novel. For Patricia Stubbs, it is "a strange work, chiefly interesting in what can be regarded as Mrs. Spark's fictional point of departure, and because it displays, even at this early stage, many of her familiar devices and preoccupations" (1973: 5-6).

According to Alan Bold, *The Comforters* constitutes "an experimental exploration of the formal nature of fictional truth" (1986: 34). Her narrative portrays the writer's deeply serious interest in the relationship between fiction and reality.

This connection mirrors that of the author's created world and God's creation. As Page explains, "the novelist, or any artist, as creator is only a shadow or imitator of the Creator, and in some sense, we are all 'characters' in a 'novel' plotted and written by God" (1990: 14).

Criticism on *The Comforters* has focused mainly on the metafictional elements of the novel including Waugh, 1984 and McQuillan, 2002. Other critics, however, have focused less on the 'mechanics' of these metafictional elements and more on the play between the author and her character "for control of the novel" (Nicol, 2010: 112). Following this line of argument, Foxwell concludes that "*The Comforters* is a novel about control, agency, and autonomy, as much as it is a novel "about fictionality" (2016: 140). Moreover, as Randal Stevenson notes, "much of Spark's writing continues to show the supernatural entering into the quotidian or hints at other 'planes of existence' that may sinisterly influence the immediate one (2010: 99).

Our study on *The Comforters* is based on the healing effect of writing and the figure of Spark as a God-like author who controls her creation's development. The reader is constantly informed of the fact that the characters' choices and actions work as components in both a novelistic and a "divine" plot. Moreover, many of Spark's characters seem to be aware of her fictional condition and the influence that the physically absent but intrinsically present author has upon them. According to Patricia Waugh, "for Spark, freedom is limited to self-conscious role-playing because in fiction characters are trapped within the novelist's script, and in 'reality' people are part of the book written by the hand of God" (Waugh, 1984: 119).

The title of Spark's first novel is quite significant since it introduces not only the main theme of the novel but also the topic around which later works also developed. Spark took her first novel's title from the *Book of Job*. Job's story had a relevant influence on Spark at that time when human suffering under the gaze of the compassionate Catholic God was an unfathomable concept for her. This became an almost obsessive theme in her narrative which culminated in her 1984 novel *The Only Problem*. It is known that Spark was working on a study based upon the *Book of Job*, but it never came on the scene. In 1955, however, the same year that she started to work on *The Comforters*, a short article of her own, "The Mystery of Job's Suffering", was issued in *The Church of England Newspaper* as both a review and a response to Carl Jung's *Answer to Job* (1954) in which she castigates Jung for ignoring the epilogue of the *Book of Job* in his analysis of the story. Some points present in this article have much in common and are relevant to *The Comforters*. For Spark, the epilogue of the *Book of Job* is "not merely a conventional happy ending [but] that type of anagogical humour which transcends irony and which is infinitely mysterious" (1955: 7, col. 4)

*The Comforters* overtly alludes to Job's friends and their unfair judgements in the form of those characters who try to soothe Caroline's distress with deceptive reasoning and lip service enhancing, thus, her feeling of insanity. They stand for these distressing people who seem to have the answer to any transcendental question dealing with moral righteousness and Catholic principles. These disturbing characters act as false comforters and in the same way as Job's friends, will be punished at the end of the story.

The *Book of Job* does not offer an answer to the problem of undeserved human suffering but hints at the possibility for men to bear evil acts if they cultivate a sense of reverence for the mystery and the miracle of life. According to the Catholic pattern, God is our last hope and comfort, but we cannot predict how his love for us will be manifest in our lives until his promises are fulfilled in heaven. The problem is that to obtain that ‘reward’ we must transcend our earthly limitations and go through death. The key is to accept suffering as part of our existence. From a fictional perspective, this means to accept the subjugation to the authorial control; to acquiesce to be trapped within a fictional plot. This is the premise that Caroline, the protagonist of Spark’s first novel, ascertains as *The Comforters* develops. The plot presents Caroline, who has recently converted to Catholicism, and Mrs Hogg, a fervent Catholic, who tries to comfort Caroline in her way to conversion. The troubled relationship between these antagonistic characters is displayed as a game of doubles where Caroline plays the role of *the author’s fictional double* and Mrs Hogg that of *the hybrid character*.

### **3.1.1 The *Author’s Fictional Double*: Caroline Rose**

The portrayal of Caroline Rose, the protagonist of the novel, as *the author’s fictional double* endows the novel with a marked autobiographical hint. Caroline is a young woman who is in her process of conversion and, because of her religious beliefs, has decided to stop sleeping with her lover, Laurence Manders temporarily. During this process, she suffers a nervous breakdown, and retires to a retreat house.

Caroline is also a student of fiction who is trying to write a book on the form of the novel:

“What are you writing these days?” [the Baron]

“Oh, the same book. But I haven’t done much lately” [Caroline]

“The work on the twentieth-century novel?”

“That’s right. *Form in the Modern Novel*”

“How is it going so far?”

“Not bad. I’m having difficulty with the chapter on realism” (Spark, 1999:48)

This remark seems to be a clear reference to Spark’s innovatory and experimental way of writing and her troublesome relationship with the traditional novel. Like Muriel Spark, Caroline lives in Queen’s Gate, South Kensington, and she repeatedly returned in some of her novels including *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988). Like Muriel Spark, Caroline has also lived in Africa as we learn from the first part of *The Comforters*: “Caroline had always felt that the Baron had native African blood, without being able to locate its traces in any one feature. She had been in Africa and had a sense of these things” (Spark, 1999: 41). Caroline, in the same way as Spark, has a heterogeneous religious background; she comes from a Jewish family, but she has recently converted to Catholicism. Her hybrid religious experience allows Caroline to reflect critically on both religious practices,

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

the emergency cord, halt the train, create a blinding distraction: and even while planning this action she reflected that she would not positively perform it. (Spark, 1999: 31-32)

Her conversion to Catholicism causes Caroline a deeply mental distress and several doubts about her own spirituality: “(t)here are spiritual dangers in everything. From the Catholic point of view, the chief danger about a conviction is the temptation to deny it” (Spark, 1999: 85). This reflection of Caroline considering her involvement into her new-acquired faith seems to reflect Spark’s rebellious attitude towards Catholic norms and precepts. Spark stated that the main effect of her conversion was “to give [her] something to work on as a satirist. The Catholic faith is a norm from which one can depart” (Spark, 1961a: 60).

Caroline feels oppressed by the narrative in the same way that Spark does by the events which affect her writing at this first stage of her literary production; she manages to cope with the suffocating idea of being trapped into someone else’s plot in the same way as Spark deals with the mental alienation that her new-acquired Catholic condition entails. Caroline’s entrance in the Church is metaphorically represented in her negative experience in Brompton Oratory, which is described in Gothic-like narrative. Thus, when Caroline enters Brompton Oratory to attend mass she suffers from a quite suffocating experience: “Brompton Oratory oppressed her when it was full of people, such a big monster of a place. As usual, when she entered, the line from the *Book of Job* came to her mind, “Behold now Behemoth which I made with thee” (Spark, 1999: 90). The complete line from the *Book of Job* which Spark uses here says: “Behold now Behemoth which I made with thee; he

eateth grass as an ox” (Job, 40: 15-16). Behemoth is ordinarily the plural of Behemah, a beast. This statement could be seen as a warning which emphasizes God’s omnipotence and the futility of questioning Him. Therefore, the reference to the magnificence of Brompton Oratory as “a big monster of a place” and the subsequent allusion to Behemoth introduce the reader into a gloomy scary atmosphere within the temple.

[N]ow alone in this company of faces, in the midst of the terrifying collective, she remembered more acutely than ever her *isolation by ordeal*. She was now fully conscious that she was under observation intermittently by an intruder. (...) it was not until the Offertory verse that she collected her wits; *Justorum animae ...* (...) the climax of the Mass approaching, she had to let her brood of sufferings go by for the time being. (My emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 90)

This is one of those revelatory scenes in the novel. Caroline feels out of place among the Catholic congregation whom she refers to as “terrifying collective”. The lines of the Offertorium or Offertory provide Caroline comfort since they give her valuable information about her present and future situation. The antiphon follows: “*Justorum animae in manu Dei sunt, et non tanget illos tormentum mortis. Visi sunt oculis insipientium mori, illi autem sunt in pace.*” Which translated into English means: “The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and the torment of death shall not touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die; but they are in peace.” The subjectivity which are in the hand of God as Caroline is in the hands of the author. In the same way that Christian tradition claims that men will find their peace in God, Caroline should give in to the author to get the long-desired comfort.

The narrative also alludes to “her isolation by ordeal” which describes both Spark and Caroline’s feeling of being misunderstood among equals. Muriel Spark also discusses this difficulty to experience a sense of community within the Catholic congregation in an article published in the magazine *Twentieth Century*: “I didn’t like some of the Roman Catholics I met awfully much, and they put me off for a long time. There were some nice people, but I didn’t like the way they drummed things in” (Spark, 1961: 59). Despite this first negative impression, Spark eventually agrees to surround her with Catholic people with whom she shares basic values and thoughts: “yet now I think I would prefer to live with Catholics (...) There are so many basic things in common and a kind of basic trust” (59). Nevertheless, *The Comforters* denounces the attitude of some “cradle” Catholics who think of converts as unable to be as “Catholic” as someone born into Catholicism. According to Whittaker, there is an important distinction between “cradle” and convert Catholics:

For the former, faith is familiar, unquestionable, given. It is not primarily an intellectual matter, since its precepts are practised and accepted before they are understood. For the convert, Roman Catholicism is alien, questioned and acquired. If an emotional or instinctive feeling for the religion is the basis of its attraction, this has to be tested by instruction and understanding. Truth, for a convert, implies rejection of a former, inadequate set of tenets. For a “cradle” Catholic truth implies acceptance, a passive, less rebellious role, involving no such dramatic demonstration of belief. (1982: 44)

In this sense, conversion implies a long training process of personal adaptation. Unlike a “cradle” Catholic, Spark had to apprehend Catholic precepts and doctrine before accepting them. Thus, she began to assimilate her Catholicism in an inverted



way; this fact influences not only her conversion process but also her evolution as a novelist. Spark's complex personal experience is accompanied by a strong feeling of doubt and apprehension, especially in the first stage of her inner transformation. This initial phase of spiritual and personal upheaval is portrayed in the argument of her first works; a subtle but hard critique upon some Catholic practices and precepts and a distorted image of Catholic characters are the common thread of Spark's first novels. *The Comforters* is not an exception and Caroline, in the same way as the author, suffers from her own initiation process.

But Caroline's distress comes from the fact that she becomes aware of being a character within a plot. She also suffers from hallucinations during her "conversion" process. According to Page,

[a]s a result of the hallucinations she experiences, she also becomes aware that she is in a novel: she hears the tapping of a typewriter and the sound of a voice that utters words taken from the text of the novel we are reading: that is, she is a character in the fiction who at times becomes aware of a world beyond the fiction, the world in which the fiction is being made. (Page, 1990: 12)

This claustrophobic idea of being the product of an otherworldly author has its counterpart in Spark's feeling of submission to the omniscience of an almighty God. This fact provokes Caroline a feeling of subjugation which she seems determined to face up to from the very beginning of the plot. Her conversion to Catholicism is also a cause of distress for Caroline who, as Spark herself, tries to come to terms with her personal spiritual doubts throughout the novel. Page puts it as follows,

Caroline's awareness of the novel's coming into existence can be compared to her awareness of God's ordering of human affairs, including her own life. She has been seeking God and has also been studying the novel, and her hallucinations bring

together the two preoccupations. They are also, of course, preoccupations of Muriel Spark herself. (Page, 1990: 12)

Mirroring the author's retreat while writing *The Comforters*, at the beginning of the novel, Caroline has also gone on a kind of spiritual retreat to relax and think because of the distress caused by her recent conversion to Catholicism, as the narrative insinuates. Caroline's breakdown is manifested as a kind of feverish state:

Once or twice she had lain for several days, running a temperature, burning with fever. Then, (...) there would come a swift alteration, a lightning revival of her sick body; Caroline would say, "I am better. I feel quite well". She would sit up and talk. Her temperature would drop to normal. It was almost as though she was under a decision, at such times, were only awaiting her word, and she herself submissively waiting for some secret go-ahead within her, permitting her at last to say, "I am better. I feel well." (Spark, 1999: 57-58)

Caroline's recovery is described in terms of dependence from a higher authority. When the narrative states that "she was under a decision" and "waiting for some secret go-ahead within her", it may be deduced that Caroline's strange feverish episodes together with her later sudden recoveries are portrayed as the result of some powerful and alienating mind's plan who, in turn, is sketching the pattern of her life. Ruth Whittaker puts it like that:

[t]he difficulties experienced by the heroine on her conversion to Roman Catholicism are paralleled by the resentment she feels at being a character in a novel. Both roles entail a loss of freedom, or rather, a redefinition of freedom as part of a divine and structural coherence. (1979: 167)

The search for freedom becomes the common thread of Spark's narrative equated with the quest for personal identity, within the parameters of someone else's ordered pattern. This suggests that Muriel Spark has created a simple yet subtle and highly suggestive web of connections between fiction and reality. There is, nonetheless, a problematic issue that may be explored throughout her work: "the nature of fictional 'truth', the relationship of 'reality' to fiction" (Page, 1990: 101). Caroline's efforts are focused on trying to regain some kind of free will. To do so, she is determined to flee from the virtual boundaries of the plot in order to achieve her own identity as individual,

I won't be involved in this fictional plot if I can help it. In fact, I'd like to spoil it. If I had my way, I'd hold up the action of the novel. It's a duty (...) I intend to stand aside and see if the novel has any real form apart from this artificial plot. I happen to be a Christian. (Spark, 1999: 94)

As the novel progresses, however, Caroline tries to understand the form of the novel as a metaphor of her conversion. This acknowledgement allows her to find certain way of scape by turning herself into a plotter within the plot. Caroline's statement "I happen to be a Christian" can be understood as a strong commitment to assert free will; thus, meeting the Christian precepts she immediately dissociates herself from the narrative; she belongs to a more important and transcendental plot: the narrative constructed by God. Curiously enough, Caroline finds freedom and autonomy in her conversion as a way out of the narrative. This fact strengthens Caroline's role as *the author's fictional double*. To portray a character who is aware of her fictional condition is a superb dramatic technique which Spark utilises in order to reflect in fiction her own anguish at feeling herself trapped into God's plot.

Caroline's presence hovers over the plot even without being present on the stage. The first time she materializes in the novel is as the subject of a conversation between Laurence, her boyfriend, and his grandmother, Mrs Jepp. During this conversation, Laurence is writing a letter to Caroline.

She [Louisa] opened [her eyes] again a few seconds later to say, "If it's your mother you're writing to give her my love."

"I'm writing to Caroline, actually."

"(...) How has she been lately?"

"Miserable. She's gone away to some religious place in the north for a rest."

"She won't get much of a rest in a religious place." (...) "But Caroline isn't a Catholic."

"She's just become one." (Spark, 1999: 18)

The reader learns from this letter that Caroline has just become a Catholic. The religious centre where Caroline is recovering from her breakdown happens to be the Pilgrim Centre of St. Philumena. Consequently, her story begins in the same way as that of Spark's novelistic career; both are in a religious place to recover from spiritual upheaval. For the time being, Caroline is physically absent but, at the same time, intrinsically present. Her relevant absence fills up the plot which seems to be hatched for her. Caroline is introduced as a powerful character since her temporary absence from the plot positions her far from the author's manoeuvres; this evokes a deceptive idea of autonomy.

This idea seems to be exemplified by the *Book of Job*, when Job himself fears what he feels as God's relentless persecution and, desperately, tries to escape from this oppressing feeling.

Why is light given to one who cannot see the way,

whom God has hedged in? (...)  
Truly that which I fear is overcoming me,  
and what I dread is befalling me.  
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet.  
I have no rest, but trouble comes. (Job 3: 23, 25-26)

Thus, as Timothy K. Beal states, “[f]or Job (...) divine omnipresence means creaturely terror (...) ceaseless pursuit, exposure and torment (...) death is refuge from divine besiegement and divine obsession (...) it is the dread of divine proximity that Job screams” (Beal, 2002: 39). Caroline is doubly exposed: both as a Catholic and as a character within a novel: “The normal opinion is bound to distress me because it’s a fact like the fact of the author and the facts of the Faith. They are all painful to me in different ways” (Spark, 1999: 86). Later on in the book, Caroline tells one of the characters, “[t]he irritant that comes between us and our suffering is the hardest thing of all to suffer. If only we could have our sufferings clean” (Spark, 1999: 147).

According to Catholic doctrine, the distressing feeling that an omniscient God might cause will vanish when new converts discover the guiding, comforting effect of God in their lives. When they accept their dependency on God.

Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there  
(...) even there your hand will guide me,  
Your right hand will hold me fast  
If I say, “Surely darkness will hide me,  
and the light become night around me”

even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
 the night will shine like the day,  
 for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139: 7-12)

This psalm sings the impossibility of hiding from God at the same time that celebrates the exaltation of divine proximity. According to Emmanuel Levinas “[i]t is impossible to escape from God, not to be present before his sleepless gaze. (...) You are always exposed!” However, you must enjoy “being exposed without the least hint of shadow” (Levinas, 1990: 167). Caroline’s reflection shows her distress at being exposed to the authorial design. Nevertheless, to accept exposure in fictional terms would mean to acquiesce in the authorial control. The last words in the psalm above “for darkness is as light to you” introduce the Catholic idea of God’s grace as light. There is no darkness in God’s work, no place to hide from Him since we are part of his creation. Similarly, characters cannot escape from the God-like author’s created plot. In the same way as Catholics must accept being enlightened by God while they overcome their own understanding, characters in a plot cannot stay in the dark but being exposed to the light of the narrative and accept their fictional nature. There is a fragment in *The Comforters* which exemplifies this when Caroline seems to acquiesce to the authorial control and accepts her exposure as a character in a plot. She is talking to her boyfriend about the apparent paranormal phenomena she has been experiencing and she says: “I feel better. I think the worst of my trouble is over; I begin to see daylight” (Spark, 1999: 57). From that moment on, Caroline’s attitude towards the plot experiences a noticeable transformation.

Another trait which positions Caroline as a powerful character is the fact that she describes herself. We know about Caroline's physical appearance and manners through her own words: "I am thin, angular, sharp, inquiring; (...) I am grisly about the truth (...) I am well-dressed and good-looking" (Spark, 1999: 27). She seems to be taking over the writer's role. Moreover, her physical description reminds us of the author's. Therefore, her noticeable absence at the beginning of the story, her isolation and her apparent autonomy while describing herself help us to identify Caroline as *the author's fictional double*. Her "inquiring" nature, as she herself remarks, makes Caroline aware of the existence of some higher authority watching her from the very moment she leaves St. Philumena.

In the train Caroline swung her case on to the rack and sat down. (...) She had the carriage to herself. After a while she rose (...) and moved the case to the middle of the rack, measuring by the mirror beneath until there was an equal space on either side. Then she sat down in her corner-seat facing it. She sat perfectly still while her thoughts became blind. Every now and then a cynical lucidity would overtake part of her mind, forcing her to comment on the fury of the other half. That was painful. She observed, "The mocker is taking over." (Spark, 1999: 29)

This is one of these memorable scenes which recreates Caroline's isolation and, immediately, readers know that some relevant information is going to be revealed. She measures by the mirror the position of her case on the track in an attempt to lead the action. Looking at the reflection of the whole scene in the mirror, she perceives it artificial, conveniently set. This unnatural image informs Caroline of her fictive nature. She recognizes herself as a character in someone's plot and, immediately, she feels suffocated at the vision. Caroline tries to stand aside sitting in the corner-seat trying to be unnoticed and out of sight. The twofold description

of Caroline's mind makes clear her feeling of alienation. Following the Catholic pattern, Whittaker states that,

In Muriel Spark's fiction, as in that of Graham Greene, we are often shown that the way to God is not always through conventional channels, and especial stress is put on the notion that there is a kind of divine satire being practiced when God mocks the rational expectations of those committed to piety. (Whittaker, 1982: 46)

Then, we can elicit that "the mocker" is the alienating God-like author who looms over the narrative revealing herself through her characters. The first time that Caroline experiences the embodiment of this intrusive presence is in her flat of London at night. And once again she is alone:

On the whole she did not think there would be any difficulty with Helena. Just then she heard the sound of a typewriter. It seemed to come through the wall on her left. It stopped, and was immediately followed by a voice remarking her own thoughts. It said: *On the whole she did not think there would be any difficulty with Helena.* There seemed, then, to have been more than one voice: it was a recitative, a chanting in unison. It was something like a concurrent series of echoes. (Spark, 1999: 36)

The sound of the typewriter is a clear reference to the author writing the novel. Caroline's thoughts are repeated aloud by a ghostly voice whose nature is insinuated/makes sense in Caroline's following consideration.

It was impossible to disconnect the separate voices, because they came in complete concert; only by the varying timbres could the chorus be distinguished from one voice. 'In fact,' she went on (...) 'It sounds like one person speaking in several tones at once'. (Spark, 1999: 45)



We learn from the narrative that Caroline hears a woman's voice first which later becomes a chanting in unison. From a metafictional perspective, this seems to be a clear reference to the authorial voice whose different manifestations are portrayed as several tones chanting at once. This chorus of voices seems to evoke, on the one hand, the rest of the characters' communion with the authorial creative voice and, on the other, anticipates Caroline's awareness of her fictive nature and subsequent rebellion. This fact underscores Caroline's traumatic experience. According to Cathy Caruth, the author's voice here is the voice of the other; "the suffering [Caroline] recognizes through the voice [she] hears, represents the experience of an individual traumatized by [her] own past" (Caruth, 1996: 21). That is why those frightening voices always use the past tense as if they were telling a story which happened some time ago. In this sense, Caroline's "own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another (...) which (...) may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (Caruth, 1996: 21). In this line of argument, Spark seems to use fiction to deal with the anxiety caused by the traumatic experience of her conversion. As she feels confused by the new reality of inhabiting a paradoxical world where she is allowed free will under the ubiquitous divine gaze, Spark creates Caroline and the metaphor of *the form in the novel* to get over that traumatic situation.

The first time that the author manifests herself openly to Caroline, she becomes aware of the existence of two parallel worlds: the fictional world in which her story develops, and a world beyond fiction, the world in which fiction is being made:

A typewriter and a chorus of voices: What on earth are they up to at this time of night? Caroline wondered. But what worried her were the words they had used, coinciding so exactly with her own thoughts.

Then it began again. Tap-tappity-tap; the typewriter. And again the voices (...)

What on earth are they up to at this time of night? Caroline wondered. But what worried her were the words they had used, coinciding so exactly with her own thoughts. (...)

“My God” she cried aloud. “Am I going mad?” (Spark, 1999: 36-37)

This doubling of discourse, this echo of thoughts, reveals the invisible link between the writing self and her fictional double. The boundaries between reality and fiction seem to blur. According to Waugh, “listening to the type-writer creating the novel in which she is a character, [Caroline] has her thoughts taken over continually by the thoughts of the author, which are the novel she is in” (Waugh, 1984: 121). Presenting characters which are aware of their condition has just become a strategy commonly used by metafictional writers. Quoting Waugh, “[this] device is an obvious theatrical strategy because of the prima facie existence of the script in drama. In fiction, characters normally know of their condition through knowledge of their relationship to an author” (Waugh, 1984: 120). In *The Comforters*, the stress suffered by the character upon the realization of her true nature is described as a traumatic experience and is always portrayed following the conventions of a horror scene. Caroline is indeed terrified by the idea of someone or something reading her thoughts as if she was “being haunted by people, spirits or things”, but what she fears more is that those voices might be “sent forth from her own mind” (Spark, 1999: 37). Whether these voices are the result of madness or the manifestation of a

ghost-like presence they entail an extremely terrifying experience which gives the scene a gothic hint.

She was now utterly convinced that what she had heard was not the product of her own imagination. 'I am not mad. I'm not mad. See; I can reflect on the situation. I am being haunted. I am not haunting myself.' Meantime she was trembling, frightened out of her wits, although her fear was not altogether blind.

Tap-click-tap. The voices again: Meantime, she was trembling, frightened out of her wits, although her fear was not altogether blind. (Spark, 1999: 37-38)

The scene shows the typical elements of a classic horror story: a young woman, alone at night in an empty house and besieged by some paranormal phenomena.

"Christ!" she said. "Who is it there?" (...) The activity took the edge off her panic (...) She suspected everything, however improbable; even that the sound might be contained in some quite small object – a box with a machine inside, operated from a distance. (Spark, 1999: 38)

This is an authorial device to inform the reader of the intricacies of the fictional pattern which, following a Chinese box structure, points to a reality outside fiction. In an effort on Caroline's part, to understand the origin of the haunting sounds, she admits that there must be a sort of remote control device, which points out to another narrative level where an intrusive authorial self is narrating her own fictional story.

This box-like artefact is recurrent in the novel:

She found Laurence in when she returned to the flat in Queen's Gate. He was fiddling about with a *black box-like object* which at first she took to be a large typewriter.

"What's that?" she said, when she saw it closer (...)

"To record your spook-voices (...)"

"Maybe those voices won't record," Caroline said.

(...) “Well, let’s first exhaust the possibilities of the natural order.”

“But we don’t know all the possibilities of the natural order.” (Spark, 1999: 53-54)

At first, Caroline takes the black-box-like artefact for a large typewriter and, immediately, a connection between this artefact and the author is evoked. This recurrent artefact functions as a kind of portent which connects different scenes throughout the novel giving the story a sense of continuity and, at the same time, endows the plot with a transcendental significance. By means of this metafictional device, the reader becomes aware of the existence of sub-plots which run concurrently with the principal one.

The fourth time Caroline hears the voices she is sleeping at the Baron’s place where she has fled trying to escape from the distressing sounds:

Caroline lay in the dark warm room on a made-up sofa bed (...) extracted the twist of cotton wool (...) stuffed a piece in each ear. Now she was alone. (...) Trough the darkness, from beside the fireplace, Caroline heard a sound. Tap. The typewriter (...) (Spark, 1999: 42-44)

Caroline is in darkness and, though she has her ears blocked, she is still able to hear the voices. The scene comes as a devastating revelation for Caroline who soon realises there is no haunted house or apartment, but a ghostly presence who is haunting her.

After this traumatic experience, she visits her old friend Father Jerome in search of comfort. This talk between Caroline and Father Jerome mirrors those between Spark and Father O’Malley when Spark was suffering from those hallucinations caused by her upheaval: “she had known him for so many years that

she could not remember their first meeting. They had been in touch and out of touch for long periods (...) she wondered now, if she did know him” (Spark, 1999: 51). She seems to see Father Jerome from a different perspective now. The terrifying experience of such recurrent otherworldly voices seems to have changed something deep down in Caroline’s conscience.

Father Jerome offers Caroline some milk and biscuits. A sacramental halo floods the scene; a kind of symbolic Communion takes place where the milk and biscuits stand for the wine and the Host consecrated in the Eucharist. According to Patrick Query, sacramentality can be described as

the belief that incorporeal content is capable of transmission through corporeal forms. Such, also is the imagination of a writer whose style is capable of collapsing the space between form and content and between subject and object such that the surfaces become the truth. (Query, 2005: 42)

During the Communion the human and the divine merge by means of the Transubstantiation. Once she takes Father Jerome’s food and drink, Caroline figuratively communes with God which, in Spark’s fiction, can be identified with the author.

“Father,” she said, almost *as if speaking to herself* to clarify her mind, “if only I knew where the voices came from. I think it is one person. It uses a typewriter. It uses the past tense. It’s exactly as if someone were watching me closely, able to read my thoughts (...)”

“These things can happen,” said Father Jerome. “Coincidence or *some kind of telepathy.*”

“But the typewriter and the voices – it is as if a writer on another plane of existence was writing a story about us.” (...) Caroline knew that she had hit on the truth. After that she said no more to him on the subject. (My emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 54)

Father Jerome, as a man of the cloth, is one of those Sparkian characters, as Inspector Mortimer in *Memento Mori*, which offer glimpses of the authorial knowledge and insinuate the solution to the mysteries of the plot. Caroline's comforting and revelatory conversation with Father Jerome "as if speaking to herself" follows the pattern of a confession. Curiously enough, the scene presents Caroline receiving the sacrament of Communion before the sacrament of Penance. This reversal introduces Caroline as the inverted version of the authorial writing self and reinforces her role as *the author's fictional double*.

In the same way as priests convey God's word, Father Jerome reveals the author's message to Caroline. In this revelatory scene, Father Jerome informs Caroline of her condition as the author's fictional double when she explains the cause of the besieging voices as "a kind of telepathy". Only Caroline can hear the spooky voices which seem to evoke the author's voice echoing in her mind from outside the narrative. At the end of this scene, once Caroline has become aware of the real nature of the voices, she seems to have a plan of her own to go against the narrative imposed by the author:

"Of course. It's a lovely idea."

"And better," he said, "than any ideas you've had so far."

"I've got a good one now," she said. "I'm sure it's the right one. It came to me while I was talking to Father Jerome."

"Let's have it," he said.

"Not yet. I want to assemble the evidence." (Spark, 1999: 54)

Caroline seems to be plotting by her own. Nobody, nor even the reader, is allowed to know about Caroline's plan. Caroline gains strength as the story develops and her attitude towards the voices changes as can be observed in her conversation with Laurence:

"I know what the voices are. It's a creepy experience but I can cope with it. I'm sure I've discovered the true cause. I have a plan. I'll tell you something about it by and by (...) the voices are voices. Of course, they are symbols. But they are also voices. There's the typewriter too – that's a symbol, but it is a real typewriter. I hear it"

"My Caroline," he said, "I hope you will hear it no more."

"I don't," Caroline said.

"Don't you? Now, why?"

"Because now I know what they are. I'm on the alert now," Caroline said.

"You see, I really am quite better. Only tired." She raised her voice a little, and said, "And if anyone's listening, let them take note." (Spark, 1999: 59)

Caroline tries hard to remark that both the voices and the typewriter are more than mere symbols: she perceives them as real. Unconsciously, she seems to be differentiating between her fictional reality and the nature of the voices. Caroline is the only character who can "hear" the eerie sounds. This fact makes her a special character and reinforces her role as *the author's fictional double*.

In *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark reflects on Caroline's experiences, "From the aspect of method, I could see that to create a character who suffered from verbal illusions on the printed page would be clumsy. So I made my main character 'hear' a typewriter with voices composing the novel itself" (Spark, 1992: 206-207). If we analyse these otherworldly manifestations which harass Caroline as mirroring Spark's hallucinations, we can observe an inversion in the way they are

experienced: Spark, the real author, tells us that she noticed them in the form of signs and symbols scattered through fictional texts whereas Caroline, the author's fictional double, notices these hallucinations in the form of "real" sounds whose source seems to transcend the fictional text. While Spark is "haunted" by fiction, Caroline is haunted by reality.

Now Caroline becomes aware that she is the subject of a narrative experiment, the principal character of a plot which seems to be sketched for her. According to Waugh, "at the furthest metafictional extreme, this is to be trapped within language itself, within an arbitrary system of signification which appears to offer no means of escape" (Waugh, 1984: 120). Language is the most powerful weapon of the author. Caroline is determined to negotiate her identity within the linguistic frame. As soon as Caroline is left on her own at Queen's Gate, she hears the mysterious voices again. This time Caroline puts down in words what she hears; this try to fictionalize her own experience may be seen as an attempt to take over the author's place in the narrative. But first the author, through an unreliable omniscient narrator, has an announcement to make:

At this point in the narrative, it might be as well to state that the characters in this novel are all fictitious, and do not refer to any living persons whatsoever.

Tap-tappity-tap. At this point in the narrative ... Caroline sprang up and pressed the lever on the dictaphone. Then she snatched the notebook and pencil which she had placed ready, and took down in shorthand the paragraph above; she did not start to tremble until after the chanting chorus had ended. She lay trembling in the darkening room, and considered the new form of her suffering, now that she was well again and committed to health. (Spark, 1999: 60)



The author stating that at this point in the narrative all the characters are fictitious and do not resemble any living person produces, precisely, the opposite effect on the reader. This strategic movement on the part of the author highlights Spark's tendency to self-effacement. Indeed, as Flaubert once affirmed, "[a]n author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere" (1979: 173). In these epiphanic moments where Caroline is revealed the secrets of the narrative, fiction and reality intermingle and the author and her fictional double mirror each other in a kind of private hybrid space of their own. Textual and extratextual experiences play out while the close relation between linguistic signs and sounds becomes more likely than ever.

Caroline tries to gain some autonomy from the author by getting evidence of the voices she hears. She also takes them down using shorthand. The use of shorthand denotes secrecy since only someone well-trained in the system can decipher the message. Therefore, writing down in shorthand what those disembodied voices say, Caroline recreates an inversion of the author's narrative. She is making a narrative of her own. Writing down the voices as she hears them, Caroline writes down the authorial voice as quick as she speaks. For one brief moment, the character of Caroline plays the role of the writer who, in turn, becomes a character in Caroline's plot. A reciprocity is established, which permits her to reproduce the author's very words as quick as she speaks. The act of transcription evokes a ritual through which words, as in the Eucharist, allow the participants to communicate in the widest sense of the word, establishing contact through language to receive communion, from the symbolic to the actual in perfect sacramental

sensibility. At this moment, both, Caroline and the writer meet in fiction by the act of writing. The writer allows Caroline to co-write the novel and get empowered in the narrative. Spark's indulgence to the character of Caroline emphasizes her role as *the author's fictional double*. However, Caroline is depicted as a character aware of her fictional nature and is constantly resenting the authorial control from which she is doing her best to escape.

“Any incidents?” said Laurence.

She was awake now. “Yes,” she told him. ‘*Lord Tom Noddy* on the air.”

“Who?”

“*Madame Butterfly*.”

“And did you remember the tape-machine?”

“Um. I pressed the button. But I don't know if it's recorded anything.”

She sounded diffident. (My emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 66-67)

Caroline gives enigmatic answers when she mentions the author as if her words are being listened to. She tries to keep the narrative under control; she is determined to lead the action. Caroline is writing a novel on the form of the novel and, in turn, she is trying to write the plot where she is in. This play-within-a-play device reveals Spark's metafictional technique and insinuates the existence of subplots which clarify Caroline's role in the novel. Another autobiographical trait can be elicited from the previous scene when Caroline refers to the author as “Lord Tom Noddy” or “Madame Butterfly”. These references have an artistic hint which immediately reminds us of Spark's father and his humorous sayings from the music-hall. This autobiographical reference to Spark's childhood invites the ideal reader to see Caroline as *the author's fictional double*.

When Laurence and Caroline listen to the recorder, only Caroline's voice has been recorded. Caroline checks then her transcriptions of what the voices said and read them aloud for Laurence to know:

She read him the shorthand notes she had taken.

“So you see,” she said with a hurt laugh, “the characters are all fictitious” (Spark, 1999: 64)

We may infer that Caroline has more information than the rest of the characters in the novel and takes over the narrator's role to inform Laurence. She feels on a superior narrative level than the rest of the characters. She starts to enjoy some kind of free will within fiction. This is masterly portrayed later in a scene in which she is making up her face. She watches directly to her mirror image and tells Laurence excitingly: “I have the answer. I know how to handle that voice” (Spark, 1999: 64-65). This time Caroline does not avoid looking at her mirror image as she did on the train when she came back from St. Philumena. She is not afraid of confronting the author. Accepting the authorial role as an intrinsic part of herself would mean to consent in having a fictional nature. Caroline informs Laurence about the writer's dynamics:

“I've discovered the truth of the matter”; the truth of the matter being, it transpired, this fabulous idea of themselves and their friends being used as characters in a novel.

“How do you know it's a novel?”

“The characters in this novel are all fictitious,” she quoted with a truly mad sort of laugh.

“In fact,” she continued, “I've begun to study the experience objectively. That's a sign, isn't it, that I'm well again?”

He thought not. He went so far to suggest, “Your work on the novel form —isn’t it possible that your mind —”

“It’s convenient that I know something of the novel form,” Caroline said.

“Yes,” he said.

He argued a little, questioned her. “Was the author disembodied? (...)”

“How can I answer these questions? I’ve only begun to ask them myself. The author obviously exists in a different dimension from ours. That will make the investigation difficult.” (Spark, 1999: 84-85)

Laurence represents one of those comforters who are unable to believe because they cannot transcend their reality. What Spark is trying to say is that although Laurence was a real person, he would still act as a fictional character. Instead of helping Caroline in her search for the truth, for her creator, he is constantly blocking her sacramental attempts, dismissing them as hallucinations:

He realised, then, that he was arguing madness upon madness, was up against a private revelation. He almost wished he were still a believer, so that he could the more forcefully use some Catholic polemic against her privacy.

“From the Catholic point of view, I should have thought there were spiritual dangers in holding this conviction.”

“There are spiritual dangers in everything. From the Catholic point of view the chief danger about a conviction is the temptation to deny it.” (Spark, 1999: 85)

To prove her point, Caroline tries to get some action and disregard what the voices dictate by doing exactly the opposite: ““The narrative says we went by car; all right, we must go by train. You do see that, don’t you, Laurence? It’s a matter of asserting free will”” (Spark, 1999: 87). Immediately, the omniscient author introduces a casual moral precept which forces Caroline to change her mind and remain subject

to the “normal” course of fiction. Caroline’s observance of her religious precepts reflects that invisible link which keeps her tied to fiction.

“All Saints’ Day,” she continued, “you know what that means?” Like most people who are brought up in the Catholic faith, Laurence was quick in recollecting such things. “A Holiday of Obligation,” he said. (...)

“But I’m obliged to attend a Mass if there’s an opportunity, since I have remembered. There’s probably a late Mass at the Oratory” (...) Her great desire to travel by train was dispersed by the obvious necessities of going to Mass, and of not messing Laurence around any further. (Spark, 1999: 88-89)

Catholic precepts make Caroline feel as belonging to a superior order from that of the narrative: “‘After all,’ she told him, ‘it isn’t a moral defeat. The Mass is a proper obligation. But to acquiesce in the requirements of someone’s novel would have been ignoble’” (Spark, 1999: 84). This is another characteristic which labels Caroline as *the author’s fictional double*. When Caroline tries to escape from the narrative constrictions, all roads lead her to the creator.

Eventually, they had clear road. Caroline pulled their spare duffle from the back seat and arranged it over her head and shoulders, so that she was secluded inside this tent, concealed from Laurence (...) it was getting on her nerves more and more that *the eyes of an onlooker* were illicitly upon them. Her determination to behave naturally in face of that situation made her more self-conscious. (My emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 90-91)

Keeping her head covered, hidden, as she thinks, from the author’s incessant gaze, Caroline insist on convincing Laurence about their fictional nature and her plan to face the author: “‘I haven’t been studying novels for three years without knowing some of the technical tricks. In this case it seems to me there’s an attempt being

made to organize our lives into a *convenient slick plot*” (My emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 93). Emphasizing the authorial interest in the fulfilment of the novel, Caroline reveals the mechanics of fiction. Consequently, Caroline’s attempt to hide from the author is an unconscious act against the narrative which, inevitably, results in the author taking some action to keep them under control; the scene ends with Caroline and Laurence having a car accident: “Just ahead of them two girls in a shining black open racer skimmed the wet road. Automatically Laurence put on speed, listening intently to Caroline at the same time, for it was difficult to grasp her mind *at this fantastic level*” (my emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 93). Caroline’s mind is at such a “fantastic level” which is able to ascertain the dynamics of the narrative; this trait reiterates her role as *the author’s fictional double*. She seems to recognize the author’s intrusion in these two girls who are approaching so fast on the road and tries to warn Laurence about them. Laurence ignores Caroline and speeds up. These two girls appear in the narrative only to cause the modification of the chain of events. The scene is framed within a surrealist atmosphere where the reader can feel anything might happen. According to Norman Page,

[G]iven the somewhat bizarre setting, there is nothing non-realistic in what happens, there is a strong sense of the supernatural impinging upon and transforming the mundane. This is what may be called the “Angels at the Ritz” motif, the use of a human or non-human messenger to issue a reminder that, for all our material preoccupations, we live in a world that not only has a spiritual dimension but whose materialism is transfigured by the transcendental. (Page, 1990: 51)

There is no description of the two girls. Conversely, we are informed of the way of transport the girls use to enter the scene, “a shining black open racer” which reminds

us of the black box-like typewriter, and Laurence's type recorder as well. All these relevant items in the narrative are described as black box-like objects used throughout the novel to convey significant information from reality to fiction. In so doing, these devices establish a kind of interstitial corridors between reality and fiction.

Laurence speeded up and touched seventy before they sided and crashed. (...) He saw Caroline too, her face covered with blood beside him, one of her legs bent back beneath her body most unnaturally, a sight not to be endured after he had noted her one faint moan and one twist. (Spark, 1999: 95)

The accident scene displays openly Caroline's broken body and emphasizes her fragility in the author's hands. When Caroline wakes up after the car crash, she is confined in a hospital bed. Suddenly, she hears the typewriter and the subsequent voices but this time the information provided has a different tone:

It is not easy to dispense with Caroline Rose. At this point in the tale she is confined in a hospital bed, and no experience of hers ought to be allowed to intrude (...) Tap-tick-click. Caroline among the sleepers turned her mind to the art of the novel wondering and cogitating, those long hours, exerting an undue, unreckoned, influence on the narrative from which she is supposed to be absent for a time. (Spark, 1999: 124)

This is the first time the author speaks about Caroline as a character within the novel. Now, she is referred to as Caroline Rose. Her surname provides Caroline with more fictional background and, consequently, keeps her trapped into fiction.

After the accident, Caroline has been in a coma. As soon as she wakes up she is informed by the voices that this has resulted in a momentary absence from

the narrative. Turning “her mind to the art of the novel” Caroline seems to have learned how to influence the narrative while being unnoticed. Thus, Caroline seems to be practicing the author’s self-effacement. The only way to get rid of the authorial control is to pass unnoticed; to haunt the narrative instead of being haunted; to imitate the author: “‘The Typing Ghost has not recorded any lively details about this hospital ward. This interlude in my life is not part of the book in consequence.’ It was by making exasperating remarks like this that Caroline Rose continued to interfere with the book” (Spark, 1999: 135). At this moment in the narrative both, the author and *the author’s fictional double* seem to be negotiating their space. Caroline’s identification with the author is patent throughout the novel by means of continuous metaphors and insinuations which force the reader to an almost continuous exercise of interpretation.

Her sense of being written into the novel was painful. Of her constant influence on its course she remained unaware and now she was impatient for the story to come to an end, knowing that the narrative could never become coherent to her until she was at last *outside it, and at the same time consummately inside it*. (My emphasis) (Spark, 1957: 165)

To be outside the narrative, “and at the same time consummately inside it” is basically what the self-effacement technique is all about. Imitating the author in fiction Caroline acquiesces at the authorial dictates playing the role of *the author’s fictional double*. Through the depiction of Caroline’s attempts at self-affirmation, the fiction-writing self succeeds in completing her process of self-effacement. By means of this technique the more the fiction-writing self seems absent from the narrative, the more we notice its presence.



### 3.1.2 The *author's Hybrid Character*: Georgina Hogg

As has been explained before in this study, Spark's novels present a recurrent pattern: a protagonist who stands for *the author's fictional double*, and an apparent secondary character who exerts some kind of influence over the protagonist. This second type of character will be called *the author's hybrid character*, since the narrative seems to place them half-way between reality and fiction. This section will analyse the character of Mrs Georgina Hogg, who plays the role of *the author's hybrid character* in *The Comforters*.

Mrs Hogg, in the same way as Caroline, is introduced in the novel before she is physically present. Curiously enough, both characters are presented in the narrative by means of that same letter which Laurence writes to Caroline. This foreshadows the connection between them:

Apparently there's a woman by name of Hogg at the outfit you are staying at. She's a sort of manageress. Mother got her the job. God knows why. We all loathe her. That's why we've always gone out of our way for her really. She's that Georgina Hogg I think I've mentioned, the one who used to be a kind of nursery-governess before we went to school. She got married but her husband left her. Poor bastard, no wonder. We used to feel sorry for him. She suffers from chronic righteousness, exerts a sort of moral blackmail. Mother has a conscience about her — about hating her so much I mean, is terrified of her but won't admit it. Father calls her Manders' Mortification. Of course, she's harmless really if you don't let her get under your skin. (Spark, 1999: 20-22)

Mrs Hogg's extremely negative description catches the readers' attention from the beginning and keeps them alert to her manipulative role in the narrative. Early in the novel, Mrs Jepp, Laurence's grandmother, insinuates Mrs Hogg's secret cause:

“I said that I would not wish to have that poisonous woman in my house for a five-second visit. It fairly puts you against Catholics, a person like that” (Spark, 1999: 22-23).

Spark’s conversion to Catholicism provided her a comforting sense of belonging at first. According to Stannard, “[Muriel] had never felt at home anywhere until she entered the Catholic Church. The competitive scratchiness of the Poetry Society and Neo-Romantic circles had been replaced by the welcome of an international spiritual family” (Stannard, 2009: 156). Nevertheless, she soon felt the harassment of those holier-than-thou Catholics who arrogated to themselves the role of preservers of the Faith:

[Spark] considered herself a loyal Catholic. Nevertheless, she found herself frustrated by others’ blind faith, and her refusal to succumb to humourless ecclesiastical authority remained with her for life. On various occasions friends complained that she could not just make up her religion as she went along. But many British Catholics (...) were over-anxious about betraying their Church and she insisted on distinguishing between doubt and disbelief. (Stannard, 2010: 158)

Spark seems to demonize those sanctimonious moralists whose righteous principles and patronizing tone threaten her belief. Mrs Hogg plays the role of one of these zealous Catholics who, feeling morally superior, attempt to give spiritual comfort to new converts. Spark showed her concern about the lack of transcendence that many Catholics exposed in favour of more mundane preoccupations in a letter to Stanford at the time of her conversion: “Doubt is never fixed, never at rest until it

finds truth by defining. (...) Catholics are scared stiff of the Holy Ghost, and that's the truth, though the Church teaches far otherwise" (Stannard, 2010: 159).<sup>4</sup>

The way Mrs Hogg seems to impose her beliefs presents her as the fictionalization of one of those "comforters" who negatively affected Spark's conversion process. Similarly, from a metafictional perspective, Mrs Hogg's hybridity portrays her as a character who is in league with the author. She is described as a suffocating character because she stalks the rest of the characters to make the authorial dictates be accomplished. *The Comforters* fictionalizes the (Catholic) figure of an omniscient God-like author, but the novel presents an inversion since any notion of authorial presence in the narrative is felt threatening instead of comforting. Mrs Hogg, then, as *the author's hybrid character*, is felt untrustworthy and frightening at the same time. Later in the novel, Caroline emphasizes both Mrs Hogg's toxic Catholicism and her proximity to the author:

"I got the impression that she's a type who acts instinctively: she'd do any evil under the guise of good. But she wouldn't engage in deliberate malice. She's too superstitious. In fact, Mrs. Hogg is a Catholic atrocity, like the tin medals and bleeding hearts. I don't see her as a cold-blooded blackmailer." (...) It stuck within her like something which would go neither up nor down, the shapeless notion that Mrs Hogg was somehow in league with her invisible persecutor. She would not speak of this nor give it verbal form in her mind. (Spark, 1999: 91)

Mrs Hogg's increasing negative portrayal can be noticed as the novel develops: "Once Mrs. Hogg had left, Caroline sprayed the room with a preparation for eliminating germs and insects" (Spark, 1999: 167). Mrs Hogg's disturbing

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<sup>4</sup> Autograph letter, 31 May 1954, Spark to Stanford.

presence, besmirching the narrative in her passing, makes Caroline resent the authorial influence which, as an infectious epidemic, threatens her to “get under [her] skin” (Spark, 1999: 20). This association between Mrs Hogg and a kind of contagious disease approximates her to Baruch’s notion of abjection, for she “may menace [the rest of the characters] from the inside” (1996: 118).

As for her physical appearance, her description varies significantly as the novel develops:

[A]n angular face, cropped white hair, no eyelashes, rimless glasses, a small fat nose of which the tip was twitching as she ate, very thin neck, a colossal bosom. Caroline realized that she had been staring at Mrs Hogg’s breasts for some time, and was aware at the same moment that the woman’s nipples were showing dark and prominent through her cotton blouse. The woman was apparently wearing nothing underneath. Caroline looked swiftly away, sickened at the sight, for she was prim; her sins of the flesh had been fastidious always. (Spark, 1999: 25-26)

Paradoxically, this description of Mrs Hogg’s almost indecent physical appearance is a far cry from the look she had when she was younger: “Her pale red-gold hair, round pale-blue eyes, her piglet ‘flesh-coloured’ face: Georgina Hogg had certain attractions at the time of her marriage” (Spark, 1999: 117). It seems as if Mrs Hogg’s physical appearance, suffering from a kind of Dorian Gray-like effect, shows her growing alienating methods and dubious principles and morals. Her almost obscene portrayal corroborates Caroline’s impression of Mrs Hogg as a “Catholic atrocity” (Spark, 1999: 86). According to Waugh,

Mrs Hogg forces her overwhelming physical and mental presence upon the other characters and upon the reader. The novel, however, goes on to delight in demonstrating the impossibility of this presence. Her physical grossness appears to

be metaphorically (and conventionally realistically) related to her inner moral condition. (1984: 55)

Mrs Hogg's unbearable presence responds to her hybrid nature. The detailed description of her physical attributes and the indecent way she is exposed recreate her external influence. She has been created to be noticed. She is a flat character, a useful device for the author to practice her self-effacement. By means of this hybrid character the author manages to control the plot from within.

*As the author's hybrid character*, Mrs Hogg's nature is not completely fictional, nor real. This ambiguity leads her to be portrayed as an abject character in the narrative: "throughout those years since her marriage, Mrs Hogg had sought in vain for an effectual garment to harness her tremendous and increasing bosom" (Spark, 1999: 126). This almost pornographic exposure of Mrs Hogg's physical appearance, all this excess, insinuates her monstrosity. According to Cavallaro,

In hybrid and grotesque bodies, the overall monstrous effect frequently results from a familiar human feature being subjected to strategies of exaggeration and distortion. By recourse to popular motifs such as bulging abdomens, protruding eyes and penis-like noses, those bodies challenge drastically the visions of seamlessness, harmony and wholeness advocated by classical aesthetics, veering instead towards the sprawling, plural and penetrable organism. (Cavallaro, 2002: 193)

Therefore, her unfamiliar, exaggerated physical appearance reinforces her role as the instrument with which the fiction-writing self "penetrates" the narrative. In other words, by means of Mrs Hogg's increasing monstrosity the reader ascertains the author's growing intention to impose her presence in the narrative. There are

several scenes which insinuate Georgina Hogg's close relation with the author by portraying her as an omniscient character. Her greediness to have the authorial dictates be accomplished is translated in the narrative by an insatiable appetite.

Georgina at ten, arriving at the farm for the summer holidays with her bloodless face, reddish hair, lashless eyes, her greediness, would tell the cousins, 'I can know the thoughts in your head.' (...)

There was always something in her mouth: grass — she would eat grass if there was nothing else to eat. (Spark, 1999: 119).

Spark establishes here an important reference to the *Book of Job*, a work on which she had written before she became a novelist. Indeed, she had planned a whole book on the *Book of Job*, but only got as far as an article before her first novel, *The Comforters*. Moreover, this Biblical text lies behind much of her work. In the scene above, Mrs. Hogg's monstrous appetite parallels that of the Biblical monster Behemoth: "Behold now behemoth, which I made with thee; He eateth grass as an ox" (Job, 40: 15). After all his suffering, Job is eventually comforted by God. God's answer, nonetheless, evokes the words of an artist speaking proudly of his own creation.

In Spark's novel *The Only Problem* (1984), Harvey Gotham, the protagonist, is writing a study on the *Book of Job* trying to find an answer to the "unspeakable sufferings of the world" (19). At first, he is not satisfied with God's answer to Job because Harvey, as Jung did before, makes the mistake of *anthropomorphizing* God, that is, framing Him in the same narrative level as Job, turning the Creator into a mere character: "God as a character comes out badly, very badly. Thunder and bluster and I'm Me, who are you? Putting on an act. Behold now Leviathan.

Behold now Behemoth” (19). Harvey ignores God’s challenge to Job when He asks: “Wilt thou condemn me, that you mayest be righteous?” (Job, 40: 8). God is the creator, the author, and will not accept the insubordination of his own characters. Spark, through the creation of Mrs Hogg penetrates the fictional world of her character, Caroline, to offer her real comfort, a sense of truth. This is a lesson in humility. Through the link between Behemoth and Mrs Hogg, Spark tries to teach Caroline a lesson in authorial omnipotence and omnipresence. Consequently, in the same way as Behemoth reminds God’s authority in the world, Mrs Hogg’s overwhelming presence ensures the author’s control over the narrative.

Any description of Mrs Hogg only points out to the magnificence of the authorial creation and reinforces her absolute control over the rest of the characters. Mrs Hogg is given carnal, wild and even animal attributes in the narrative. Her amorphous appearance changes along the novel at the convenience of the narrative; sometimes she appears more human, others she looks more like an animal, but her aberrant presence always fills the scene with her grotesqueness: “she senses my weakness, my loathing of human flesh when the bulk outweighs the intelligence” (Spark, 1999: 27).

Thus, Mrs Hogg’s bizarre image shadows her discourse. Mrs Hogg, then, as *the author’s hybrid character*, is voiceless, since the authorial voice speaks through her.

Mrs Hogg ate heartily at lunch. Caroline sat as far away from her as possible to avoid the sight of her large mouth chewing, and the memory of that sight, when at St Philumena’s, she had first observed Mrs Hogg sitting opposite to her at the refectory table, chew — pause — chew — pause. Mrs Hogg spoke little, but she was very much present. (Spark, 1999: 171)

Even voiceless, she has a powerful discourse in the form of an image full of significance which recreates the author's self-effacement. As a hybrid character, Mrs Hogg is allowed to move freely through the narrative. She appears and disappears from the plot in rather unnatural ways, always attending the author's needs. She is thought to make use of those interstitial spaces, those virtual corridors of Spark's porous narrative which connect reality and fiction: "as soon as Mrs Hogg stepped into her room she disappeared, she simply disappeared. She had no private life whatsoever. God knows where she went in her privacy" (Spark, 1999: 131). This quote reveals Mrs Hogg's intimate relationship with the God-like author whom she seems to share her privacy with. This fact emphasizes her sinister depiction: "And what a day for Mrs Hogg, that gargoyle, climbing to her mousy room at Chiswick where, as she opened the door, two mice scuttled one after the other swiftly down their hole beside the gas meter" (Spark, 1999: 131). Georgina's mousy room nurtures our idea of her capacity to move freely through the "holes" of the Sparkian narrative. Her mysterious disappearances from the plot give Mrs Hogg supernatural characteristics. There is a scene close to the end of the novel which relates in detail Georgina Hogg's spooky nature.

"Well, yes, she was snoring," Helena said. "And I thought the sleep would do her good. After a while she stopped snoring. I said to Willi, "She's dead asleep." Then Willi's cigarette lighter gave out and he asked for some matches. I thought there were some at the back of the car, but I didn't want to wake Georgina. So I pulled up. And when I turned to reach for the matches, I couldn't see Georgina."

"Why, what had happened?"

"She simply wasn't there," Helena declared. "I said to Willi, "Heavens, where's Georgina?" and Willi said, "My God! she's gone!" Well, just as he said this, we



saw Georgina again. She suddenly appeared before our eyes at the back of the car, sitting in the same position and blinking, as if she'd just then woken up. It was as if there'd been a black-out at the films. I would have thought I'd been dreaming the incident, but Willi apparently had the same experience. He said, "Where have you been, Mrs Hogg? You vanished, didn't you?" She looked really surprised, she said, "I've been asleep, sir." (Spark, 1999: 155-156)

Mrs Hogg's ghostly condition corroborates the fact that she only exists when it is necessary for the plot, if not, she simply disappears.

One morning Caroline had an unexpected caller. She had opened the door of her flat unguardedly, expecting the parcel post. For a second Caroline got the impression that nobody was there, but then immediately she saw the woman standing heavily in the doorway and recognized the indecent smile of Mrs. Hogg just as she had last seen it at St. Philumena's. (Spark, 1957: 181)

Georgina Hogg's personal life is also described in detail. As opposed to Caroline, we are told of Mrs Hogg's past and her relation to some of the characters in the novel in a different time and space from that of the plot. Thus, we know that she worked in Laurence's house as a servant of the Manders family when Laurence was a child. We are also informed that Mrs Hogg was married to Mr. Mervyn Hogarth, when they were young.

By that time [Mr Hogarth] had married Georgina instead of hacking out her image in stone. A mistake. She turned out not at all to be his style, her morals were as flat-chested as her form was sensuous; she conversed in acid drops while her breasts swelled with her pregnancy. He left her at the end of four months. (Spark, 1957: 142)

Mrs Hogg's description when she got married emphasizes her hybridity. Her physical appearance seems to contrast with her inner manners and behaviour. This contradictory portrayal draws our attention to Mrs Hogg's role in the narrative. Her physical appearance is excessive as her destiny is tragic. Mrs Hogg's notorious physicality is essential because she works as a symbol, a graphic portent of the authorial proximity. Her inner morals are negatively described because they are ambivalent and artificially conformed at the author's convenience.

Later on, we are informed that "[Mr Hogarth] assumes the name of Hogg on the dark side of his life and Hogarth by daylight so to speak" (Spark, 1999: 150). Mervyn Hogarth renounces his family name in favour of the hideous Mrs Hogg. Marrying Mr Hogg Georgina captures his very essence. This event highlights Mrs Hogg's influence over the narrative. She blackmails with identities in the same way than an author would do with the characters of their works. We do not know about Georgina's maiden name. It seems as if she has no existence of her own; as if she always stands for anyone else, "She looked very like Mervyn in profile" (Spark, 1999: 118-119). Mrs Hogg originates and resides in the authorial universe and adopts the form which is more convenient for the proper development of the narrative.

Every acceptance on the part of Mrs Hogg seem to be summarized in the following scene:

Georgina was speaking. "Repent and be converted, Mervyn."

He shuddered, all hunched in the chair as he was, penetrated by the chill of danger. Georgina's lust for converts to the Faith was terrifying, for by the Faith she meant herself. He felt himself shrink to a sizable item of prey, hovering on the shores of her monstrous mouth to be masticated to a pulp and to slither unrecognisably down

that abominable gully, that throat he could almost see as she smiles her smile of all-forgetting. “Repent, Mervyn. Be converted.” (Spark, 1957: 147)

If *The Comforters*, this dissertation argues, is a fictional account of Spark’s traumatic process of conversion, this scene presents a valid metaphor. Mrs Hogg represents all those fears that the new convert has to go through in the first steps into the Church. Consequently, this scene depicts an inversion of this first incursion: Mrs Hogg’s monstrous feminine figure represents an inversion of that Church urging us to “repent and be converted” which provokes a sense of rejection. At the same time, Mrs Hogg, taking over the role of the Creator, “masticates” us also offering an inverted Communion. This image reveals the author/creator intentions by linking reality and fiction.

Mrs Hogg and Mr Hogarth’s unnatural encounter mirrors the unbalanced relationship between the author and her creation. Mrs Hogg’s description in terms of excessive physical attributes and insatiable appetite emphasizes her ambiguity and exposes her role as *the author’s hybrid character*. Thus, this scene recreates the writer devouring her narrative in a narcissistic exercise of authorial omnipotence. Mrs Hogg, the harbinger of the author, stands as a reminder of a world beyond fiction.

Patricia Waugh confirms this idea, but she gives Mrs Hogg a minor role: “Georgina Hogg is a public figure in all senses of the word because she is contained by, and exists through, the public medium of language. Thus, having been designated a minor role in the plot, when not essential to its unfolding, she does not exist” (Waugh, 1984: 55). However, the present study, as has been explained, grants

Mrs Hogg a crucial role in the plot. Mrs Hogg's unbearable physicality which denotes her realness collides with the linguistic composition that her fictional nature requires. She is necessary for the author to trespass and invade the fictional space. Her presence is forced in the narrative. Consequently, her physicality may result aberrant but, at the same time, creates a sense in which language "turns into flesh", fiction acquires the vivid dimension the fiction-writing self needs to become an absent presence. Thus, through the interplay between Mrs Hogg and Caroline, the writer can take the fragments of her experience into fiction finding a fertile ground to reflect on them from a more objective position.

### **3.1.3 The author's first Spark**

As this study elaborates, in *The Comforters* Spark performs a self-discovery exercise in order to fully deal with her own process of conversion which took place by the time she was writing the novel. *The Comforters* can be analyzed as the fictionalization of Spark's conversion process. This experimental novel introduces Caroline Rose, a student of fiction who is writing a novel on the Form of the Modern Novel and who has recently converted to Catholicism, playing the leading role. As this study argues, Caroline's description and story lead the reader to identify her as *the author's fictional double*. The distress and anguish which accompanied Spark's process of conversion is materialized in the figure of the hideous Mrs Hogg, a zealous Catholic, whose arguable morals and manners undermine her cause. Mrs Hogg's proximity to the author insinuates her hybrid nature: she seems to be half-way between reality and fiction; this character seems to trespass the narrative levels

conveying information from one dimension to the other which gives the plot supernatural connotations. This unnatural condition leads the narrative to portray her as *the author's hybrid character*.

The structure of the novel mirrors the Catholic organizational pattern where the presence of an omniscient God may be perceived through his Creation. Mrs Hogg, as the harbinger of the God-like author, materializes the presence of the fiction-writing self in the narrative. However, *The Comforters* presents an inversion, since any authorial proximity causes distress instead of comfort. The confrontation between Caroline and Mrs Hogg mirrors the inner tensions and contradictions that the new convert has to go through. This opposition gradually builds up to a powerful climax by the end of the novel. In this scene, Caroline, Mrs Hogg, Laurence (Caroline's former boyfriend), Helena (Laurence's mother) and the Baron (Helena's friend) are spending a peaceful summer day in the country. At first, Caroline and Laurence were to enjoy a riverside picnic together but, after a series of events, the narrative forces them to share their day off with the rest of the characters. The spot chosen to spend the day has a symbolic meaning since it is by the river "Medway where it borders Kent and Sussex" (168). This border area between two counties is a kind of no-man land, which helps the reader to elaborate the idea of an encounter between opposites. This hybrid territory also endows the scene with a halo of transcendence where fiction and reality seem to merge. The proximity of a river contributes to give the scene a sense of continuity and evolution and frames it as a relevant scene in the development of the novel.

The first to arrive are Caroline and Laurence and half an hour later “they could see as [Helena] bumped down the track towards them that she had brought two people with her, a man beside her in the front and a woman with *a black hat* at the back. The couple turned out to be the Baron and Mrs Hogg” (Spark, 1999: 168). Mrs Hogg’s witch-like hat exposes her nature. This idea is nurtured throughout the novel:

At various times the Baron had described to Caroline the stages by which he had reached the conclusion that Mervyn Hogarth was a diabolist and magician. The first hint had come to him from Eleanor. ‘She told me he had previously been through a form of marriage with a witch. Eleanor had seen the witch, a repulsive woman.’ (Spark, 1999: 164)

The Baron blames Mrs Hogg for having introduced Mr Hogarth to witchcraft. In this sense, Mr Hogg, who after separating from his “witch-wife” changed his family name to Hogarth to avoid any relation, is presented as Mrs Hogg’s first “victim”. Later, in the course of a conversation between the Baron and Caroline on Mrs Hogg’s vanishing incident, the Baron’s remarks reinforce this idea:

“There is no other way of accounting for the strange phenomenon in the car but to accept the fact that this woman Hogg is a witch.”  
 “Not necessarily,” Caroline said, “even if she did disappear. I think she’s too ignorant to be a witch.” And she added, “Not that I believe in witches Particularly” (172).

Caroline’s words undermine the idea of Mrs Hogg as a powerful figure. Incapable of taking any sort of action by herself, Mrs Hogg is described as a puppet in the hands of a superior authority existing in a dimension different from theirs. Caroline

accepts Mrs Hogg's disappearances as part of her relation to that otherworldly presence which she also identifies as the source of the mysterious voices. At this point in the novel, Caroline does not think of Mrs Hogg as a threatening presence, now that she knows "all the possibilities of the natural order" (55). Caroline's acceptance of the intricacies of the plot anticipates a change of perspective. Caroline's new attitude is revealed in the course of a conversation with Helena. Helena, uncertain of her welcome, apologizes for having taken Mrs Hogg and tells Caroline about Mrs Hogg's vanishing in their drive to the riverside. This time, Caroline normalizes Mrs Hogg's "absences":

"It may have been some telepathic illusion shared by you and Willi," Caroline said.

"I shouldn't worry." (...)

"Maybe when she goes to sleep she disappears as a matter of course,—” Caroline said with a dry laugh so that Helena would not take her too seriously.

"What a gruesome idea. Well, I swear that she did apparently vanish. All I saw when I first looked round was the empty seat."

"Maybe she has no private life whatsoever," Caroline said, and she giggled to take the grim edge off her words. (Spark, 1999: 170-171)

This conversation mirrors that of Caroline with Father Jerome – when the priest identified the voices Caroline heard as telepathy. This time, Caroline's comforting attitude responds to her gradual understanding of the mechanics of the novel. From a metafictional point of view, this change of perspective reflects how Caroline is beginning to accept her fictional nature. In some way, she understands that she has been granted some freedom of "action", that is, her share of authorial power, on condition that she accepts her part in the author's plot. Caroline's privileges in her fictional world make her a relevant character, as important as to be allowed to plot

within the plot. This postulate is insinuated in the following conversation between Helena and the Baron:

“Is it all off between Laurence and Caroline?”

“No, I don’t think so. They are waiting (...) ‘I suppose Caroline wants to get her book off her hands.’ (...)”

“Caroline’s “book”,—” he said; “do you mean the book she is writing or the one in which she lives?” (...)”

“Now, Willi! Caroline is not a silly girl. She did have a little upset and imagined things, I know. And then there was the accident. But since that time she’s recovered wonderfully.”

“*My dear Helena, I do assure you that Caroline has been receiving communications from her Typing Spooks continuously since that time.*” (Spark, 1999: 176)

The Baron’s remark on the Typing Spooks insinuates the idea that those spooky voices that Caroline hears have actually been conveying valuable information to Caroline. This remark, together with Helena’s ambiguous commentary on Caroline’s book, contributes to elaborate the idea of Caroline being empowered in the plot, which precipitates the novel’s resolution.

After having lunch, Mrs Hogg goes for a walk “downstream, by the towpath” (174) and the Baron goes to meet Mervyn Hogarth at a nearby Abbey. Caroline, Laurence and Helena stay enjoying the lazy afternoon. The revelatory scene begins:

Laurence lay listening to their voices, contentedly oblivious of what they said. He was too somnolent in the warmth of the sun to take part in the conversation and too enchanted by his sense of the summer day to waste it in sleep. He watched the movements of a young fat woman on a houseboat moored nearby. Every now and then she would disappear into the cabin to fetch something. He wished the



houseboat were his. (...) A little rowing boat which lay alongside caught Laurence's fancy. (Spark, 1999: 177)

This passage is introduced as Laurence's sleepy vision which, immediately, confers the scene some oneiric connotations; a dream-like fantasy where fiction and reality blur. According to Freedman, this revealing scene, "not only stage[s] the invisible but seek[s] to make invisible that which is already present" (2012: 196). The mysterious fat woman on the houseboat catches not only Laurence's but also the reader's attention. She does not speak; she only drinks tea on her houseboat until a storm starts to thunder overhead. Then, the woman gets inside and out of sight. Soon we realize that she will contribute to the desirable denouement of the story. She acts as "an absent presence that moves and so is both present and invisible" (Freedman, 2012: 196). Her powerful silent presence foreshadows her relevant position in the plot. Thus, this woman has been imposed by the narrative not to comfort, but to assist Caroline in her way to transcend the novel.

After a series of events conveniently contrived by the fiction-writing self, Caroline must ask the mysterious woman for the rowing boat twice, first to fetch the Baron and then Mrs Hogg. In the same way as the frightening voices who terrified Caroline could not be recorded by the tape-recorder, there is no written record of this conversation in the novel. A kind of a secret alliance between the author and her *fictional double* is insinuated. The author and Caroline appear to be working together for the first time. Mrs Hogg's presence is coming to an end.

The houseboat, in the same way as the typewriter, the black box-like tape-recorder and the shining black open racer, is just one of those devices which convey

portions of reality to fiction; they help us to perceive the author's presence throughout the story. At this point in the novel, the image of a houseboat evokes a former one in the novel; it takes place during the course of a conversation between Laurence and his grand-mother, Mrs Jepp:

“If you won thirty thousand in the pool, what would you do?” Laurence said.  
 “Buy a boat,” she replied  
 “I would paddle you up and down the river,” Laurence said. “A houseboat would be nice. Do you remember that fortnight on the houseboat, my first year at prep school?”  
 “I mean a boat for crossing the sea. Yes it was lovely on the houseboat.” (...)  
 “Well, a good-sized boat”, said Louisa, “that’s what I’d buy. Suitable for crossing the Channel.” (Spark, 1999: 10)

This initial scene seems to foreshadow the final one, giving the plot its circular structure. This artistic device makes the reader get familiarized with the sub-plots inherent in the novel, his attention being focused on that authority beyond fiction who the narrative points to: the omnipresent fiction-writing self. In metafictional terms, Mrs Jepp's remark on the dream-like boat as “suitable for crossing the Channel” adds extra significance to the presence of the houseboat in this revelatory scene. “Crossing the Channel” evokes an idea of escape. Sailing on the houseboat the plump woman seems to be sailing along the narrative. To know how to sail the narrative, instead of being dragged by it, can be understood as a metaphor of complying with a convenient role playing.

Therefore, the representation of water in the novel always evokes any tragic change in the development of events which must be understood as some kind of authorial intrusiveness. After the accident, Caroline has her leg broken and has to

spend some time in hospital: “[s]he lived now in a flat in Hampstead (...) with only a slight twinge in her leg before rainy weather to remind her of the fracture, and in reminding her, to bring the surprise of having had a serious accident” (Spark, 1999: 132). From a metafictional analysis, this reminds her of the existence of another world beyond fiction which highlights her role as *the author’s fictional double*. There is a complementary identification as difficult to discern “as well try to distinguish between the sea and the water in it” (Spark, 1999: 77). This last parallelism evokes the idea of Caroline as the *container* of the author, thus, obeying the alienating depiction of the authorial self: “In her private neurotic amusement Caroline decided to yield. Ten more minutes of Mrs Hogg. The rain pelted with sudden fury against the windows while she turned to the woman with a patronizing patience” (Spark, 1999: 26). Thus, the rain foreshadows a bad omen and, most of the times in the narrative, anticipates Mrs Hogg’s presence as the harbinger of the authorial control: “A light rain had started to pat the windows (...). Presently the middle-aged housekeeper put her head round the drawing-room door” (Spark, 1999: 127).

The resolution scene is also set under the rain. The first time that Caroline has to borrow the boat to fetch the Baron, “the rain had started, but it was light and the river calm” (Spark, 1999: 163). However, the storm worsens when she has to fetch Mrs Hogg. Water, meaning the authorial intrusiveness, precipitates the action and gives a tragic tone of disaster. The end draws near: “The thunder was still distant. The storm that was raging some miles away seemed unlikely to reach them, but now the rain was heavy (...) ‘Oh, there’s Georgina!’” (Spark, 1999: 164).

Caroline seems to have been informed of what is going to happen next and acts carefully as following someone else's instructions:

She knew she would have to give Mrs Hogg a hand into the boat. The anticipation of this physical contact, her hand in Mrs Hogg's only for a moment, horrified Caroline. (...)

"Step down here, Mrs Hogg. On to that stone. Give me your hand. Take care, the river's deep here." (...)

"I'm doing fine," Caroline thought, gripping the woman's hand tightly in her own. She was filled with the consciousness of hand. (Spark, 1999: 180)

Mrs Hogg's hand in Caroline's conjures up the physical contact between Caroline and the author. Mrs Hogg's hand on Caroline's has opened a hole in the narrative and Caroline gets filled up with the authorial awareness. The whole plot seems to have been secretly arranged for this scene to happen: Mrs Hogg slips on her heels when both women were in the water:

Mrs Hogg lashed about her in a screaming panic. Caroline freed herself and gripped the side of the boat. But she was wrenched away, the woman's hands were on her neck — "I can't swim!"

Caroline struck her in the face. "Hold on to my shoulders," she shouted. "I can swim." (Spark, 1999: 181)

According to our previous postulate on the significance of water in *The Comforters*, the image of Caroline and Mrs Hogg trying to save their lives in the water reflect their immersion in the narrative itself. Caroline is a literary critic who is writing about the form of the novel, so she is aware of the intricacies of the narrative as she herself states: "I haven't been studying novels for three years without knowing

some of the technical tricks” (Spark, 1999: 87-88). Caroline’s artistic condition prevents her from being swallowed by the narrative because she *can swim*.

Caroline saw the little boat bobbing away downstream. Then her sight became blocked by one of Mrs Hogg’s great hands clawing across her eyes, the other hand tightening on her throat. Mrs Hogg’s body, and even legs, encompassed Caroline so that her arms were restricted. She knew then that if she could not free herself from Mrs Hogg, they would both go under. (Spark, 1999: 181)

Mrs Hogg’s huge presence fills the scene until the end by preventing Caroline from taking any kind of action. Caroline and Mrs Hogg’s is a fight for transcendence in the plot. No linguistic representation is needed; the scene is described with symbolic identification.

The woman clung to Caroline’s throat until the last. It was not until Mrs Hogg opened her mouth finally to the inrush of water that her grip slackened and Caroline was free, her lungs aching for *the breath of life*. Mrs Hogg subsided away from her. *God knows where she went*. (My emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 181)

The scene depicts an inversion of birth creating a connection between the author’s creative art and the process of giving birth to a child. The character of Caroline emerges conscious of being *the author’s fictional double*. We must not forget that the novel itself is a metaphor of Spark’s conversion process. From this perspective, after being *baptised* into the waters of the narrative, Caroline is reborn as a new character completely conscious of her fictitious nature. This fact invites the reader to establish a clear link with Spark’s assimilation of her own process of conversion.

Mrs. Hogg disappears from the plot. She “subsides away”, sinks into the water, but her corpse does not appear in the book. We are not informed of her

whereabouts. Consequently, Georgina Hogg's body vanishes into the narrative, but part of her essence remains alive in Caroline through her equation with the author.

According to Peter M Sinclair,

If death is the ultimate frontier in life, a horizon that cannot be transcended, it marks the limits of representation in literature. But Spark's postmodernist experiments entertain the possibility that narrative can transgress the boundary between this world and death, a natural and supernatural world. (2010: 72)

Accordingly, Mrs Hogg's disappearance from the novel gives transcendence to her existence and reinforces her role as *the author's hybrid character*. The narrative evolves around Caroline as the object but also as the subject of the action which leads the reader to identify her as *the author's fictional double*. Once the scene in the water is over, a voice wakes her up:

"Jolly good luck I had my friend here. I can't swim myself."

Caroline lay in the bunk of the houseboat, without a sense or even a care of where she was. She recognized Helena, then the plump woman of the houseboat and a strange man who was taking off all his dripping wet clothes. Caroline had a sense of childhood, and she closed her eyes. (Spark, 1999: 166)

'A voice', which is a clear reference to the authorial voice, awakens Caroline and, in some way, brings her back to life. This time Caroline is not frightened but comforted. She is reborn to a new kind of existence that she feels as comfortably as being back in childhood. Curiously enough, Caroline is rescued from the river by a man, not a woman. This fact together with Caroline's feeling of childhood lead the reader to establish a parallelism between this mysterious character and Spark's influential paternal figure. From a psychoanalytical perspective, her idolized father

brings Spark back to the former notion of the ideal subject. The symbolic *other* has been assimilated and a new identity arises as a result. This male character is precisely who mentions the idea of *the other* when referring to Mrs Hogg:

“There was no sign of *the other*,’ the man was saying. ‘She’s had it. Any relation?’  
 “No,” said Helena’s voice.” (My emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 181)

From this relevant scene on, Caroline is portrayed exclusively as a writer. At the beginning of *The Comforters* we are informed of Caroline’s artistic condition as she is writing a novel on the Form in the Modern Novel and is having difficulty with “the chapter on realism” (40) Paraphrasing Swinden, expressing reality in fiction is a recurrent difficulty which authors come across because “the patterns we impose on reality are distinct, in action and in thought, from reality itself” (1973: 256). Spark’s famous and frequently quoted statement to Kermode where she claims that her novels are not truth, but fiction (1963: 80), takes on particular relevance in *The Comforters*, a novel that tells the story of a parallel process of writing a novel and converting to Catholicism. The character of Caroline is designed to reflect the author’s anxieties and force the reader to establish a connection with the fiction-writing self. This process of identification turns fiction into the vehicle for the authorial voice. Spark states in *My Conversion*: “Nobody can deny that I speak with my own voice as a writer now, whereas before my conversion I was never sure what I was” (Spark, 1961a: 26).

According to Spark’s consideration on her fiction, Caroline’s reality is true but only a part of a much more objective reality which is the truth of the author. The authorial

reality, in turn, becomes a part in a superior organizational pattern which tends to an absolute truth. Narrative levels in fiction mirror those invisible levels in reality. That is why at the end of *The Comforters* we read what seems to be Caroline's novel which, in turn, belongs to Spark's novel. Our expectations for an end are never fulfilled because Spark's fiction refuses to impose an end. She is not interested in the story's denouement, but in the truth of that story. We can also speculate that Caroline's fulfilment of her first novel on *The Form of the Modern Novel* may be understood as the culmination of Spark's therapeutic activity of writing her experimental novel.

The two final scenes are really significant since they openly display the experimental nature of the novel. They act as a kind of epilogue which brings to light the communion between the art of fiction and God's created world.

Caroline had finished her book about novels. Now she announced she was going away on a long holiday. She was going to write a novel.

"I don't call that a holiday," said Helena, "not if you mean to spend it writing a novel."

"This is a holiday of obligation," Caroline replied.

"What's the novel to be about?-"

Caroline answered, "Characters in a novel." (Spark, 1999: 186)

The whole dialogue has a sacramental tone since Caroline talks about the process of writing her novel as a "holiday of obligation". There is a final turn of the screw when the complete identification between Caroline and the writer is manifested. Caroline sends Laurence to her apartment in order to collect some books: "A few weeks later the character called Laurence Manders was snooping around in Caroline Rose's flat (...) He took his time (...) He thought, 'What am I looking for?'" (Spark,



1999: 186). Laurence's artificial description as a character in a novel elaborates the idea that what we are reading is in fact Caroline's new novel which, as we have been informed, is about "Characters in a novel". Laurence, while searching for Caroline's books, comes across some notes she wrote. He gets annoyed as soon as he reads them and decides to write Caroline a letter: "I found an enormous sheaf of your notes for your novel in the cupboard in that carton marked *Keep in a Cool Place*. Why did you leave them behind?" (my emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 186-187). Caroline's notes, as the rest of the valuable information in the novel, are cunningly concealed from the reader. Caroline is trafficking with information imitating the author. Her acceptance of the role of *the author's fictional double* makes her become the co-creator of the plot.

Curiously enough, the novel ends as it opens, portraying Laurence writing a letter to Caroline. This contributes to the cyclic structure of the plot which gives the novel its sense of completeness: "Laurence wrote a long letter, re-read it, then folded and sealed it. He put it in his pocket" (Spark, 1999: 187). Nevertheless, Laurence never sends the letter to Caroline:

His letter had failed to express his objections. He took it out of his pocket and tore it up into small pieces, scattering them over the Heath where the wind bore them away. He saw the bits of paper come to rest, some on the scrubby ground, some among the deep marsh weeds, and one piece on a thorn-bush; and he did not then foresee his later wonder, with a curious rejoicing, how the letter had got into the book. (Spark, 1999: 187)

This final revelation emphasizes what was foreshadowed in the notes that Laurence found in Caroline's apartment: that they are all characters in a plot and that Caroline

has accepted her role as *the author's fictional double*. Laurence, “who terrorized the household with his sheer literal truths” (Spark, 1999: 5), is the closest of Caroline’s comforters, “a realist trapped in a metafictional novel whose ontological openness perpetually defies his grasp” (Waugh, 2018; 1644).

In a novel full of metafictional devices, Caroline is portrayed in opposition using language to approach the truth in her life and in her fictions. The final revelation that Laurence gets rejoiced when she discovers that his letter is in Caroline’s novel leads us to elaborate the idea that Laurence has been “converted” by Caroline. He seems to be aware now that he is a character in a plot. Writing the letter within Caroline’s plot, he, unconsciously, becomes a plotter and, as this study aims to prove, starts his way towards transcendence. According to Page,

It is a conclusion that, in its unexpected lyricism (...) anticipates other conclusions. It is also the point at which the Spark-novel and the Rose-novel at last coincide. The undelivered letter can only have got into ‘the book’, Caroline’s book, by supernatural means. Her book, which is also Muriel Spark’s book, has been co-authored by God. (Page, 1990: 14)

Freedom depends on, and is limited to, a convenient role playing. Spark is deeply interested in the relationship between the art of fiction and God’s created world. The relationship between the novelist and her characters imprints on *The Comforters* a marked aesthetic dimension which endows the whole work with a halo of transcendence so common in Spark’s literary production.

### 3.2 *THE DRIVER'S SEAT* (1970)

*The Driver's Seat* is the reference text chosen to illustrate the second stage of Spark's novelistic production, as it has been classified in this study. This period comprises those novels published between 1965 and 1979. First, it is important to contextualize this second phase which starts with the publication of Spark's eighth novel, *The Mandelbaum Gate*, in 1965, a novel that represented an intermediary step in her fiction. This novel can be seen as a re-examination of the role of religion in everyday life. As Malcolm Bradbury wrote in his review of the novel:

The Mandelbaum Gate in Jerusalem is the crossing point between Israel and Jordan; a place of tension where the present-day pilgrim to the Holy Places meets modern political division. In religious and in political terms, the Holy Land is a land of schism; and this fact has interested a number of novelists. The Holy Land novel has quite a place in the tradition of English fiction, particularly among Catholic novelists. (1965: 1)

The plot is set in Jerusalem in 1961. It recreates the story of Barbara Vaughan, a half-Jewish Catholic convert who suffers a personality crisis and travels to the Holy Land to re-establish her identity. According to Ruth Whittaker,

it is possible (...) to see the novel as a fictionalized version of a similar quest in the author's experience (...) the narrative does suggest an attempt by Mrs. Spark to assert some kind of independence of faith, or at least to accommodate aspects of her nature formerly made dormant by adherence to its laws (1982: 70-71).

According to Stannard, "the novel discussed no less a subject than the intersection of Judaic and Christian culture" (2010: 285). During its writing Spark suffered from

diverse diseases and psychological breakdowns, some of them due to her stressful and disorganized way of life. Stannard makes reference to this fact in his biography on Spark:

Apart from the struggle with *Mandelbaum*, perhaps because of it, Muriel's health was delicate. She ate little, smoked and sometimes drank more than was good for her. She had low blood pressure and the symptoms of anaemia. Gynaecological problems dogged her, resulting ultimately in a hysterectomy. Worse [was] the melancholy that occasionally defeated her body and her work plans. When she returned to England in May 1964, it was to have a large cyst removed from her head. (2009: 302-3)

In the same way as *The Comforters* was published soon after her conversion to Catholicism and after having suffered from hallucinations, *The Mandelbaum Gate* is the result of a period of spiritual and physical derangement which culminates in a distinct way of interpreting the communion between religious and worldly life. There is a feeling that Spark's physical problems come on a par with her spiritual upheaval and that some kind of physical sacrifice is needed.

Barbara, the protagonist of *The Mandelbaum Gate*, has fallen in love with Harry, a married man who is engaged as an archaeologist on the Dead Sea Scrolls site at Qumran in Jordan; both of them are waiting for Rome to annul his first marriage so that theirs can take place. So Barbara's pilgrimage to the Holy Land is in part religious, in part racial, and in part sexual and seems to mirror Spark's own pilgrimage.

By the time Muriel Spark started to write *The Mandelbaum Gate*, she had also been suffering for another identity crisis. She has been a Catholic for seven years since her conversion in 1954 and now she feels, as the protagonist of *The*

*Mandelbaum Gate*, “on the borderline between Judaic and Christian civilizations” (Stannard, 2009: 242). Spark tries to cope with this split spirituality of hers in order to get some kind of reassuring completion. As Bryan Cheyette claims, “[t]he problem with placing Spark in a tradition of Catholic writing – or any other monolithic tradition for that matter – is that she self-consciously resists such classifications” (2000: 9). At this time, Spark is still in the process of constructing her Catholic identity. According to Carruthers, “Identity in Spark’s fiction is often hybrid, contradictory even, so that it can be difficult to define with any certainty and this reflects her Catholic outlook that life itself is rather wonderfully mysterious and humans should not presume to define it in very limiting ways” (2010: 77). While Spark rejects limitations, she investigates secular forces, ideas, or institutions that are used by many as replacements for authentic belief. She reserves a substantial measure of criticism for the post-Vatican II Church as,

a very fallible institution whose members are seen as often caught up in their own power schemes or delusions of power, and where the quest for influence and crass, materialistic gain is often masked by pious motivations. Through her canvas became darker in these novels [where] she transfers her attention from God’s patterning of the world to human behavior and the malevolent designs that, through their schemes and actions, human beings concoct for one another in a fallen world. (Fraser, 1994: 169)

Muriel Spark feels the possibility of a change in the direction not only of her novelistic career but also of her life. This implies not merely a reaffirmation of her faith but a re-examination of it. She feels the need to travel to Israel to attempt to unify the split culture of her childhood; and this is precisely what her fictional double does in *The Mandelbaum Gate*. Thus, as Stannard records, she wants to get

“to ‘the Holy Land’, to ‘Israel’, to ‘occupied Palestine’, whatever the Christians, the Jews, or the Arabs wished to call it. Somehow that was, or might be, ‘home’” (Stannard, 2010: 242). She decided to travel alone in an attempt to get some kind of self-reflection. When Spark travels to Jerusalem in the summer of 1961 she finds a city divided between Israel and Jordan; not to mention the Eichmann trial. This division and upheaval give the place a hybrid halo of instability: “[e]verything in the Holy Land seemed divided, like Jerusalem, (...) and yet intrinsically whole as the site of Christ’s healing mission” (Stannard, 2009: 244). Once there, Spark climbed Mount Tabor from where she could enjoy a magnificent overview of the Holy Land; visited Nazareth, Mount Carmel and finally, on 6<sup>th</sup> July she went through the Mandelbaum Gate to Jordan; then she went on to Bethlehem and the other shrines debarred from the Jews. She knew that once she had passed through the Mandelbaum Gate, she could not re-enter Israel and would have to find her way home from Jordan. The Gate, then, became a symbol of transition, a point of no return. This significant journey exemplifies Spark’s return to her roots only to be able to go on with her new faith and precepts, “as if to counter an increasing pessimism about the role of religion in everyday life” (Whittaker, 1982: 70). Thus, Spark thinks of this location as “[a] place of transfigurations” (Stannard, 2010: 245).

For Spark, “the Transfiguration was fundamental to Christianity, the junction of the divine and the human, of the spiritual and the material, of Old and New Testaments. And Transfiguration was also the essence of art, the translation of fact into fiction or ‘vision’” (Stannard, 2010: 247). Therefore, we must

understand Transfiguration as the ability to create art from reality; in other words, the practice of transforming reality into fiction. However, Art does not reproduce reality but one of the aspects of that reality which the artist aims to represent. This last consideration fits the notion of truth in Spark's novels. Thus, paraphrasing Danto, creating fiction, the writer practices "The transfiguration of the commonplace", which, curiously enough, happens to be the title of a psychological treatise written by Sandy Stranger – one of the characters of a previous novel by Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961). This is a practice in which places (or bodies) retain "[their] identity through a substitution which is meant to illuminate [them] under novel attributes" (Danto, 1981: 172). Danto himself explains in his book that he took the title from Muriel Spark's novel,

Hers was a title I admired and coveted, resolving to take it for my own (...) I wrote Muriel Spark of the takeover, curious also to know what might have been the content of Sister Helena's book (...) she replied, to my delight, that it would have been about art, as she herself practiced it. The practice, I suppose, consisted in transforming commonplace young women into creatures of fiction, radiant in mystery: a kind of literary caravaggism. Upon reflection, I have done something more amazing if less impressive: I have made fiction into reality, for what was once a fictional title is now a real one (...) Still, it is nice to have a title which overcomes limits it is the task of the book. (1981: v)

This is a common practice in Muriel Spark's metafictional writing where the connection between reality and fiction seems to be the essence of her narrative while the boundaries between both dimensions appear to blur sometimes. That is why we can understand her whole literary production as Spark's own

transfiguration. As Whittaker explains, the protagonist of *The Mandelbaum Gate*, as Spark herself,

makes up her own mind, prior to the Church's opinion, believing this process to be essential to establish her own identity. She feels the need to acknowledge the Jewish part of her before acknowledging the Catholic, and then to try to unite the two (...) she has to accommodate both her old and new religions. (Whittaker, 1982: 73)

This is a spiritual journey more than a physical one. By means of the Transfiguration of the Commonplace, the Holy Land is not fixed to a determined geographical location, but it becomes a kind of virtual space which we can recreate everywhere by means of sacramental practices. This idea is elaborated in the novel when a priest warns the pilgrims against fake shrines, and highlights the inaccuracy in the detection of false religious sites: "If you are looking for physical exactitude in Jerusalem it is a good quest, but it belongs to archaeology, not faith" (Spark, 1965: 213-214). This journey, then, helps Spark to transcend the conception of place as synonymous of identity and home, because, from now on, these terms will be intimately in league with the notion of the body as place of belonging and sacrifice.

This aesthetic vision of the Holy Land and its relationship to the notion of the body leads us to the figure of Christ as the representation of the Holy Body which will be recreated in the portrayal of her main characters from this period. This relevant shift in the representation of the authorial fictional double makes *The Mandelbaum Gate* a relevant novel in Spark's literary career which masterly defines the shift between the first and the second periods in Spark's work. Moreover, if we consider the notion of the Divine Trinity as the pattern upon which



this study divides Spark's literary production, this second stage mirrors the idea of God as son and, consequently, conjures up the image of the body as object of sacrifice.

Catholicism, both in theological and artistic imaginations, is haunted by the image of Christ's broken body. The Catholic depiction of an almost grotesque body exposing its gaps and fissures is precisely the central symbol of the Eucharist. The image of Christ's body can be seen as the abject, emaciated body of Christ in his passion and then, the spectacle of the crucified Christ, skin stretched tight over his ribcage, severe bleeding wounds from the flogging, and the crown of thorns on his head, blood trickling down from his scalp to his breast. It is a dying but not-yet-dead body, and, paradoxically, one from which life springs forth. A body abandoned and nailed to a dead tree, but also a body accompanied and remembered, nailed to the Tree of Life. This vision invites us to contemplate the centrality of human suffering and sacrifice while it strengthens us thus offering consolation. Mikhail Bakhtin introduces the term 'grotesque realism' in his study on Rabelais:

Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth takes place. Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving. (1984, 21)

The representation of the Holy Body humiliated, injured, wounded and bleeding to death represents the image of the human triumph over the mundane suffering and sin. Eventually, the Holy Body fuses with God transcending earthly life in favour

of eternity. Then the dismembered, broken Holy Body in the form of the Host stands for the only possible unity we can experience in this world.

The fragmented representation of this Holy Body and its mundane counterpart, the human body, stand for Spark's split identity. The body is represented in this stage of her work as the element to be conquered and controlled. The sacrifice of the body can be understood as the offering which will give us eternity. From a metafictional point of view, the self-imposed sacrifice of some of her main protagonists during this period will be understood as an attempt to transcend fiction. Most of the times, this sacrifice is the result of an exercise of self-reflexiveness mirroring Spark's spiritual and artistic re-examination.

This personal process is reflected in her work by a different treatment in the portrayal of the protagonists of the novels from this period. Caroline Rose's rebellious attitude against the author, the fictional God, and the subsequent *acceptance* of her role within the novel (in Spark's pattern of life this can be interpreted as her acceptance of the norms and precepts imposed by her new acquired faith) is now substituted by Barbara Vaughan's geographical and inner journey where the idea of breaking with a former spiritual pattern hovers over the plot. "Sacrifice" as the result of "disbelief" substitutes "acceptance" and this is what the second period in Muriel Spark's work is all about.

Spark's novels from this period distill an underlying feeling that no complete satisfaction is to be found in this world. The body becomes an unbearable burden that the self wants to get rid of in order to get transcendental sense. We may state that this is Spark's most obscure period, characterized by formally intense

claustrophobic novels where the confrontation between predestination and free will is brought to the fore.

From now on, there is no physical location to be conquered but a determination to carry out an exercise of personal recognition. Geographical places fuse into spiritual ones with the idea of the body as element of sacrifice and the idea of home acquiring a transcendental dimension.

According to Carruthers, these novels show “an unnaturalistic scenario, humanity entirely denuded of the dignity of free will as a version, perhaps of Hell” (Carruthers, 2010: 83). And maybe this is what the novels from this period focus on, the idea of Hell in the world. The body as the bearer of sin, and suffering, becomes the bargaining chip to ascertain salvation. As the mundane sign of God’s transfiguration, it keeps us subject to the limits of this world; that is why it has to be sacrificed in the same way as the Holy Body.

The feminine central character of these novels seems to be appealing to God – the writer in the narrative – for some kind of mercy which may alleviate her suffering in the narrative; she appears to be asking for the promise of an otherworldly existence after the end of the book where the author’s presence, mimicking God’s presence in the world, seems to have vanished. This desperate situation of the protagonist recreates the image of Christ praying in the garden of Jethsemane: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done” (Luke, 22: 42). In *The Driver’s Seat* (1970), the novel chosen to exemplify this transitional stage, the conquest of the body by means of its sacrifice frames the protagonist’s story.

Although this novel does not seem to display religious matters explicitly, it still preserves a strong moral background. Frank Kermode, reviewing *The Driver's Seat*, writes that there is in it “nothing to remain one of the writer’s religious plots” (Kermode, 1970: 426). Indeed, the novel, following new postmodern trends, seems to denounce a society devoid of spiritual values in which everything seems contingent and provisional; free will as an attempt to depart from the established order is proclaimed. In literature, the traditional vision of the integral self begins to shake and, consequently, the role of the author is questioned. During the seventies, postmodern concepts take the self for a grammatical entity and for a symbolic construct rather than a referential one; that is to say, the self is no longer a unified psychological representation whose “essence” or “identity” is prior to the language which expresses it. On the contrary, its essence and identity are constituted by the language that produces it. Language is then the signifier that creates the self that signifies, and the self is in turn so absent that it can only be guessed at, like a ghost, among the lines that comprise the text.

Spark’s work from this period is strongly influenced by French literary tradition, especially typical methods from the *nouveau roman* such as, “reflexiveness, use of the present tense, minutely detailed description given in a neutral tone, and narrative discontinuity involving the sacrifice of suspense” (Whittaker, 1982: 8). Most of the times we are revealed the very ending of the novel at the beginning and the treatment of dramatic themes acquires a tragic-comic tone. In 1970, Spark writes an essay called “The Desegregation of Art” which plays a

key role in understanding and depicting the style she uses in this period. In her essential manifesto she states:

The art and literature of sentiment and emotion, however beautiful in itself, however striking in its depiction of actuality, has to go. It cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society, but in reality it is a segregated activity. In its place I advocate the arts of satire and ridicule. And I see no other living art form in the future. (Spark, 1971: 24)

In an interview led by Martin McQuillan in 1998, Mrs Spark is asked about her manifesto and she agrees with her statement about achieving some change:

MS: Ridicule is the only respectable weapon we have. In a way, I think it's probably the most deadly.

MMcQ: In that sense, is the novel there to effect social change? Do you think that's what the novel can do?

MS: A novel can do it. I think it just depends on the time and the circumstances, if it does do it. I think if you set out to do it, that's another type of novel; it's really an *Uncle Tom's Cabin* type of novel. You set out to right a wrong. I haven't ever done that. I haven't a message just like that. I would hope that everything I write changes something, opens windows in people's minds, something. I do want to do that, to clarify. (McQuillan, 2002: 222)

And this appears to be Spark's main aim during this second period of her career: to look for truths which *clarify* her mind. Her move to Italy, a Catholic country, makes Spark question her previous notion of Catholicism in favour of a more mundane and domestic one. The Italian congregation experiences Catholic rites more "naturally", making them part of their everyday life. Spark has to face a new way to interpret the Catholic practice where God seems to be everywhere and nowhere

simultaneously. This laxity gives her a sense of abandonment and a need to probe the reliability of the Catholic God the way she had formerly internalized it.

Indeed, in this period, the protagonists in Spark's novels are given an apparent freedom of action in plots where the authorial presence seems to be absent. *The Driver's Seat* is probably the most radical of all those authorial experiments in self-effacement only to reinforce the absurdity of a world devoid of any spirituality and utterly opposed to the notion of the death of the author.

### **3.2.1 The author's *Fictional Double*: Lise**

*The Driver's Seat* tells the story of Lise, a woman in her thirties, single, from a Northern European country, employee in an accountant's office, who arranges a trip to Southern Europe on her holiday with the only purpose of planning her own murder. The reader is not informed of Lise's background or family – we do not even know her surname. Her origin is placed in a Northern European country and her destination somewhere in the South, although there is no reference to the exact location: “Our home is in Nova Scotia,” says Mrs Fiedke, “where is yours?”. “Nowhere special,” says Lise waving aside the triviality. “It's written on the passport. My name's Lise” (Spark, 2006: 26-27). Her origin is obviously written in her passport but Lise does not verbalize it. This gives the impression of an imposed identity and contributes to making of Lise a fictional projection under the authorial thumb:

“Excuse me?” says Lise politely, in a foreign accented English, “what is that you’re looking for?”

“Oh,” the woman says, “I thought you were American.”

“No, but I can speak four languages enough to make myself understood.” (Spark, 2011: 10)

Later in the story we will know about what these languages are:

At the hotel (...) [s]he gives her name and when the concierge asks for her passport she evidently does not immediately understand, for she asks him what he wants first in Danish, then French. She tries Italian, lastly English. He smiles and responds to Italian and English, again requesting her passport in both languages. (Spark, 2011: 21-22)

Although Denmark is likely to be her country of origin – since the narrative says she comes from a Northern European country – Lise’s uncertain origin gives her story a cosmopolitan trait at the same time which reinforces her lack of emotional attachments. These aspects remind us of Caroline, the protagonist of *The Comforters* with whom Lise shares many other characteristics: Lise comes from the North and Caroline, at the beginning of *The Comforters*, is in a retreat in the North; both are single and not very interested in the other sex; both suffer from some kind of nervous upheaval which is attached to the development of the plot; and both keep a distressful relationship with the fiction-writing self. However, while Caroline in *The Comforters* feels oppressed by the relentless presence of an omniscient author, in *The Driver’s Seat*, Lise is looking forward to meeting this presence which Spark refers to as the “lack of an absence” (Spark, 2011: 35-36). This fact establishes a connection between these two characters and contributes to giving continuity to

Spark's novelistic production. Thus, Lise is endowed with a halo of transcendence from the very outset of the story. On the other hand, the fact that she can speak four languages might reveal a hybrid background which immediately evokes Spark's hybrid religious upbringing. This autobiographical characteristic also contributes to reinforcing Lise's relevant role in the plot and leads us to analyze her as *the author's fictional double*.

Lise is thin. Her height is about five-foot-six. Her hair is pale-brown, probably tinted, a very light streaked lock sweeping from the middle of her hair-line to the top of her crown; her hair is cut short at the sides and back, and is styled high. She must be as young as twenty-nine or as old as thirty-six, but hardly younger, hardly older. (Spark, 2011: 15)

Lise's aseptic description highlights her objectification and leads the reader to think of it as a police profile. This foreshadows the end of the novel and insinuates that Lise is dead from the beginning of the story: "Lise's eyes are widely spaced, blue-grey and dull. Her lips are a straight line. She is neither good-looking nor bad-looking" (Spark, 2011: 15). This last sentence is repeated several times in the novel, which reinforces Lise's anonymity. The narrative seems determined to portray Lise as a plain character whom the reader cannot feel any sympathy or sorrow for; a bizarre middle-aged woman leaving a dull existence whose weird behavior and a notorious appearance contribute to depict her as a secluded character.

She has five girls under her and two men. Over her are two women and five men. Her immediate superior had given her the afternoon off, in kindness, Friday afternoon. 'You've got your packing to do, Lise. Go home, pack and rest.' She had resisted. 'I don't need a rest. I've got all this work to finish. Look – all this.' (Spark, 2011: 4)



The position of Lise at work, in the middle of an almost mathematical succession of employers in the hierarchical disposition of the office, results artificial. It seems as if her absence at work, which exemplifies her absence in the plot, would be unnoticed. As opposed to *The Comforters*, this is not a novel of revelations; Lise seems to be aware not only of her role in the narrative but also of her fatal destiny from the beginning. Hers is not a pleasant vacation but a non-return journey. Her imminent future and the impossibility to change her destiny frighten her. That is why she is reluctant to leave the office.

On the other hand, Lise's artificial position at work between two numerical successions of seven people each, may respond to an authorial nod to traditional numerology. Accordingly, the number seven has always been described as the seeker, the thinker, the searcher of Truth. Lise, as well as Spark, is a searcher who looks for the truth of her identity. From a Catholic perspective, seven is the number of completeness and perfection (both physical and spiritual). It derives much of its meaning from being tied directly to God's creation of all things. The Bible constantly plays with the number seven establishing a direct relation between the number and fulfillment or perfection ultimately representing God's word as the omnipotent and omnipresent creative force.

Consequently, this scene encapsulates the structure of the novel where everything seems to be accurately and perfectly planned with no possibility of change. Lise is stuck in a plot which, following the pattern imposed by the God-like author, leads her, inevitably, to an imminent death. Thus, Lise, deprived of any possibility of change, longs for the fiction-writing self to assist her in "her last

moment". In this sense, Lise's journey through the novel is an inversion of Christ's way to the cross. Her bizarre behavior throughout the novel responds to her determination to be noticed in order to catch the authorial attention.

"It can wait till you get back," said the man, and when she looked up at him, he showed courage and defiance in his rimless spectacles. Then she had begun to laugh hysterically. She finished laughing and started crying all in a flood, while a flurry at the other desks, (...) conveyed to her that she had done again what she had not done for five years. As she ran to the lavatory she shouted to the whole office (...) "Leave me alone! It doesn't matter. What does it matter?" (Spark, 2011: 3-4)

Unlike most of *the author's fictional doubles* in Spark's novelistic production, Lise is not an artist. However, the way her abnormal behavior and extravagant presence affect the narrative provides Lise with the typical creative connotations of *Sparkian fictional doubles*. Thus, Lise is an *Isle* among the rest of the characters in the plot.

Spark writes *The Driver's Seat* in Rome. There, Sacramentalism is naturally accepted as the normal manifestation of God within his work. This apparent absence of fixed norms in the Catholic practices was fostered by the Vatican Council II itself. In this mundane vision of Catholicism, God's figure seems to have weakened. *The Driver's Seat* presents a search for God translated in metafictional terms as a search for authorial representation. Thus, the protagonist's journey mirrors a strong feeling of disbelief and fosters a troublesome debate on the presence of God in the world and his effect on human beings' suffering. Jeremy Idle suggests that this novel is about "a quest for a self-definition" (2002: 150-51). No one in the office is able to alleviate Lise's painful situation because the source of her sorrow is far from the fictional plane.

Half an hour later they said, “You need a good holiday, Lise. You need your vacation.” “I’m going to have it,” she said, “I’m going to have the time of my life,” and she had looked at the two men and five girls under her, and at her quivering superior, one by one, with her lips straight as a line which could cancel them all out completely. (Spark, 2011: 3-4)

Her colleagues work as false comforters who try to help Lise without understanding the very cause of her suffering. The way she looks at her partners one by one as recreating a solemn farewell when she leaves on holiday foretells her self-destructive journey. Those authoritative references to her mouth insinuate that it stands for the voice of the author who is the highest authority in any literary work: “Now, as she walks along the street after leaving the shop, her lips are slightly parted as if to receive a secret flavor” (Spark, 1970: 3). Lise’s mouth is slightly open, as if it was ready to say something. Lise seems to be awaiting the authorial voice to speak through her mouth and cause her to change the course of the story.

Her lips, when she doesn’t speak or eat, are normally pressed together like the ruled line of a balanced sheet, marked straight with her old-fashioned lipstick, a final and a judging mouth, a precision instrument, *a detail-warden of a mouth*. (My emphasis) (Spark, 2011: 6)

Her lips, deprived of any feminine attractiveness, are given a mere instrumental use in the hands of the fiction-writing self. They are scribble-like signs, authorial devices which influence the narrative with their significance. The symbolism given to Lise’s mouth fosters her linguistic representation which leads to portray Lise as a verbal construction in the hands of the writer. According to Waugh, the characters are “verbal constructions, *words not beings*” (Waugh, 1984: 26). Therefore, the

description of Lise's mouth emphasizes her textual condition and keeps her conveniently tramped into the linguistic scope of fiction.

The deceitful narrative uses the present tense to describe Lise's search for a man to murder her. This clever device leads the reader to elaborate the idea that Lise is in control; that she is creating her own story. It is counterpointed, however, by the analeptic use of the future tense which reveals the ending to the reader at the beginning of the book. Spark creates a dynamic in which the end becomes the beginning. As Malcom Bradbury states,

Muriel Spark's [novels] are end-directed; no author could be surer about where things are going. From her novels the beginning, which creates expectation and freedom, and the middle, which substantiates and qualifies it, seem absent. Her people arise at the last, from the last; what has withered is a world of motive, purpose, aspiration. (Bradbury, 1973: 248)

Thus, early in the novel the revelation of the ending denaturalizes the whole detective formula: "Her nose is short and wider than it will look in the likeness constructed partly by the method of identikit, partly by actual photography, soon to be published in the newspaper of four languages" (Spark, 2011: 8). As Carruthers says, this thoroughly disturbing novel "presents a story that is almost entirely predetermined (...) and so devoid of life, devoid of possibility" (2010: 83). The protagonist of the novel fosters traces of predestination which can be seen as a remnant trait of Spark's Calvinist background. Hence, Lise, as the aesthetic alter ego of the author, must be sacrificed at the end of the novel, so that the fictional pattern established by the author would accomplish its healing effect.

She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a man's necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at gate 14. (Spark, 2011: 21).

Revealing the tragic end of the novel at the beginning, *The Driver's Seat* meets the demands of a metafictional text and “draws the reader’s attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations of meaning and closure” (Waugh, 1984: 22). This move implies a departure from the Modernist conventions and brings about a redefinition of self-consciousness.

The adjectives “empty” and “foreign” describing the villa and the city where Lise is going to be murdered seem to be describing Lise herself. She is “empty” because her thoughts and actions are attached to the accomplishment of the narrative which tends to portray her as a victimized “foreign” body. Thus, the novel fits the conventions of the rest of the novels of this period where the transfiguration of the commonplace seems to be a perfect device to express in fiction those limitations of the real world. Gloomy places and desolate landscapes stand for the subjectivity of the protagonist: a maladjusted character doomed to be stuck in an end-directed plot with no likelihood of salvation. The scenes we recreate in our mind while reading the novel are just shots, fragments of a past existence, without any possibility of transcendence. That is why Lise’s story has such terrifying connotations since it has no plausibility of amendment. According to Carruthers,

This is the darkest moment in all of Spark’s fiction. Is it the author, Spark even, as simulacrum of God reasserting control over the life of the lost soul, Lise? If it is, this would seem to be very far from a loving, compassionate God. One way to read this moment, theologically, is that God is attempting, in the final instance, to shake

Lise out of her complacency, to rouse her perhaps to fight for her life rather than, as she originally intends, surrendering it. (Carruthers, 2010: 83)

Lise's surroundings contribute to frame her as an inanimate character from the beginning of the story:

The bed-supports, the door, the window frame, the hanging cupboard, the storage space, the shelves, the desk that extends, the tables that stack – they are made of such pinewood as one may never see again in a modest bachelor apartment. Lise keeps her flat as clean-lined and clear to return to after her work as if it were uninhabited. (Spark, 2011: 5-6)

Furniture at Lise's place can be folded or extended as if it was destined to disappear: "the furniture is all fixed, adaptable to various uses, and stackable (...) everything is contrived to fold away into the dignity of unvarnished pinewood" (Spark, 2011: 5-6). As Lise in the narrative, everything in her apartment seems to be temporary. Additionally, the suffocating pinewood-made interiors make the apartment look like a coffin. Lise's single-room-coffin-like apartment exemplifies her claustrophobic affliction in the plot.

Therefore, Lise's unnatural behavior reflects a desperate endeavour to escape from those suffocating environments imposed by the narrative. The novel opens in a dress shop where Lise is searching for a suitable dress which fits "her demands":

"And the material doesn't stain," the salesgirl says.

"Doesn't stain?"

"It's the fabric," the salesgirl says. "Specially treated. Won't mark. If you spill like a bit of ice-cream or a drop of coffee, like, down the front of this dress it won't hold the stain."

The customer, a young woman, is suddenly tearing at the fastener at the neck, pulling at the zip of the dress. She is saying, “Get this thing off me. Off me, at once.” (...) “I won’t be insulted!” (Spark, 2011: 2-3)

This scene recreates an inversion of the famous scene from *Macbeth* when Lady Macbeth sleepwalking seems determined to remove an imaginary blood stain from her hands which reminds her of the bloodshed she has caused:

Doctor: What is she does now? Look, how she rubs her hands.

Gentlewoman: It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus

washing her hands: I have known her continue in

this a quarter of an hour.

Lady Macbeth: Yes, here’s a spot

Doctor: Hark! She speaks: I will set down what comes from

her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

Lady Macbeth: Out, damned spot! out, I say!

*MACBETH*. Act V. Scene I (30-37)

The blood stain is a sign of Lady Macbeth’s corrupt moral and guilty conscience which ensures Lady Macbeth’s tragic end, that is why she tries, desperately, to take it off. In the shop, Lise is not interested in a stainless fabric because, as we will confirm later, she is choosing her “final dress” and, unlike Lady Macbeth, she wants to get it stained with her blood. The blood stain is a sign of her fictional death and, consequently, an evidence of her transcendence. A tragic end is needed to get the much-needed catharsis of the plot. Lady Macbeth wants to remove her imaginary spot to cleanse her of her sins. Lise is not interested in purification, nor redemption, since her blood spot will not stand for her sins but those of the author.

A lemon-yellow top with a skirt patterned in bright V's of orange, mauve and blue. "Is it made of that stain-resisting material?" (...) "I'm afraid (...) I've never heard of anything like that." Lise (...) says, "I'll have it." Meanwhile she is pulling off a hanger a summer coat with narrow stripes, red and white, with a white collar; very quickly she tries it on over the new dress. "Of course, the two don't go well together," says the salesgirl. (...) "They go very well together," Lise says (...) "Those colours of the dress and the coat are absolutely right for me. Very natural colours." (Spark, 2011: 4)

Lise's grotesque behavior is also manifested by her macabre practice of collecting evidence for the postmortem investigations. Throughout the novel, as Stannard asserts, "she is laying a trail for the police. She argues with the doorkeeper of her flat, picks up strangers. At the airport she buys a book with a striking cover and holds it up before her wherever she goes, like an 'identification notice carried by a displaced person'" (Stannard, 2010: 366).

Norman Page argues about this issue as follows, "For human beings to behave with inhumanity is, by definition, unnatural, and unnaturalness is a central theme in this novel, taking many forms from references to synthetic materials such as plastics to unpredictable and violent language and behaviour" (1990: 69). Lise is a secluded character who, according to Sinclair, "[i]nstead of the search for self-knowledge, or for something greater than the self, Lise wants to eliminate herself. Instead of the new life proclaimed by the gospels, Lise seeks her salvation in annihilation" (2000: 223). A victim seeks a murderer, and from this perversion the novel takes its tone. A kind of misrule seems to preside over the action, and we are reminded of this by Lise's deliberate adoption of the abnormal.



In this novel, Spark presents a world without attachments, loyalties or stable relationships. The public distress and, what seems to be as the absence of any authoritarian figure in the “real” world, is translated in terms of fictional experience as the apparent absence of the authorial figure. The settings are all impersonal public buildings and open-air spaces like airport terminals, department stores, hotels and parks, which prevent the protagonist from growing individually and from projecting any kind of intimate situations. *The Driver’s Seat*, thus, tells the story of a woman who has lost all human contact and who instead of being searching for a sense of self she seems to be looking for the obliteration of self. This antisocial tendency gives Lise some autobiographical traits due to the imposed isolation of the fiction-writing self.

Muriel gave wonderful parties (...) But when she closed her door on the last guest (...) she was alone in her echoing pile. She liked it that way. She had, deliberately, made herself a stranger, while simultaneously building massive defences against the neuroses of isolation. For some years, her only intimate relation to other human beings had been with her readers. (Stannard, 2010: 365)

Lise’s role as *the author’s fictional double* condemns her to incomprehension. As Roof suggests, “she knows the story but does not know its details. She fears that her life will not comply with the story, that she will make mistakes (...) Lise’s desire is to conform to the story” (2002: 60). Lise’s predetermined existence seems to be reduced to a mere instruction manual. An example of Lise’s anguish on this issue is portrayed in her conversation with the taxi-driver:

“Anything the matter, lady?” says the driver.

“It’s getting late,” she says, weeping. “It’s getting terribly late.”

“Lady, I can’t go faster. See the traffic.”

“I can’t find my boy-friend. I don’t know where he’s gone.”

“You think you’ll find him at the Metropole?”

“There’s always a chance,” she says. “I make a lot of mistakes.” (2011: 60-61)

In this sense, the emphasis of the narrative in Lise’s unnatural behavior contributes to questioning the conventions of free-will within the plot. Sometimes, Lise’s discourse seems to undermine the narrative by exposing the inconsistency of such a limited plot: “Oh,” says Lise, “I’m only going to the Centre. I’ve no definite plans. It’s foolish to have plans.” She laughs very loudly” (Spark, 2011: 25-26) (34). Lise’s remarks and laugh seem to point to the fictional-writing self; Lise does “laugh for acquiescence”.

In this obscure novel nothing is what it seems: Lise’s quest for love is really a longing for death; and meeting her boyfriend means to find a murderer to kill her. In several revelatory scenes which lead the reader to ascertain some of the authorial tricks: “‘He’s afraid of me,’ Lise whispers, indicating with a jerk of her head the man behind her. ‘Why is everybody afraid of me?’” (Spark, 2011: 18-19). The inverted structure of the plot shows Lise as a threatening presence and her would-be murderer as the frightened victim. Lise’s suicidal plans besmirch the narrative in her passing causing fear instead of pity.

Lise is looking for a man, not a woman, to kill her. This choice was not at random. A masculine figure raping and killing Lise, depriving her of any involvement in her last stage contributes to victimizing Lise even more, if possible, and fits the demands of this inverted love story. She is not interested in mundane expressions of love but a love based on sacrifice. She offers herself completely in a

last attempt to leave behind her painful existence. Lise's search for the *perfect murderer* turns out to look a kind of hunt where Richard becomes the victim. They meet for the first time in the plane where Lise sits between two men: Richard an apparent businessman who will become her future murderer, and Bill a fanatic of macrobiotics.

Lise follows (...) closely on the heels of the fellow-passenger whom she appears finally to have chosen to adhere to. This is a rosy-faced, sturdy young man of about thirty; he is dressed in a dark business suit and carries a black briefcase. She follows him purposefully (...) almost at her side, walks a man who in turn seems anxious to be close to her. He tries unsuccessfully to catch her attention. He is bespectacled, half-smiling, young, dark, long-nosed and stooping. (...) Up the steps they go, the pink and shiny businessman, Lise at his heels, and at hers the hungrier-looking man. (Spark, 2011: 11-12)

Richard and Lise do not know each other but there is something in Lise which frightens Richard up to the point of leaving his seat in the plane.

The man says, in a foreign accent, 'Excuse me. Please. I wish to change.' He starts to squeeze past Lise and her companion. (...) he hurries up the plane with the air-hostess leading the way. (...) He stops at an empty middle seat (...) He sits, fastens his seat-belt (...) and heaves a deep breath as if he had escaped from death by a small margin. (Spark, 2011: 13-14)

It seems as if present and future intermingle; as if Richard recognizes in Lise his would-be victim. This dramatic effect highlights the fantastic condition of the story where anything seems to be possible at the same time that seems to underline the horrific effect of predestination.

Most of the male characters in the novel are rather negatively portrayed. Mrs Fiedke, *the author's hybrid character*, performs a kind of monologue questioning the role of men:

“They are demanding equal rights with us,” says Mrs Fiedke. (...) “Perfume, jewellery, hair down to their shoulders, and I’m not talking about the ones who were born like that. I mean, the ones that can’t help it should be put on an island. It’s the others I’m talking about. There was a time when they would stand up and open the door for you. They would take their hat off. But they want their equality today. All I say is that if God had intended them to be as good as us he wouldn’t have made them different from us to the naked eye. (...) You couldn’t run an army like that, let alone the male sex.” (...) “If we don’t look lively,” she says, “they will be taking over the homes and the children, and sitting about having chats while we go and fight to defend them and work to keep them.” (Spark, 2011: 36-37)

This scene takes place in a crossroads which endow Mrs Fiedke’s words with a declarative tone. We must not forget that the novel was written immediately after the ‘summer of love’ and the wake of the Feminist Second Wave. Although the narrative never offers a clear opinion on these matters, it insinuates a certain critical position. Thus, Mrs Fiedke’s words denounce the increasing sexual hybridity. However, most of the male characters in the novel are prone to be typified.

There is a meaningful scene where the portrayal of masculine character in the novel acquires a different tone. Lise has bought several presents for some acquaintances and relatives but the scene focuses on a parcel with two ties in it:

Lise makes straight for the ladies’ toilets and while there, (...) she takes a comfortable chair in the soft-lit rest-room and considers, one by one, the contents of her zipper-bag which she lays on a small table beside her. (...) She also leaves unopened a soft package containing the neckties, but, having rummaged in her hand-bag for something which apparently is not there, she brings forth the lipstick

and with it she writes on the outside of the soft package, 'Papa'. (Spark, 2011: 43-44)

The same old-fashionable lipstick which censored her mouth is used as a pencil to label the parcel for her father. We have not had any information of Lise's family until now; this moving scene gives Lise a sense of humanity. In this scene the narrative seems to portray Lise's last attempt to convey some kind of secret message. She is trafficking with information within the plot. The father-like figure who rescued Caroline from the river in *The Comforters* is reverberated here in an ambiguous way. The neckties she buys for her father are both black which makes us think that she is making arrangements for her funeral: "She buys a striped man's necktie, dark blue and yellow. Then, (...) she changes her mind (...) Lise selects two ties, one plain black knitted cotton, the other green. Then, changing her mind once more, she says, 'That green is too bright, I think.' (...) 'All right, give me two black ties, they are always useful'" (Spark, 2011: 34). Curiously enough she buys two ties instead of only one. This fact makes sense later in the plot when we are informed that Lise is strangled with a black tie. It stands for a superb dramatic recourse to highlight the connection between Lise's parental figure and her murderer. The comforting father-like image is enacted here as the murderer but also liberator who will free Lise from her miserable existence. This antagonistic identification adjusts to the Sparkian notion of duality which is displayed not only by the opposition between Lise and Mrs Fiedke, but also by the presentation of themes and events following a twofold pattern.

This is the case of the *two* men which flank Lise in the plane, the *two* men who try to sexually assault her, the *two* neckties and the two scarves Lise buys at the mall, and the *two* knives that as a kind of premonition she checks before Mrs Fiedke buys *the right one*. She also enters *two* clothes shops and tries *two* dresses before buying the one that she was looking for. Lise also explains to the woman at the airport that this is the *second* time she travels to the South:

“You going on holiday?” the woman says.

“Yes. My first after three years.”

“You travel much?”

“No. There is so little money. But I’m going to the South now. I went before, three years ago.” (Spark, 2011: 10-11)

Lise carries *two* bags: a zipper-bag and a hand-bag where she keeps her passport. All these double objects and events scattered all over the narrative mirror the interconnection between Lise and the fictional-writing self which strengthens the idea of Lise as *the author’s fictional double*. Lise’s acknowledgement of bearing someone else’s identity is implied when she checks in to her hotel. The concierge asks for her passport and she does not understand at first because she does not speak the language properly, but a second reading of the scene gives a different perspective:

“It’s confusing,” she says in English, handing over her passport.

“Yes, you left part of yourself at home,” the concierge says. “That *other* part, *he is still in route to our country but he will catch up with you in a few hours’ time*. It’s often the way with travel by air, the passenger arrives ahead of himself. Can I send you to your room a drink or a coffee?” (my emphasis) (Spark, 2011: 21-22)

The abstract allusion to Lise's *other* suggests her twofold identity. Curiously enough, the concierge gives Lise's "other part" a masculine nature. From a metafictional perspective, this scene contributes to reinforcing the feasibility of a masculine character playing the role of the *author's fictional double* in the next stage of our study. This device would give the work a sense of continuity and transcendence at the same time that reinforces Lise's temporary role in a no less temporary plot within Spark's novelistic universe.

On the other hand, a masculine subject "in route" to "catch up with" Lise might also be a direct reference to Lise's would-be murderer. The narrative seems to be warning Lise that her murderer is approaching and that she will meet him soon. Thus, the concierge's remark is comforting and distressing at the same time since Lise's liberation from the plot is coming in the form of a rescuer-murderer man. Lise seems to be ready to abandon her miserable existence leaving her passport behind:

"Are you staying here long?" says the woman.

"This will keep it safe," says Lise, stuffing her passport down the back of the seat, stuffing it down till it is out of sight. (...)

"You left your passport in the taxi!"

"Well, I left it there for safety. Don't worry," Lise says, "*It's taken care of.*"

"Oh, I see." The old lady relaxes (Spark, 2011: 25-26-27)

Lise's passport works as a tangible remnant of her former fictional existence. Hers is *a holiday by ordeal* where no emotional baggage is allowed.

In the same way as the end-directed story does not focus on the resolution of the plot but in the way it develops, the horror of *The Driver's Seat* is located not

so much in Lise's violent murder at the end of the novel, as in the world from which she wishes to escape. Thus, when Lise arrives at her hotel bedroom we soon realize she has exchanged a neat impersonal one-room flat for a squalid, impersonal hotel bedroom. A change of location only emphasizes her perception of universal dreariness.

It is a bed with a green cotton cover, a bedside table, a rug, a dressing-table, two chairs, a small chest of drawers; there is a wide tall window which indicates that it had once formed part of a much larger room, *now partitioned into two or three rooms* in the interests of hotel economy (...) The walls and a built-in cupboard have been a yellowish cream but are now dirty with dark marks giving evidence of past pieces of furniture now remove or rearranged. (...) She switches on the central light which (...) flicks on, then immediately flickers out as if, having served a long succession of clients without complaint, Lise is suddenly too much for it. (Spark, 2011: 22)

The hotel bedroom looks gloomy as if it has been recently occupied by another host and it has not been cleaned properly or taken care of. Hers is a journey from death to life; from her coffin-like apartment to the messy and careless room at Tomson Hotel where the remnants of the previous occupant make Lise as uncomfortable as living someone else's life. The narrative informs the reader that the hotel room where Lise stays has been occupied by "a long succession of clients" before her. This "succession of clients" makes us think of the different characters who have played the role of *the author's fictional double* before Lise.

She tramps heavily into the bathroom and first, without hesitation, peers into the drinking-glass as if fully expecting to find what she does indeed find: two Alka-Seltzers, quite dry, having presumably been put there by the previous occupant who



no doubt had wanted to sober up but who had finally lacked the power or memory to fill the glass with water and drink the salutary result. (Spark, 2011: 22-23)

Lise's a single room but she finds two Alka-Seltzers in a glass, which emphasizes the double condition of the previous occupant. This mysterious character, as the narrative goes on, has forgotten "to fill the glass with water and drink the salutary result". As in the *The Comforters*, the presence of water in the narrative seems to insinuate authorial proximity. However, in *The Driver's Seat*, authorial presence is not frightening but comforting.

"Well, enjoy yourself Lise," says the voice on the telephone. "Send me a card."  
 "Oh, of course," Lise says, and when she has hung up she laughs heartily. She does not stop. She goes to the wash-basin and fills a glass of water, which she drinks, gurgling, then another, and still nearly choking she drinks another. She has stopped laughing, and now breathing heavily says to the mute telephone, "Of course. Oh, of course." (Spark, 2011: 5)

The development of the scene makes us think of the voice on the phone as the authorial voice. They seem to be talking in an encrypted language, but the coded message reminds Lise of her fatal destiny. She knows hers is a no return journey. She frightens her destiny but, and yet, she cannot help it. Drinking water, Lise tries to recreate the authorial presence and assistance:

"Where is the tooh-glass?" Lise demands. "I must have a glass for water." Lise soon makes known her need for a drinking-glass on the telephone to the concierge, threatening to leave the hotel immediately if she doesn't get her water-glass right away. (Spark, 2011: 23)

Lise's demanding attitude in the hotel mirrors her rebellious attitude in the narrative. Therefore, Lise's threatening to leave the hotel illustrates her attempt to leave the narrative. Her request for the water-glass signifies her desperate appeal for authorial assistance. Later in the novel, "another maid arrives with two drinking-glasses" (Spark, 2011: 23-24). Lise's twofold condition is reinforced here by the narrative which seems to be reminding Lise, once and again, of her role as *the author's fictional double*.

From a Catholic approach, water means purification and transition. Both phases take place at the Baptism ceremony where the individual is released from his original sin and becomes a Catholic. In this sense, after being baptized, one is born to a new form of existence so certain halo of transition is implied in the process. According to this idea, water will foster change and development. Thus, a parallelism can be established between holy water in the Catholic rite and the significance of water in Spark's work and, particularly, in *The Driver's Seat*. Holy water is a symbol which helps Catholics to recreate God's compassionate presence by means of sacramental practices, and the water that Lise drinks in an almost compulsory way, helps her to reproduce the proximity of the God-like author throughout the novel. To accept Holy water means to acquiesce in the promise of an otherworldly life after death; similarly, Lise seems to hold the hope of transcendence beyond the narrative once she has acquiesced in the authorial dictates. This time, following the inverted pattern of the novel, Lise tries to get "purified" from inside to meet the liberating finale.

Before finding the *right man*, Lise suffers from a kind of *training process* during which she meets two other men who fail in their attempt to sexually abuse her. Lise is not interested in any kind of sexual intercourse. The most relevant one takes place within a car. Lise has entered a garage to escape from a mob and, Carlo, the proprietor offers to bring her to her hotel:

“We go out of town a little way,” says Carlo. “I know a place. I brought the Fiat, did you see? The front seats fold back. Make you comfortable.”

“Stop at once,” Lise says. “Or I put my head out of the window and yell for help. I don’t want sex with you. I’m not interested in sex. I’ve got other interests and as a matter of fact I’ve got something on my mind that’s got to be done. I’m telling you to stop.” She grabs the wheel and tries to guide it into the curb. (2011: 54)

Taking the wheel Lise starts to get control. Nevertheless, Carlo insists and Lise has to get out the car shouting for the police. The scene, which ends with Carlo complying to Lise’s refusal to have sex with him, reflects Lise’s clear determination to fit the demands of the narrative.

She runs and makes a grab for the door of the driver’s seat, and as he calls after her, “The other door!” she gets in, starts up, and backs speedily out of the lane. (...) “You’re not my type in any case,” she screams. Then she starts off, too quickly for him to open the back door he is now grabbing at. (...) she yells back at him, “If you report this to the police I’ll tell them the truth and make a scandal in your family.” And then she is away, well clear of him. (Spark, 2011: 41-42)

For the first time in the novel, Lise occupies the driver’s seat. She becomes threatening and intimidating. She is not willing to comply with men’s discourse any longer. Carlo tries to impose Lise a certain position in the car; he aims at delimiting

Lise's role in the narrative. Lise ignores him and takes over the action as the only driver in the plot.

She spins along in expert style, stopping duly at the traffic lights. She starts to sing softly as she waits:

Inky-pinky-winky-wong

How do you like your potatoes done?

A little gravy in the pan

For the King of the Cannibal Islands. (Spark, 2011: 42)

The scene portrays Lise happy for the first time in the novel. She is at the driver's seat now driving her way to meet her fatal destiny as the only way to get released from the miserable plot imposed upon her. The cryptic lyrics of the nursery rhyme she is singing convey a hidden message: Lise is offering herself in sacrifice to the fiction-writing self whom she refers to in her singing as "the king of the cannibal islands" emphasizing the authorial greediness for fictional identities. The fiction-writing self is portrayed as a threatening presence who as a big monster of a place seems to be nourishing by the subjectivities of her successive fictional doubles in her attempt to conform her own personal identity. Now, Lise is ready for the encounter with her murderer.

Thus, Lise undergoes a profound transformation throughout the plot. At the beginning of the novel, Lise is introduced as a tortured character, attached to a tragic plot which leads her to a fatal destiny. Her bizarre behavior and extravagant appearance does not go unnoticed by the rest of the characters in the plot who contribute to isolate her with their critiques and incomprehension.

She drops her hand and looks at her coat which is stained with a long black oily mark. "Look at my clothes," Lise says. "My new clothes. It's best never to be born.

I wish my mother and father had practised birth-control. I wish that pill had been invented at the time. I feel sick, I feel terrible.” (2011: 51)

Soon we learn that her grotesque look and manners respond to her determination to be noticed in the narrative and catch the authorial attention. She needs some authorial assistance, a sign which will give her painful existence a meaning. Lise is portrayed as a misfit. Throughout her journey she makes up new identities to try to escape from the fictional pattern that the author has sketched for her: “she puts a hand up to her eyes, covering them, and in the language of the country she says, “Oh please, please. I’m only a tourist, a teacher from Iowa, New Jersey. I’ve hurt my foot” (Spark, 2011: 38-39). Lise lies and, to do so, she covers her eyes with her hand as hiding from the relentless authorial gaze.

Lise inventing a life of her own is portrayed as a plotter within the plot and this contributes to empowering her as *the author’s fictional double*. At the beginning of the novel, she is described as a single woman but later Lise says otherwise when she is asked:

“I’m a widow,” Lise says, “and an intellectual. I come from a family of intellectuals. My late husband was an intellectual. We had no children. He was killed in a motor accident. He was a bad driver, anyway. He was a hypochondriac, which means that he imagined that he had every illness under the sun.” (Spark, 2011: 39-40)

Now, she is a widow and her husband was a bad driver. In a novel entitled *The Driver’s Seat*, this revelation has significant connotations. To be a good driver would mean to know how to deal with the narrative intricacies; in this sense, this symbolic remark reminds us of Caroline’s statement in *The Comforters*: “I can

swim” (181) referring to her ability to manage on the authorial demands. Both characters show a change in attitude throughout the novels. Lise gets empowered at the end of *The Driver’s Seat* thanks to the soothing intervention of Mrs Fiedke.

Mrs Fiedke plays the role of a comforting character. She seems to have been sent by the fiction-writing self as a response to Lise’s repeated requests for assistance. As soon as Mrs Fiedke appears in the plot Lise’s situation reverses and the reader’s attention focuses on the rest of the characters whose reprehensible conduct normalizes that of Lise. Therefore, Mrs Fiedke’s presence encourages Lise’s development.

Nevertheless, this ambiguous character, who seems to support Lise from the very moment she appears in the plot, contributes to the fulfilment of the narrative as well – her nephew will be Lise’s murderer – therefore, she would be next analyzed as *the author’s hybrid character*.

### **3.2.2 The *author’s Hybrid Character*: Mrs Fiedke**

Mrs Fiedke, in the same way as Mrs Hogg in *The Comforters*, plays the role of *the author’s hybrid character*. However, Mrs Fiedke is portrayed as an apparently conciliatory character. Thus, the relationship between Mrs. Fiedke and Lise is not described in terms of opposition but complementarity. Mrs Fiedke is a kind old lady who works as a companion in Lise’s way to death. Her status as an elderly woman represents experience and tradition in the plot. In this novel, as opposed to the novels belonging to the previous stage, Mrs Fiedke functions as a

“gentle” authority to keep Lise’s yearnings for freedom at bay. The fiction-writing self uses the relationship between Lise and Mrs Fiedke as a metaphor of a spiritual journey in search of the essence of one’s existence, which involves facing an unavoidable destiny. This charming ancient woman meets Lise as soon as she arrives at the hotel and, from the beginning, her comforting and unconditional support helps Lise to comprehend the meaning of her sacrifice.

“I want a taxi,” Lise says loudly to the uniformed boy who stands by the swing door. He goes out to the street and whistles. (...) An elderly woman, small, neat and agile in a yellow cotton dress, whose extremely wrinkled face is the only indication of her advanced age, follows Lise to the pavement. She, too, wants a taxi, she says in a gentle voice, and she suggests to Lise that they might share. (...) This woman seems to see nothing strange about Lise (...) the woman’s eyesight is sufficiently dim, her hearing faint enough, to eliminate, for her, the garish effect of Lise on normal perceptions. (Spark, 2011: 25-26)

Lise’s request seems to be unnoticed by the man at the door. All of a sudden, Mrs. Fiedke appears on the stage as a *deus ex machina* device. She is introduced as an artificial character because, although she is described as an old lady, she does not completely look like that. She is dressed in yellow which match perfectly with Lise’s bright colour patterned outfit; this symbolic coincidence leads the reader to establish a connection between two characters. Her unnatural arrival, as if she is coming from another world far from that of the novel insinuates her hybrid nature.

As soon as they meet, Mrs Fiedke accommodates to Lise’s arrangements and they tend up spending the day together. Mrs. Fiedke’s presence in the plot responds to an authorial device to assist Lise in her bitter journey to death. This authorial resource secures the resolution of the plot.

While Mrs. Hogg is a zealous Catholic, Mrs. Fiedke is a Jehovah's Witness. Following the postulate displayed in this study, this shift in the authorial approach to her fictional pattern reflects a change of perspective from that in *The Comforters*. To be a Jehovah's Witness seems to be an explicit reference to Mrs. Fiedke's role in the narrative: the God-like author's witness in the plot. Thus, Mrs. Fiedke, in the same way as Mrs. Hogg in *The Comforters*, plays the relevant role of the authorial harbinger who ensures the fulfilment of the narrative.

"I'm going shopping, It's the first thing I do on my holidays. I go and buy the little presents for the family first, then that's off my mind."

"Oh, but in *these days*," says the old lady. She folds her gloves, pats them on her lap, smiles at them.

"There's a big department store near the Post Office," Lise says, "You can get everything you want there."

"My nephew is arriving this evening." (My emphasis) (Spark, 2011: 26)

Mrs Fiedke acts as an omniscient character dropping significant hints in the conversation. She seems to be questioning Lise's purchases for her relatives as foreshadowing that Lise is not going back home. This charming and angelic old lady appears sinister all of a sudden when, while smiling at Lise, she introduces her nephew Richard in the conversation. Mrs Fiedke's 'apparition' invites readers to question the nature and purpose of this mysterious character.

The narrative displays Lise and Mrs Fiedke's complicity openly to force the reader to go deeper into the mechanics of the novel.



At the Post Office they pay the fare, each meticulously contributing the unfamiliar coins to the impatient, mottled and hillocky palm of the driver's hand, adding coins little by little, until the total is reached and the amount of the tip equally agreed between them and deposited; then they stand on the pavement in the centre of the foreign city, in need of coffee and a sandwich, accustoming themselves to the layout, the traffic crossings... (Spark, 2011: 26)

Unlike Mrs Hogg in *The Comforters*, Mrs Fiedke's presence is synonym of relief instead of distress. This shift in the portrayal of *the author's hybrid character* is due to the protagonist's different attitude towards the narrative. While Caroline rejects her fictive nature and, hence, any authorial manifestation, Lise, this study aims to show, is aware of being a fictional character from the beginning. She only asks for some authorial assistant which help her to fulfill her painful way through the narrative. That's why Mrs Fiedke, as the author's messenger, plays the role of such a comforting character. The apparent absence of the author in this novel, mirroring that of God in the world, can be perceived in Mrs Fiedke's subtle presence whose appearance in the plot is relegated to some pages in the novel. Mrs Fiedke is only Lise's companion; she appears to be invisible for the rest of the characters in the plot; she interacts with nobody. This fact emphasizes her almost eerie presence reflecting that of the fiction-writing self within the novel. So, Mrs Fiedke is the harbinger of an otherworldly presence.

In the bar they sit at a small round table, place their bags, Lise's book and their elbows on it and order each a coffee and a ham-and-tomato sandwich. Lise props up her paperback book against her bag, as it were so that its bright cover is addressed *to whom it may concern*. (My emphasis) (Spark, 2011: 26-27)

Lise and Mrs Fiedke do exactly the same things simultaneously. Both seem to be involved in each other's story. This fact enhances both characters' close collaboration. The phrase "to whom it may concern" on the cover of Lise's book makes reference to Lise's attempts to communicate with the author. Lise tries to acquiesce to the author's demands and acts accordingly.

"My dear, I don't want to detain you or take you out of your way."

"Not at all. Don't think of it."

"It was very kind of you to come along with me," says Mrs Fiedke, "as it's so confusing in a strange place. Very kind indeed."

"Why shouldn't I be kind?" Lise says, smiling at her with a sudden gentleness. (Spark, 2011: 27-28)

Lise guides Mrs Fiedke through fiction waiting for the old lady to show her the way out of fiction. She recognizes the authorial involvement in the figure of Mrs Fiedke and she does not want to commit "mistakes".

"*Everything is different,*" says the old lady.

"A girl isn't made of cement," Lise says, "but *everything is different* now, it's all changed, believe me." (My emphasis) (Spark, 2011: 26)

Mrs. Fiedke's presence influences Lise profoundly in her attitude towards the narrative. She is no longer desperate but determined to face her destiny no matter how horrible it is. So Mrs Fiedke as Mrs Hogg in *The Comforters*, "[speaks] little, but she [is] very much present" (Spark, 1999: 171):

"You can come shopping with me," Lise says, very genially. "Mrs Fiedke, it's a pleasure."

"How very kind you are!"

“One should always be kind,” Lise says, “in case it might be the last chance. One might be killed crossing the street, or even on the pavement, any time, you never know. So we should always be kind.” She cuts her sandwich daintily and puts a piece in her mouth.

Mrs Fiedke says, “That’s a very, very beautiful thought. But you mustn’t think of accidents. I can assure you, I’m terrified of traffic.”

“So am I. Terrified” (Spark, 2011: 27-28) (36-37)

This scene of both women at the bar drinking coffee and eating a sandwich has strong sacramental connotations. It reenacts a kind of inverted communion after which Lise confesses her terrors to Mrs Fiedke and she pronounces an ambiguous revelation which is far from comforting. The term “traffic”, as it was used in *The Comforters*, refers to the authorial intrusiveness in the plot which encompasses the *traffic* of information between reality and fiction. To be “terrified of traffic” seems to be a kind of warning about the authorial practices in the plot.

After having eaten the sandwich Lises orders a rainbow ice. This is quite significant since the rainbow’s symbology gives the scene a transcendental tone. From a Catholic perspective the rainbow in the Bible appears three times representing God’s omnipotence and mercy. It can be found in the books of Genesis, Ezekiel and Revelation. In the Genesis account, a rainbow appears right after the great worldwide flood brought in order to remove sinful and evil-minded man from the earth. It symbolizes God’s mercy and the covenant He made with Noah, representing mankind, not to destroy the world: “I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth . . . and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh” (Genesis 9:13 HBFV). In this sense, the rainbow ice cream Lise eats can be seen as a symbol of the

compromise Lise and Mrs. Fiedke, in the author's name, share. Although it is only Lise who eats it: "They eat their sandwich and drink their coffee. Lise then orders a rainbow ice while Mrs Fiedke considers one way or another whether she really wants anything more, and eventually declines" (Spark, 2011: 28). Mrs. Fiedke's refusal stands for the author's betrayal of their commitment – as we will know later, the fiction-writing self is not going to assist Lise in her last moment because hers is a dead-end story from the beginning. This is the terrible revelation of the plot only soothed by the alliance between these two characters as opposed to the rest of the characters around:

"Strange voices," says the old lady looking round. "Look at the noise."

"Well, if you know the language."

"Can you speak the language?"

"A bit. I can speak four."

Mrs Fiedke marvels benevolently while Lise bashfully plays with crumbs on the tablecloth. (Spark, 2011: 28)

Mrs Fiedke does not understand what the voices say because she does speak a different language. However, she has no problem in understanding Lise; both characters speak the "same language" which reinforces their intimate relationship. Mrs Fiedke's presence acquires certain perverse connotations as the story develops, because she induces Lise to meet her nephew, who, later, happens to be Lise's future murderer: "'It is in my mind,' says Mrs Fiedke; 'It is in my mind and I can't think of anything else but that you and my nephew are meant for each other. As sure as anything, my dear, you are the person for my nephew'" (Spark, 2011: 35-36). And she insists later: "It just came to me while we were looking at those very

interesting pavements in that ancient temple up there, that poor Richard may be the very man that you are looking for” (Spark, 2011: 35-36). Mrs Fiedke, as the harbinger of the fiction-writing self, is in the plot to control the development of the narrative until the end. Her main role is not only comfort Lise but make Lise and Richard’s encounter possible. Mrs Fiedke seems to be framing her nephew as Lise’s victim when she refers to him as ‘poor Richard’. We are also told of Richard’s stay in a clinic which makes us think of him as suffering from some kind of psychological damage or nervous upheaval. This is the first time Richard’s description approaches that of Lise which, ultimately, mirrors Spark’s breakdowns.

The structure of the novel acquires a convenient structure which masterly fits the demands of the pattern established in this study. As Lise’s story is coming to an end, Richard, by means of Mrs Fiedke’s intercession, is given a position of prominence in the narrative. His increasing relevance for the fulfilment of the plot has an external projection which leads him to play the main role in the last lines of the narrative. This last turn of screw makes us think of him as insinuating the role of the next protagonist figure in the third stage of this study. Thus, this is a novel full of signs and symbols, which the presence of Mrs Fiedke brings to the fore. When Lise and Mrs. Fiedke go shopping together, the old lady buys a pair of slippers for her nephew and a paper-knife.

She chooses a paperknife in a sheath. Lise stands watching. (...) ‘The slippers are enough,’ Lise says.

Mrs Fiedke says, ‘You’re quite right. One doesn’t want to spoil them.’

She looks at a key-case, then buys the paper-knife. (45)

In Freudian terms, as Page observes, “the slippers and knife are obvious symbols for, respectively, the female and male genitalia, hinting at the final rape” (Page, 1990: 75). Therefore, Mrs Fiedke’s presents for Richard favours Lise’s tragic destiny which will put a satisfactory end to the novel. Lise seems to be aware of the symbolism of the paper-knife and tries to persuade Mrs Fiedke to buy only the slippers as a present.

According to Whittaker, in this novel, as in most novels of the time, “sexual and spiritual fulfillment are made incompatible. The enjoyment of one entails the destruction of the other” (Whittaker, 1982: 71). The body is only portrayed as element of sacrifice and future salvation but not a way of pleasure. That is why Lise does not want to have any sexual intercourse, because she is interested in spiritual transcendence which in the novel should be understood in terms of author-character interrelation. Nevertheless, Mrs Fiedke brings about the intercourse between Lise and Richard, despite his past as a sex maniac. Mrs Fiedke as *the author’s hybrid character* performs an ambiguous role: on the one hand, she tries to make the demands of the narrative be fulfilled, but, on the other, she provides her nephew with a victim. In this sense, Mrs Fiedke represents the fears and obsessions of a society devoid of any spiritual sense. This idea is expressed when Mrs Fiedke tells Caroline of her nephew Richard who is coming to meet her by plane.

I hope he’s on that plane. There was some talk that he would go to Barcelona first to meet his mother, then on here to meet up with me. But I wouldn’t play. I just said No! No flying from Barcelona, I said. I’m a strict believer, in fact, a Witness, but I never trust the airlines from those countries where the pilots believe in the after-life. You are safer when they don’t. I’ve been told the Scandinavian airlines are fairly reliable in that respect. (Spark, 2011: 56)

Mrs Fiedke's harsh critique against the Catholic way to conceive human existence – as a preparatory step to get a worthy reward in the afterlife – exposes her lack of transcendental thought in favour of a more material and agnostic conformity. Curiously enough, Mrs Fiedke, a Jehovah Witness, praises Scandinavian pilots since, as she insinuates, they fear death because they do not believe in the afterlife. Accordingly, we can elaborate the idea of Lise's journey as a spiritual one where she "travels" from a Scandinavian conception of death to a much more comforting Catholic one.

Mrs Fiedke's mundane connotations contrast with those eerie episodes where she appears and disappears from the plot in rather mysterious ways. This contributes to portray Mrs Fiedke as *the hybrid character* of the novel:

Lise stands in the ladies' room combing her hair while she waits for Mrs Fiedke  
 (...) Eventually she knocks on Mrs Fiedke's door. "Are you all right?"  
 (...) "There's an old lady locked in here and I can't hear a sound. Something must  
 have happened.' And she calls again. 'Are you all right, Mrs Fiedke?"  
 "Who is she" says the other woman.  
 "I don't know."  
 "But you're with her, aren't you" The matron takes a good look at Lise.  
 "I'll go and get someone," Lise says (...) Then she grabs her bag and her book  
 from the wash-stand and dashes out of the ladies' room leaving the other woman  
 listening and rattling at the door of Mrs Fiedke's cubicle. (Spark, 2011: 30-31)

Lise never goes back to rescue Mrs Fiedke. She goes on shopping as if nothing has happened. This scene questions Mrs Fiedke's existence, since, although Mrs Fiedke seems to have vanished, Lise does not look surprised. However, as it has been

insinuated before, Lise seems to be aware of Mrs Fiedke's role in the plot; she seems to know that her presence in the plot is temporary and as soon as the authorial expectations are fulfilled, Mrs Fiedke will be erased from the narrative.

Later in the department store Mrs Fiedke appears out of the blue, touches Lise's arm and says: "I think I fell asleep for a moment," Mrs Fiedke says. "It wasn't a bad turn. I just dropped off. Such kind people. They wanted to put me in a taxi. But why should I go back to the hotel? My poor nephew won't be there till 9 o'clock tonight or maybe later (...)" (Spark, 2011: 31). Mrs Fiedke's mysterious disappearance here, reminds us of that of Mrs Hogg at the back seat of the Baron's car in *The Comforters*. Both characters allege to have been asleep when they return from their "absences". This fact equates, definitely, Mrs Fiedke and Mrs Hogg and exposes their hybrid nature. The abnormality is accepted as the norm in the distorted scale of values portrayed in this novel. As Helen Meyers puts it,

[i]n this world, conversations are collections of utterances rather than dialogues dependent upon understanding and response (...) Although Mrs Fiedke contributes to the success of Lise's plan (...) Lise's relationship with Mrs Fiedke demonstrates that human contact does not ensure communication, continuity, or connection. (Meyers, 2001: 78-79)

As the story develops Lise's identity seems to blend in with that of Mrs Fiedke: "It's getting late," says Lise. (...) *inhibiting her stride to accommodate Mrs Fiedke's pace*, she seems at the same time to search for a certain air-current, a glimpse and an intimation" (My emphasis) (Spark, 2011: 36-37). Lise gives up her former customs and manners in favour of those she learns from Mrs Fiedke. Moreover, it is noticeable that we never know of Mrs Fiedke's first name in the



same way that we are never told of Lise's surname. This fact makes us think of Mrs Fiedke as giving background to Lise's story. Mrs Fiedke completes what Lise lacks. As soon as she has done the task that she has been commended, Mrs. Fiedke disappears from the plot as mysteriously as she appeared: "*I ought to take a nap,*" says Mrs. Fiedke, "so that I won't feel too tired when my nephew arrives." (...) Suddenly round the corner comes a stampede. (...) all yelling together and making rapidly for somewhere else. "Tear-gas!" (Spark, 2011: 37-38). This is the last time Mrs Fiedke appears in the novel. Curiously enough, Lise does not mention her any longer. It seems as if she has never existed. Before leaving, Mrs Fiedke says she needs a nap what seems to be a coded message of the narrative to inform the reader that she is taking her *hybrid character* out of the plot.

Like Mrs Hogg in *The Comforters*, Mrs Fiedke seems to be "not all there" (Spark, 1999: 129-130). The stampede of "a large crowd composed mainly of young men, with a few smaller, older and grimmer men, and here and there a young girl" (2011: 60) can be interpreted as a current of Spark's fictional material; past and future characters which sweep Mrs Fiedke away and get the plot structure back on track. Male and female characters fill the scene in their passing. This crowd which sweeps along Mrs Fiedke reminds the reader of the inrush of water which guzzles Mrs Hogg in *The Comforters* and caused her to disappear from the plot. Mrs Fiedke gets blurred into this sudden mob and literally vanishes out of sight. Both, Mrs Hogg and Mrs Fiedke do not die but just evaporate. Nobody gives any explanation about their whereabouts; they simply disappear from the plot as disposable material which is no longer needed. And this idea is reinforced by the

fact that once they are not present in the narrative, they are not missed nor remembered either by the other characters or the readers.

### **3.2.3 The author's second Spark**

This period in Spark's work is characterized by an apparently marked sense of disbelief evidenced both in a shortage of explicit religious characters and matters, and in plots where materialism and the secular are emphasized. Thus, this novel may be understood as an attempt to enhance the necessity for some spiritual background that comforts people living in a hopeless world, a world that is end-directed toward nothingness. However, when Lise and Mrs Fiedke meet, we see a spark of warmth and friendliness in a cold and impersonal narrative. While they have a snack, Lise makes the relevant declaration that "one should always be kind in case it might be the last chance" (36). The idea of an imminent death is insinuated in their conversation, but it is not given any final connotation but a transcendental significance since death in the novel – understood as the end of the fictional existence – is, precisely, what gives complete sense to Lise's "narrative". Lise seems to have understood this point and acts consequently. Just after pronouncing those words, Lise "cuts her sandwich daintily and puts a piece in her mouth" (Spark, 2011: 82). The sandwich image appears in several of Spark's novels and always points out to a direct communication with the author; a kind of narrative communion. Then, the conversation continues:

"Do you drive an automobile?" says the old lady.

“I do, but I’m afraid of the traffic. You never know what crackpot’s going to be at the wheel of another car.” (...)

They eat their sandwich and drink their coffee. (Spark, 2011: 82)

This sacramental scene, where Mrs Fiedke and Lise eat and drink their sandwich and coffee, respectively, captures the symbolism of the work. In a novel entitled *The Driver’s Seat* the conversation is highly relevant. It is a novel about control, about the process of creation, about authorship. At this point, halfway through the novel, Lise’s conversation with Mrs Fiedke seems to transcend the limits of the narrative. With scenes of this kind, precisely, Spark seems to underscore the lack of transcendence that Lise’s existence conveys throughout the novel.

The aesthetics of the novel makes an exhaustive use of elements that emphasize an apparent lack of individual personality. Therefore, Lise’s story is a search in the opposite way, that is, a path that leads to the rejection of her own identity which, paradoxically, emphasizes her (fictional) self. To be in the driver’s seat is to be, according to Page, “whether literally or metaphorically, in charge. But the very ending of the novel shows that Lise’s belief in her capacity for self-determination is no more than a delusion: it is after all God, not man or woman who writes the plot of our lives” (Page, 1990: 79). As in the first novel *The Comforters*, Spark negotiates issues of authorship and identity by establishing a connection with her own conversion and her way to understand her new identity as part of a world filled with God’s creative presence. *The Driver’s Seat* goes further and negotiates issues of free will and eschatology in a world which is losing its spiritual sense. In a novel “written as if to be filmed” (Rankin, 1985: 147), Spark introduces Lise

showing a close-up of her lips which “tell” more of her than her acts, a gloomy feeling that makes Lise the victim she does not seem to be externally:

Her lips are slightly parted; she, whose lips are usually pressed together with the daily disapprovals of the accountants’ office where she has worked continually, except for the months of illness, since she was eighteen, that is to say, for sixteen years and some months. Her lips, when she does not speak or eat, are normally pressed together like the ruled line of a balance sheet, marked straight with her old-fashioned lipstick, a final and a judging mouth, a precision instrument, a detail warden of a mouth. (Spark, 2011: 6-7)

There are two relevant moments in the story when the narrative seems to victimize Lise. In the first of these scenes, which happens shortly after Mrs Fiedke’s definitely disappears from the story, Lise is depicted exhausted and overwhelmed by the situation when her coat gets stained with a long black oily mark: ““My new clothes. It’s best never to be born. I wish my mother and father had practiced birth-control. I wish that pill had been invented at the time. I feel sick. I feel terrible”” (Spark, 2011: 94). The stain reminds Lise of her fictionality and, at the same time, foretells her own fatal ending. Ideal readers of Spark’s work might observe here an authorial interest in the dichotomy between providence and predestination. Lise’s attempts to exert free-will in the narrative keep a balance between her control and the author’s, which help maintain suspense in the novel mirroring the uncertainty of life. Lise, however, resents and loses control when she becomes aware of the fact of having been created.

The other painful moment occurs near the end of the novel when Lise remembers her former existence as a lonely spinster and breaks into tears. She is with Bill and she thinks all her plans of transcending her miserable life by meeting

the man she is looking for are ruined: 'I want to go home (...) I want to go back home and feel all that lonely grief again. I miss it so much already' (Spark, 2011: 104). The author employs a distant, observing narrative, which describes Lise's actions as if they were at the same time familiar and alien. The provision of this kind of description produces a gap in the reader's approach to Lise, who appears isolated and lacking identity. The novel is the tragedy of a woman who dies a violent death. Devoid of any affectionate background, Lise seems to be invisible and vulnerable in this world. As Helene Meyers states, "she lacks a 'fixed-point' and thus cannot find meaning in life. Hence she chooses death" (2001: 80). Michelle Massé has argued that "[g]iven oppression as a premise", the oppression of the authorial control in the narrative, "masochism can work to create and preserve a coherent self, to control repetition of trauma, and to regulate others as well as the self" (1992: 45). By plotting her own murder, Meyers adds, "Lise will use the mutilated remains of her body to gain posthumous attention. In short, Lise will create an identity by becoming a victim" (2001: 80).

As in the traditional detective story, Lise must produce a body for the crime to be investigated. However, this is not a classic detective novel, it is an inversion. The 'whodunnit' is not the case, because victim and plotter are the same. The murderer, therefore, is not the man Lise is looking for to kill her. He is just another part of her plan to 'murder herself': "You can have the book as well; it's a whydunnit in q-sharp major and it has a message: never talk to the sort of girls that you wouldn't leave lying about in your drawing-room for the servants to pick up" (2011: 111). In this sense, the case is all about the reasons why and the message

implied. Lise tries to leave no room for speculations or inquiries. Every clue must lead to the next. Lise's story is being written while we are reading it, but the story has been already written. When she is at the airport ready to embark on a plane to Southern Europe, she boards at Gate 14. This is the end of chapter two. Chapter three begins with a shocking prolepsis:

She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man's necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14. (2011: 21)

The focus on Gate 14 intentionally marks a sort of door to the "author's dimension". The novel is full of sevens including the fact that it is divided into seven chapters, the action takes place in July, at the office we are told that Lise has seven colleagues over her, another seven below her, Bill's diet is Regime 7, and they meet at seven. Indeed, Scripture represents seven as the number of completeness and achievement and its meaning is connected to God's creation. The image of Gate 14, two sevens, through which Lise leaves her past life and begins her last journey is not a coincidence given Spark's taste for detail in a novel full of signs and symbols. The novel negotiates the limits of free will and humans' capacity to manage their lives in the prospect of an inescapable fate. In this sense, *The Driver's Seat* is a satire about the logical quest of anyone's life whose starting point is the only certain fact: death. And from this sure finale, the reader is forced to go back again looking for clues – if we take it as a traditional detective work – or looking for those sparks of grace which may offer us a glimpse of hope and transcendence to our

fictional/earthly limitations. It is, in short, an autobiography in reverse up to the point when we are aware of being fictions in someone else's creation.

By the time this novel was written, concepts of self and identity were being questioned and revised. Spark seems to be analyzing here the concepts of autobiography. It could be argued that the perfect autobiography does not exist since the "I" who writes is not the same "I" who experienced the facts narrated. Memory and its selective and, sometimes arbitrary, way of storing information is in the way. To narrate past events, one must rely on memory, which becomes unreliable because of the passing of time and hindsight. However, Spark further complicates the slippery notions of autobiography and presents us the story of the "perfect autobiography" in the figure of Lise using the present tense. She is writing her life as it occurs but, to complete fully one's life, one should be able to tell her own end, her own death. This is precisely where Lise fails. Her fictional attempts to usurp the authorial role cannot be fulfilled because, Lise, even in her fictional nature, in the 'presentness' of her own narrative, will never be able to complete the "final of the end". Eventually, the author takes on the narrative and narrates/finishes Lise's final act leaving her just feeling "how final is finality".

Spark fuses causal and contingent elements in the novel. It is only at the end that the relationship between them is revealed and the reader understands they are absolutely significant. Although Lise provides a presence, she is portrayed as purely fictional, not because the obvious fact of her being a fictional character, but because the narrative is constantly highlighting her fictionality. In this sense, Lise is a fictional presence even for a fictional world sparking a debate on authorial self-

effacement. As an author within the narrative, she points to an absence because she negotiates the complex ambivalences of the acts of telling and reading. Lise obscures the narrative's inadequacy while seeming to fill its space. In other words, although the author seems to depict a protagonist creator, she is only dramatizing the making of a narrative from the inside out. Judith Roof sees here a doubled consciousness, "a consciousness of telling a story and a consciousness of the story's shape [that] makes telling itself the subject of the novel, (...) an uncertainty that lies not in Lise, but in the character of the narration itself" (Roof, 2002: 53). Lise, therefore, can be seen as the displacement of the fixations of another, in this case the fixation of the authorial self to pervade her own fiction while, at the same time, dissimulating that presence through the figure of a creative character. Nevertheless, the author goes further as the story develops.

When Lise arrives at her hotel late at night, she finds a mysterious man at the hall and, suddenly, a sharp revelation is brought to the fore: that man in a dark suit happens to be Mrs Fiedke's nephew.

It is long past midnight when she arrives at the Hotel Tomson (...) The porter is talking on the desk telephone which links with the bedrooms. Meanwhile the only other person in the hall, a youngish man in a dark suit, stands before the desk with a brief-case and a tartan hold-all by his side.

"Please don't waken her. It isn't at all necessary at this late hour. Just show me my room" - "She's on her way down. She says to tell you to wait, she's on her way."

"I could have seen her in the morning. It wasn't necessary. It's so late." The man's tone is authoritative and vexed.

"She's wide awake, sir," says the porter. "She was very definite that we were to let her know as soon as you arrived." (Spark, 2011: 110)



The continuous use of “she” to refer to the interlocutor on the phone together with some clues conveniently displayed by the author makes us think of Mrs. Fiedke as the person on the phone. However, from a metafictional viewpoint, we can discern the authorial presence behind the identity of this mysterious absent character; thus, the fiction-writing self will succeed in controlling her plot beyond the lines of the narrative. *She* keeps Richard waiting at the hall until Lise meets him; their encounter is needed for the demands of the narrative. Richard seems to be reluctant to acquiesce to the imposed authorial pattern as can be seen in the way he tries to leave the hall. He is going to be both victim and executioner. There is no escape from this suffocating story where a prearranged ending seems to have been agreed in advance.

Lise touches him on the arm. “You’re coming with me,” she says.

“No,” he says, trembling. His round face is pink and white, his eyes are wide open with fear. He looks neat in his business suit and white shirt, as he did this morning when Lise first followed and then sat next to him on the plane. (Spark, 2011: 111)

Lise, who immediately recognizes the man she has been looking for, forces him to fit with the pattern which has been sketched for them.

“Leave everything,” says Lise. “Come on, it’s getting late” She starts propelling him to the door.

(...) “No, I don’t want to come. I want to stay. (...) *I want to get away.*” He pulls back from her.

“I’ve got a car outside,” says Lise. (My emphasis) (Spark, 2011: 111)

Lise has a car; she is on the driver’s seat, taking control; she leads the action of the plot which will precipitate her ending. Lise’s demise, thus, can be understood as an

assisted suicide which is portrayed in her desperate search for a man to kill her. Her disappearance from the plot is required for her miserable plot to come to an end.

After an unidentified appearance on the first pages of the novel, Richard is introduced in the plot by means of a conversation between Mrs Fiedke and Lise. Mrs Fiedke tells Lise about her “poor” nephew. Richard’s presence hovers over the narrative before appearing as a character; he is absent but very much present. This is a common quality shared by all the characters playing the role of *the author’s fictional double* in this study. Richard’s relevance in the plot is exposed from the very beginning and increases as the novel develops, thus insinuating both the imminent end of Lise as the protagonist of the novel and a new phase in our analysis of Spark’s novelistic production where, most of the times, men play the leading role of the plot. Mrs Fiedke introduces him in the first part of the novel: “My nephew is arriving this evening” (Spark, 2011: 70). Mrs Fiedke, then adds that her “nephew gets everything when I’m gone” (Spark, 2011: 70). From this moment on, Lise’s story starts to come to an end in favour of that of Richard. The close relation between Richard and Mrs Fiedke, *the author’s hybrid character*, reinforces our theory on the author’s fictional double. Mrs Fiedke’s significant remark on her inheritance seems to be insinuating the role of Richard as taking over Lise’s once Mrs Fiedke concludes her task in the plot.

There are more characteristics which make of Richard a suitable candidate for the role of *the author’s fictional double*: “My poor nephew has been unwell, we had to send him to a clinic. It was either or the other, they gave us no choice. He’s so much better now, quite well again. But he needs rest. Rest, rest and more

rest is what the doctor wrote” (Spark, 2011: 88). Richard, as Lise and Caroline before him, seems to have been suffering from some kind of nervous breakdown or mental derangement which, at the same time, seems to mirror that suffered by the author herself, the cause of which is insinuated a bit later in the novel when Lise asks about the name of Mrs Fiedke’s nephew: “Richard. We never called him Dick. Only his mother, but not us. I hope he gets the plane all right” (Spark, 2011: 90). As the narrative informs, Richard’s disease seems to have its roots on the relationship with his mother. In slang English, the term *dick* is used to refer to the masculine sexual organ. The fact that only Richard’s mother calls him *Dick* suggests some kind of failure in his personal development which might have to do with Richard’s inability to overcome the Oedipus complex. Being Richard the would-be author’s fictional double in the plot, we might consider this psychological trauma as the mirror image of a possible latent Electra complex on the fiction-writing self’s part, which could also explain the reason why Spark’s protagonists in her last novels are men instead of her traditional women.

We soon know that Richard is a tormented man who only seems to be satisfied assaulting and murdering women. However, at this point in the novel, Lise is portrayed even more frightening than Richard; her plan is more terrible than suicide itself because she is looking for someone who “assists” her in her violent way to death. In so doing, she is not only putting an end to her existence but also to Richard’s possibilities to reintegration. From a metafictional perspective, Lise is taking the driver’s seat and this unnatural shift in the narrative is what makes Lise’s plan such a repulsive act.

When Richard and Lise meet at the hotel hall, Richard appears frightened and reluctant to acquiesce to Lise's plan but submissive at the same time: "She takes him to the car, lets go of his arm, gets into the driver's seat and waits while he walks round the front of the car and gets in beside her. Then she drives off with him at her side" (Spark, 2011: 111). Richard gets on Lise's car by his own and sits on the passenger seat as if an inner force obliges him to do it. He shows himself vulnerable and weak as he accomplishes the dictates of this inverted narrative.

As it has been mentioned before, there is an attempt being made on the part of the fiction-writing self to expose a harsh critique upon predestination which gives the story its macabre atmosphere; that is why Lise's journey becomes a dead-end.

"I've been looking for you all day. (...) As soon as I saw you this morning I knew that you were the one. You're my type."

He is trembling. She says, "You were in a clinic. You're Richard. I know your name because your aunt told me."

He says, "I've had six years' treatment. I want to start afresh." (...)

"Were the walls of the clinic pale green in all the rooms? Was there a great big tough man in the dormitory at night, patrolling up and down every so often, just in case?"

"Yes," he says.

"Stop trembling," she says. "It's the madhouse tremble. It will soon be over."  
(Spark, 2011: 111)

This conversation between Lise and Richard seems to transcend the limits of the novel. Lise and Richard seem to share a common past, since both have suffered from nervous breakdowns which cause them to spend some time in a sanatorium. When Lise refers to the pale green walls of the clinic, we may recall the description of St. Philumena where Caroline, in *The Comforters*, stayed for a while to recover

from some kind of nervous upheaval. However, the “sacred” stone blocks of a place destined to spiritual comfort now become the cold green tiles of an operating theatre.

This scene elaborates a kind of connection, almost communion, among the leading characters of Spark’s novels at the same time that questions Richard’s role in the novel.

“Before you went to the clinic how long did they keep you in prison?”

“Two years,” he said.

“Did you strangle or stab?”

“I stabbed her, but she didn’t die. I never killed a woman.”

“No, but you’d like to. I knew it this morning.”

“You never saw me before in your life.”

“That’s not the point,” Lise says. “That’s by the way. You’re a sex maniac.”

“No, no,” he says. “That’s all over and past. Not anymore.” (Spark, 2011: 112)

Lise seems to know Richard’s secrets; in this sense she acts as an omniscient writer sketching her character’s plot. Mrs Fiedke’s presence in the narrative has empowered Lise to the point of thinking herself to be in the driver’s seat. There is a feeling that some secret alliance has been forged between Lise and the fiction-writing self who informs Lise of some of the intricacies of the narrative. This fact immediately endows her with a halo of hybridity; this hybridity given by her relationship with the author. Lise seems to be ready to leave the plot. But in this end-directed story, all the roles have been prearranged and the deceitful narrative inverted pattern changes the focus of the plot onto Richard: “‘I don’t want to do it,’ he says, staring at her. ‘I didn’t mean this to happen. I planned everything to be

different. Let me go” (Spark, 2011: 114). The fiction-writing self deceives her readers one last time letting Lise to give the final orders:

Lise instructs Richard, her would-be murder, on how to commit the crime:

“I’m going to lie down here. Then you tie my hands with my scarf; I’ll put one wrist over the other, it’s the proper way. Then you’ll tie my ankles together with your necktie. Then you strike.” She points first to her throat. “First here,” she says. Then, pointing to a place beneath each breast, she says, “Then here and there. Then anywhere you like.” (Spark, 2011: 113-4)

She even gives him the knife which his aunt has bought him as a present so that he uses it to stab her to death: “‘Don’t forget,’ she says, ‘that it’s curved.’ (...) ‘After you’ve stabbed,’ she says, ‘be sure to twist it upwards or it may not penetrate far enough.’ She demonstrates the movement with her wrist” (Spark, 2011: 114). At this point in the novel, just when Lise seems to have gained complete creative control is when she believes that her character is ready to transcend the fictional level: she fantasizes about being found next day and imagines the police investigations:

They will reveal, bit by bit, that they know his record. They will bark, and exchange places at the desk. They will come and go in the little office, already beset by inquietude and fear, even before her identity is traced back to where she came from. They will try soft speaking, they will reason with him in their secret dismay that the evidence already coming in seems to confirm his story.

“The last time you lost control of yourself didn’t you take the woman for a drive in the country?”

“But this one took me. She made me go. She was driving. I didn’t want to go. It was only by chance that I met her.”

“You never saw her before?”

“The first time was at the airport. She sat beside me on the plane. I moved my seat. I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what? What frightened you?”

Round and round again will go the interrogators, moving slowly forward, always bearing the same questions like the whirling shell of a snail. (Spark, 2011: 113)

Lise’s plot seems to have been walking in circles to baffle the reader. However, the clearing-up scene is never fulfilled since the victim is the plotter according to the murderer, and the murderer is the plotter according to the official files. Indeed, all clues lead to the murderer, the author’s ‘vehicle’ to enter the fictional world. The author’s self-effacement in the work mirrors that of God in universe, limits the protagonist’s desires to usurp his role, but also reinforces the existence of a creative force. As has been explained before, this research divides Spark’s novelistic production into three different stages. The first one, represented by her first novel *The Comforters*, is characterized by a character protagonist who embodies the authorial presence in the narrative and establishes a relationship between the author and his fiction and God and his creation.

In this second phase, the author’s fictional double depicts the link between author and character in a different way: Lise must be sacrificed for the author to ‘materialize’ in her own fiction as a Christ-like figure. Consequently, following the Holy Trinity imagery, the authorial presence in her fiction is seen from the perspective of God, the son. This fact sheds some light on the author’s Christian convictions in a novel apparently devoid of any religious message and parallels Lise’s body with that of Christ which has to be immolated in order to achieve God’s sacred plan. Lise’s martyrdom is required for her to be reborn as a new subject. The idea of the body as a virtual place where the author negotiates her identity functions

as a relevant resource at this point of the story. Lise at her very last moment is portrayed as a container which comprises Spark's multiple personalities in just one body; she can be understood as the abridgement of the author's former identities; as a remnant of the past which has to be sacrificed in favor of a promising future. Lise's body at the end of the story, in the same way as Christ's body, is endowed with a holy halo since her death symbolizes rebirth, transcendence. The final authorial intrusion can be seen as a showy display of power which corroborates the omnipotence of the writer within the novel:

“Tie my hands first,” she says, crossing her wrists. “Tie them with the scarf.”  
 He ties her hands, and she tells him in a sharp, quick voice to take off his necktie and bind her ankles.  
 “No,” he says, kneeling over her, “not your ankles.”  
 “I don't want any sex”, she shouts. “You can have it afterwards. Tie my feet and kill, that's all. They will come and sweep it up in the morning.”  
 All the same, he plunges into her, with the knife poised high.  
 “Kill me,” she says, and repeats it in four languages.  
 As the knife descends to her throat she screams, evidently perceiving how final is finality. (Spark, 2011: 114)

In Lise's very last words, we can see that the author is completely in control. As Spark *plunges into her creation*, Lise realizes that everything must comply with the author's will and she is not, she has not been, the author. Through a brutal display of violence, adding rape to murder, the author modifies the end that Lise had scrupulously planned for herself. The effect of an open-ended narrative, in which the totally unexpected can happen, finally takes place. However, after killing her, Richard “stands staring for a while and then, having started to turn away, he



hesitates as if he had forgotten something of her bidding. Suddenly he wrenches off his necktie and bends to tie her ankles together with it” (Spark, 2011: 114). In a final macabre twist on the part of the author, Richard ironically tries to leave everything as Lise told him and ties her ankles together as if he were hiding the rape. This last authorial self-effacement points out to Lise’s comment when she talks about that moment of anagnorisis when she recognizes the man she’s looking for: “‘Not really a presence,’ Lise says. ‘The lack of an absence’” (Spark, 2011: 92). Lise experiences the infallible presence of the God-like author and realizes the impossibility of writing her own story within someone else’s fictional pattern. Once Lise is dead, the narrative does not make any reference to Lise’s corpse. After Lise’s death, the murderer appears as Lise’s victim. He seems to be the only one on stage:

He runs to the car, taking his chance and knowing that he will at last be taken, and seeing already as he drives away from the Pavilion and away, the sad little office where the police clank in and out and the typewriter ticks out his unnerving statement: “She told me to kill her and I killed her. She spoke in many languages, but she was telling me to kill her all the time. She told me precisely what to do. I was hoping to start a new life.” (Spark, 2011: 114)

Just as Lise is both the victim and the ‘killer’, Richard is both the killer and the ‘victim’. Lise acts as plotter only to discover at her very end that she was “being plotted”. Conversely, Richard is “being plotted” by Lise only to discover at the very end that he can plot himself changing Lise’s plan. This set of paradoxes make the reader look for some reference, some clue, among the last words of the novel. The reference to the first novel *The Comforters* when he mentions the “clank in and out

of the typewriter” explains that Lise’s plot is no more – and no less – than the author’s plot. In the last scene of the novel, Richard waits to be caught:

He sees already the gleaming buttons of the policemen’s uniforms, hears the cold and the confiding, the hot and the barking voices, sees already the holsters and epaulets and all those trappings devised to protect them from the *indecent exposure* of fear and pity, pity and fear. (My emphasis) (Spark, 2011: 114-5)

Through Richard, the author wants to make clear her control of the narrative. However, the way Spark constructs the final twist of the plot is shocking and even cruel for a reader too immersed in Lise’s plot to realize that there is an author in control. The controversial ending proves necessary for the message of the novel – “a whydunnit in q-sharp major” (Spark, 2011: 111) – a message which blends perfectly ethics and aesthetics giving us a crash course in Aristotelian tragedy.

The legal term *indecent exposure* is related here with the uniforms and trappings of the policemen, depicting a return to law and order. After so much pity and fear – and fear and pity – Spark reminds us that this fictional tragedy imitating life goes both ways from creator to created and vice versa; Lise’s sacrificial, almost ritualistic murder means the elimination of the author’s former self in favour of a new one. Following the Aristotelian analysis of tragedy, readers must put in the place of the protagonist and purge their emotions of pity and fear. However, the tragic event, like Spark’s fictions, does not teach us a lesson. Hans-Georg Gadamer's attempt to describe the difficult process that Aristotle called *catharsis* in his study *Truth and Method* can shed some light on this:

What is experienced in such an excess of tragic suffering is something truly common. The spectator recognizes himself and his finiteness in the face of the

power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has exemplary significance...To see that "this is how it is" is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives. (1995: 132)

With the final reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*, Spark invites us to understand her (Lise's) tragedy in relation to a larger concern with the social and ethical purpose of literature. Criticism, according to Aristotle, should not be simply the analysis of aesthetic principles, but should also take into account the overall function of any feature of a work of art in its social context. When Spark reflects on the purpose of art, she observes that, the purpose of art "contains that element of pleasure that restores the proportions of the human spirit, opens windows in the mind" (Spark, 1971: 25). Spark, however, sees in the satirical, the witty and the ironic the only effective art form in the future. Lise cannot be the heroine of this tragedy if we see her as a victim because the "cult of the victim is the cult of pathos, not tragedy" and for Spark, "the art of pathos is pathetic (...) and it has reached a point of exhaustion" (1971: 26). Thus, Spark questions the moral and political effectiveness of "socially-conscious art" and advocates ironic and satiric art which offers a more porous relationship between life and art. In short, she suggests that this art form can be more ethically, socially and politically effective and can help to change the ways in which we see the world.

The phrase *indecent exposure* summarizes Spark's intention with an ending that many readers and even critics have found pointless and unnecessarily cruel. Spark, however, makes use of a "metaphysical shocker" – as the novel was described on the cover at the time of its publication – to reject the secular

materialism of society and open our minds to a more spiritual sensibility. Lise's sentimental attachment to reality and her materialist organization of life metaphorically shows spiritual dissolution and apathy. Spark uses Lise, more specifically, Lise's body, to satirize this materialist society.

Spark ridicules a possible reading of her novel from a sentimental point of view problematizing Lise's image as victim. Spark tries to show the wasteland of Lise's life and her hopeless prospect for the future. Some may interpret the trauma of a middle-aged woman whose life expectations have failed and a death drive that compels her to commit suicide. Some may see a lack of spiritual or religious sensibility in the face of desperation. Connecting fiction with life, in the relationship between the character of Lise, who writes her own end, and the author who continuously reminds us that everything has already been written (even Lise carries the book under her arm), the novel implies a world where the absence of God leaves humans in a state of shock. As the fiction-writing self reveals itself in a narrative apparently controlled by Lise, Spark – following the tradition of other writers such as Flannery O'Connor – depicts those moments of revelation, when the sacred surfaces from the material, in a shocking and unsentimental way. There is a connection between this aesthetic pattern and Lise's latent trauma. Spark would make extensive use of references to Lise's body.

In this sense, the body becomes the object through which people can project their traumas. In *The Comforters*, Spark forces a direct identification between her protagonist's trauma and that of the fiction-writing self. In *The Driver's Seat*, however, Spark displaces the projection of trauma onto her protagonist. Unlike

Caroline, Lise's trauma is not gone through sensations and perceptions, but through her own body. Caroline is trying to deal with her trauma, to understand it. Lise has experienced that trauma and is trying to deal with the wounds inflicted. At this point is where Spark's fictions become complicated.

Trauma in her fiction is intimately related to her conversion and subsequent observance of Catholic norms. In Catholicism Spark sees a connection with fiction, not only in its form, but also in the way fiction may serve to discern certain anxieties and contradictions of real life. Through fiction, Spark seeks to show that our existence needs some sort of transcendence, a spiritual comfort, to explain the contingency of our creation. Spark negotiates this traumatic experience through her experimental fiction, always porous and numinous, to project a sense of the spiritual.

Writing *The Driver's Seat* at the beginning of the 70s was not precisely an easy task in order to depict this transcendental spiritual imagination, so Spark decided to show precisely the lack of it. This narrative devoid of any transcendental goal apart from being able to get complete control of one's life is what we are shown in Lise's story. The almost imperceptible wounds of her senseless existence only hinted at the sight of her slightly parted lips. Our goal here is not to study the relationship between psychoanalysis and theology, but we must admit that spiritual awakening in Spark's fiction work through psychological trauma. In *The Driver's Seat*, the physical feature that links Lise with her trauma is her lips. Lise's actions throughout the novel aim to completing her own autobiography. In this sense, she

is giving voice to herself. The wounds inflicted on both the body and the mind represent what Cathy Caruth calls “a double wound”:

The wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. [...] Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance— returns to haunt the survivor later on. (1996: 3)

As many of Spark’s fictions, Lise’s autobiography becomes the depiction of unassimilated memory into discourse, when the representation of trauma coincides with self-representation. As Caruth goes on to say, trauma “is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (1996: 4). The truth, because it is delayed, has to incorporate what is known and also what is unknown. Lise’s story is the story of a traumatic life whose unique expectation is death. This allegory reflects people’s anxiety about a life devoid of any transcendence. The only way for Lise to transcend her fictional existence is to discover that she is not in the driver’s seat. The writing-fiction self reveals itself in the final twist when the murder is preceded by rape.

Spark’s novel exposes that kind of *double telling* that Caruth observes at the core of these narratives: “the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (author’s emphasis) (1996: 7). Connecting trauma and religious experience, Shelly Rambo argues in *Spirit and Trauma* that

“this oscillation between life and death opens up a distinctive middle in which neither can be read apart from each other. Instead, the experience of survival is a death-life experience” (2010: 34). Thus, from religious experience, we must not only address to the triumph of resurrection, but also what she calls the Holy Saturday of experience, that is, a middle realm in life between birth and the prospect of resurrection. In this middle, the threat of death that traumatically wounds us remains to haunt our lives. Thus, in this middle space hope for new life remains suspended and suffering endures.

This idea is difficult to show in literature and Spark is aware of the fact that one must always distinguish between theology and theology-in-fiction. No novelist of any worth imposes theology over fictional narrative, but instead allows narrative to embody its own theological intimations. This idea might be one of the reasons why *The Driver's Seat* is such a difficult novel to categorize and, at the same time, allows multiple interpretations.

Lise's arrogant attempt to usurp the authorial role is punished with the hardest lesson: the imaginary prospect of a world without any sense or transcendence, without a God; the hopeless idea that there is nothing beyond the end. However, if we take death as part of the expectancy of life, that is, if we read again Lise's story and join the dots, we can see in every scene not Lise's actions, but the author's. Lise's *whydunnit* is a life of pressed lips, hopeless and death oriented. Spark proposes the opposite. Spark does not imply an opposition between secular and sacred but uses the form of the novel as a way to understand her place in the world, the truth of her existence: not herself, the who, but the reason, the why.

Susana Lee, in her book *A World Abandoned by God: Narrative and Secularism* analyses secularism as an idea articulated through the novel form (2006: 11). She cites Georg Lukács's famous assertion that the novel is the epic of a world abandoned by God, but she posits that God's abandonment of the world is built into and out of the very structure of the novel. Consequently, she observes that "the departure of God becomes the formal substance and undertone of the novel, and the novel in turn informs our understanding of secularism and its crises, uncertainties, and potentials" (Lee, 2006: 11).

For Spark, however, that same sense of being aware of the absence of God serves only to reinforce that creative presence which her fiction-writing self emulates through self-effacement in fiction. In this sense, *The Driver's Seat* is a radical experiment. By the end of the novel the reader perceives the inexorable connections between contingency and plot which are so common to all Spark's novels, but which are made obvious in this novel because all contingent events are revealed finally to be necessary. There is no superfluous material. Thus, *The Driver's Seat* succeeds at both levels, as a secular thriller (an inversion of the traditional detective story) that serves as a practical analysis on the novel form and as an allegory of the trauma of our contingency.

The phrase "pity and fear, fear and pity" ends the narrative resounding like an echo. The readers' expectations for a satisfactory ending do not seem to be fulfilled. However, the very ending of the novel emulates an echo that aims to transcend the limitations of the page where we can meet the creator and get our much-needed catharsis.



### 3.3 *THE FINISHING SCHOOL (2004)*

The third stage in Spark's work comprises those novels from 1981 to 2004. In other words, it embraces those works between the publication of *Loitering with Intent* (1981) and her last novel *The Finishing School*. This last novel has been chosen as the representative text because it is felt as a compendium of this period. The title, together with the fact that it was the last novel she wrote, adds certain grade of transcendence to Spark's whole literary production.

This third phase in our division of Spark's work is characterized by an apparent economy in the use of Catholic 'signs and symbols', which seem to have disappeared from stage, and a change in the portrayal and identification of both *the author's fictional doubles* and *the author's hybrid characters*. Our theory is that even when invisible at first sight, Catholic concerns in Spark's last novels are, as the authorial presence in her work, *physically absent but intrinsically present*. Catholic representation is shown in the form of moral questionings more than symbolic interpretation:

According to the catechism of the Roman Catholic faith, into which Rowland had been born, six sins against the Holy Spirit are specified. The fourth is 'Envy of Another's Spiritual Good,' and that was the sin from which Rowland suffered. (Spark, 2016: 93)

Rowland, *the author's fictional double* in *The Finishing School*, as a kind of abridgement of all Sparkian protagonists, is openly victimized. He is portrayed as

a sinner whose main fault is to wish for a different existence/identity from that of his own:

“Suffered” is the right word, as it often is in cases where the perpetrators are in the clutches of their own distortions. With Rowland, his obsessive jealousy of Chris was his greatest misfortune. And jealousy is an affliction of the spirit which, unlike some sins of the flesh, gives no one any pleasure. It is a miserable emotion for the jealous one with equally miserable effects on others. (Spark, 2016: 93)

This time, Rowland is introduced as the victim of his own obsessions. Thus, *The Finishing School*, as a kind of dramatic closure to Spark’s work, is given a much more solemn tone since it deals with such abstract concepts as those inner emotions which concern human condition. The moral of the story implies an exercise of self-learning which leads to the overcoming of one’s personal limitations. Consequently, this last period in Spark’s novelistic production is not about acceptance, nor sacrifice but improvement with a sense of personal/spiritual liberation. The novels from this last stage in Spark’s literary production present a relevant shift in content since religious matters and institutions are treated from a more respectful perspective and an unmistakable tint of transcendence; there is no need of Catholic signs and symbols at this stage since spirituality is distilled everywhere. Similarly, elaborating the premise of a God-like author, the ostensible absence of any authorial control in her last works highlights the author’s intrinsic presence. That is why those hybrid characters so typical in Spark’s work are not easily identified at first sight; especially in her last novel, *The Finishing School*, where both categories of characters, *the author’s fictional double* and *the author’s*

*hybrid character*, unexpectedly, join together at the end in a kind of homosexual relationship:

Chris proceeded to establish himself as a readable novelist and meanwhile joined Rowland at College Sunrise as soon as he was of age. After a year they engaged themselves in a Same-Sex Affirmation Ceremony, attended by friends and Chris's family. (Spark, 2016: 179)

According to the Catholic notion of the Holy Trinity and its threefold dimension, this third stage in Spark's fictional production would correspond to that of the Holy Spirit. In the first stage of her literary production, that of the Father, Spark sets the scene for the rest of her work and presents acceptance as the key of her narrative; in the second, that of the Son, sacrifice seems to be the basis mirroring Christ's death on the cross; and, finally, the works from this third period distill a noticeable sense of transcendence which is masterly displayed in the presentation of themes and characters where hybridity as synonym of completeness seems to be the underlying tendency. The themes treated in these novels, even if they appear more mundane and domestic, hold a desperate yearning for spiritual transition which implies the *acceptance* of new forms of interpretation and the *sacrifice* of former identification patterns. This introspective process will necessarily lead to the *improvement* of human conduct which is the first step to reach perfection. Tom Richards's words in *Reality and Dreams* (1996), one of the novels from this period, seem to elaborate this change of perspective:

I want some sign of inspiration. Do you want what inspiration is? It is the descent of the Holy Spirit. I was talking to a Cardinal the other day. He said there was a theory that the ages of the Father and the Son were over and *we were approaching*

*the age of the Holy Spirit*, or as we used to say, Ghost. The century is old, very old (...). (Spark, 1997: 44)

As a kind of epilogue, Richard's words seem to summarize Spark's narrative pattern and provide a kind of guideline for the interpretation of the novels from this last stage. *The Abbess of Crew* (1974), one of the novels which conclude the second stage of our division, seems to foretell the same idea when the Abbess informs her closest nuns about the new regulation of the abbey: "we must form new monastic combines. The ages of the Father and the Son are past. We have entered the age of the Holy Ghost (...) I was elected Abbess and I stay the Abbess and I move as the Spirit moves me (Spark, 1995: 10). In metafictional terms, the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost, are clear allusions to the figure of the fiction-writing self who, as a kind of spectre, hovers over the narrative, influencing the characters' actions from outside the plot. Therefore, the "Age of the Holy Spirit" seems to be a clear reference to this last stage where Catholic symbols, in the same way as the authorial presence, are apparently invisible in the narrative, yet deeply rooted in the development of the plot.

In the first example, Tom Richards, in *Reality and Dreams*, is a film director, whose work consists of creating fiction, inventing dream-like stories. His position as a character who creates fiction places him a step beyond the fictional field and, consequently, closer to the artistic scope of the fiction-writing self. Similarly, in the second example, the Abbess, in *The Abbess of Crew*, occupies a quite hybrid position between the experience of the mundane world and the promise of an otherworldly existence. In metafictional terms, her constant relationship with God

is reflection of her exposure to the authorial influence. In this sense, both characters are given a hybrid role since they seem to be half-way between either reality and fiction or worldly and divine perception. This relevant position gives their remarks an authoritative tone which emphasizes their message. Both citations, then, seem to be insinuating the central theme of Spark's last novels: the culmination of a personal quest for identity which implies hybridization and the internalization of a belief. In this study, we will refer to this third division of Spark's work as "the age of the Holy Ghost", a clear allusion to the consummation of the authorial artistic expression which necessarily implies the assimilation of the two previous stages. As Cavallaro observes,

[t]he 'Holy Ghost', or 'Holy Spirit', occupies a privileged position in the Christian Trinity and indeed requires two taps, one on each shoulder, in the act of crossing oneself, whereas the 'Father' and the 'Son' only require one. (Cavallaro, 2002: 76)

Cavallaro's commentary on the twofold notion of the Catholic Holy Spirit masterly depicts the double structure which characterizes the novels from this period; they denote an eventual duality as a sign of maturation and completion. These plots do not expose sharp differentiations but in-between spaces where fictional representation is negotiated. These hybrid positions resulting from the intersection of opposites enhance the duplicity inherent to these novels which seem to elaborate the idea of the double dimension of the human condition as an attempt to reach perfection.

The novels from this stage were all written in Tuscany, where Muriel Spark and Penelope Jardine lived together since 1979. Muriel met Penelope, a painter, at the hairdresser's and they immediately got on well. As Stannard informs,

She was a woman who could have succeeded as lawyer or literary agent, had she not been driven by her muse and a subversive sense of humour [...] At first she had come and gone with the other secretaries but, unlike most of them, she had her own creative life. She became a friend” (Stannard, 2009: 403)

Jardine's description by Stannard seems to meet the standards of the Sparkian fictional doubles whose artistic tendencies empower them as the protagonists of their plots. Thus, Penelope soon played a principal role in Spark's personal plot. Jardine bought a villa in Tuscany which, after some restoration, was barely inhabitable. Muriel decided to move to this place in 1979. However, San Giovanni was Jardine's house and remained so throughout the thirty-odd years of the two women's time together there.

Muriel never paid rent or contributed towards the costs of rebuilding. Instead she supplied the means of escape: the cars, the holidays, the meals out, the business trips across Europe. Jardine always drove (she had a fear of flying). At home she cooked, washed up, catered for guests, and generally acted as personal assistant keeping the world at bay (Stannard, 2009: 413)

Jardine became Spark's right-hand woman. Although there is no mention about any sentimental relationship between them beyond mutual friendship, it seems clear that Spark wanted Penelope to keep her company until the end of her days when Jardine was her only heiress. In an article in *The Standard*, this issue is explained: “Dame Muriel Spark cut her estranged son out of her multi-million-pound will, leaving

every penny to the female friend she lived with for 40 years” (*The Standard*, 14 April, 2007). Her son, Robin, was brought up by his maternal grandparents, because she walked out on him when he was six years old and the estrangement between them was never resolved. They had a terrible relationship. Muriel Spark describes Penelope in her will as her friend and helper since 1968, and as she herself indicates in her will “to her must go all my furniture, books, manuscripts, letters and correspondence and documents, and all my rights as an author in Italy” (*The Standard*, 14 April 2007). By the time Muriel Spark died, both women were still living in Tuscany. After the novelist’s death, “Miss Jardine denied rumours that they were in a lesbian relationship, saying they were simply close friends” (*The Standard*, 14 April 2007). What seems clear is that “this relationship was becoming quite different from anything she had experienced. Slowly, almost reluctantly, [Spark] was learning to love again” (Stannard, 2009: 413). This “kind of love” might have led Spark to experience plenitude in complementarity. Spark and Jardine seemed to be perfectly interrelated through art and friendship. They complemented each other up to the point of appearing as a twofold unit more than a united couple. During her last years, Muriel Spark seemed to have found in Jardine the long-desired stability and peace of mind which eventually led her to settle.

As we learn from her biographer, Martin Stannard, there was a tendency for Spark to remain unsettled, in exile, most of her life. There was a kind of predisposition to be always ready to leave in the way she was reluctant to have any kind of possession of her own; this permitted her to keep her long-standing freedom. Muriel Spark moved to Tuscany in summer of 1979. She was in her sixties and a

more peacefully restless phase of her life was opening. Living with Jardine, Spark seemed to experience a kind of spiritual communion which can be perceived in her work as well. They actually shared common interests since both were writers and artists who tried to maintain their artistry intact. There was a counterbalancing relationship.

We may consider them as a couple of complementary opposites, a pair of doubles supplementing each other. In this sense, Spark seems to go beyond the fictional boundaries reproducing in reality the pattern established in her works. This would mean to reach the climax of metafiction where reality and fiction mirror each other in a never-ending self-identification process. This leads us to elaborate the idea of Penelope Jardine as a young version of Muriel Spark. In his biography of Muriel Spark, Stannard describes a relevant scene where Jardine, as a kind of conscience, whispers to Spark's ear providing her with instructions which shows the close complementarity between two women:

In the early days Muriel and Jardine would go to the Continentale to make international telephone calls (...) It was an important discussion: about Macmillan's contract for *Territorial Rights*. An offer was made. Jardine whispered: 'Tell them to double it.' 'I want double,' said Muriel (Stannard, 2009: 437)

This scene evokes a significant interpretation of their relationship since Jardine, as a God-like author would do, seems to be guiding Spark in real life. Thus, fiction and reality would blur in what appears as a relevant metafictional scene for my dissertation. Jardine's portrayal in this scene from Spark's biography is near to the figure of the double as it has been previously explained. Moreover, Spark's reaction to Jardine's words seems to be a play on words; she might as well be saying, "I



want to be doubled”. This idea fantasizes about an interrelation between two women who, far from keeping a sexual relationship, seemed to complement each other both artistically and spiritually. Accordingly, and taking into account the autobiographic hint of Spark’s work which is portrayed in this study as the aesthetic representation of her personal development, we will elaborate the idea of a double perspective in the portrayal of the protagonists of her last novels as the representation of Spark’s eventual notion of the perfect condition of the self. Thus, these novels introduce two characters playing the principal role. These characters are depicted as opposites which seem to intermingle as complementary parts of a whole. The border between the author’s fictional double and the author’s hybrid character blurs in favor of a composite notion of the subject. This fictional pattern seems to mirror Spark and Jardine’s relationship.

The only novel from this period that keeps the single feminine protagonist structure is *Loitering with Intent*, which works as a dividing point between this and the former period. We can say that this novel encapsulates and culminates a fictional autobiography of Spark as she herself reveals in a letter to Greene: “‘I had to do an ‘I’ because it’s a fictional autobiography and treats of other autobiographies’”<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, we can observe a kind of split between the writing subject and the subject of writing due to “the temporal-spatial distance between the writing self and a narrativized representation of that self. [Thus] Spark writes an explicit self-referential (...) story which acts as an allegory for her own writing process” (McQuillan, 2002: 87). The protagonist of *Loitering with Intent* is Fleur Talbot, a

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Spark to Graham Greene, 11 November 1980. See Stannard, 2009: 442.

middle-aged woman who wants to become a writer. Taking into account Spark's references to its autobiographic trait, we can dare to say that this is a novel about Muriel Spark becoming a writer. However, when promoting the novel, she denied any connection between Fleur Talbot and herself, which perfects her self-effacement exercise. In a rare TV interview with Frank Delaney she tries to settle the issue:

“But [Fleur] did a lot of things which I suspect you must have done in your time,”  
Delaney inquiries.

“Yes”

“So therefore how is it not autobiographical?”

“It wasn't autobiographical because she didn't do the things, she did the *sort* of things.” (Stannard, 2009: 483)

This subtle difference that she establishes between her fictional double and her own might be the basis of the perfect autobiography. The main reason for us to have chosen this novel as the turning point of Spark's last years as a novelist is precisely its autobiographical hint which insinuates a personal focus. In some way, it works as a kind of summary of what her former years as a writer have been and foresees a successful future where she will be, eventually, *loitering with intent*. Spark has experienced a “double conversion to both Roman Catholicism and the art of the novel (...) these coexisting transformations are somehow equivalent” (Kemp, 1974: 158). She had suffered from many doubts and nervous upheavals throughout her conversion process and her novelistic career, not to mention the numerous illnesses which accompanied her for a long time. This fact made her search for identity, as we consider the primary motivation of her whole work, a traumatic and painful

period sometimes. The novel introduces a new stage which she herself describes as the happiest of her life:

“Now I’m eighty-one” Muriel remarked in 1999, “and I think the happiest years of my life started between sixty and seventy [...] For one thing, I can handle life. Up till the time I was sixty I was never very capable of saying “No”, of really saying “This is the way I do it” and being absolutely firm.” Her interviewer, Janice Galloway, threw out a quotation by Jean Taylor from *Memento Mori*: “How nerve-racking it is to be growing old! How much better to be old!” “Was it true?” Muriel brightened. “Yes,” she said, “That is true”. (Stannard, 2009: 427)

She was in her sixties when she wrote *Loitering with Intent* and she seemed to be determined to carry out a kind of restoration of her past which would lead her to a regeneration of her own identity. In some way, from then on, she dedicated her future to examining her past. Thus, in this first novel of her last epoch, she used herself, directly, as a subject.

Unlike the previous period exemplified by *The Driver’s Seat*, this stage in the work of Muriel Spark shows the author’s interest in abandoning any kind of suffering or complaint. Her heroines are no longer victims in her plots. In contrast, the protagonist of *Loitering with Intent* is exuberant about her powers of creativity, and through her Mrs Spark looks at the problem (and the joy) of creating plots in the capacity of a novelist. In this book she resolves her ambiguity towards the plotter as protagonist by making her heroine, Fleur Talbot, a distinguished novelist, who, as such, is granted approval for pursuing her vocation. (Whittaker, 1982: 121)

The novel introduces the protagonist looking back at the time of writing her first novel in London in the late forties. So, the book’s organizational pattern follows Spark’s traditional structure of a story within a story which points to the author outside the narrative. Fleur works in the completion of her novel *Warrender Chase*

at the same time that she is employed as a secretary in the Autobiographical Association. Throughout *Loitering with Intent*, Fleur's novel and the events of her daily life get interwoven. Fleur then gets shocked at realizing the powerful effect of her narrative which instead of recreating past events seems to foresee her personal experiences. As the novel which introduces the last period of our division of Spark's novelistic production, *Loitering with Intent* emphasizes the power of fiction in the experience of the artist whose writing exercise leads her to enjoy a kind of hybridity where the boundaries between fiction and reality seem to blur. The opening scene of *Loitering with Intent* is set in a recognizable churchyard where Muriel Spark has sat many times among the tombstones to write her poems:

One day in the middle of the twentieth century I sat in an old graveyard which had not yet been demolished, in the Kensington area of London, when a young policeman stepped off the path and came over to me (...) I told him I was writing a poem, and offered him a sandwich which he refused as he had just had his dinner, himself. (...) This was the last day of a whole chunk of my life but I didn't know that at the time. I sat on the stone slab of some Victorian grave writing my poem as long as the sun lasted. (Spark, 2014: 5)

This first scene seems to foresee the rest of the novel, in the same way as the novel itself foresees the rest of Spark's work. Spark sat on an ancient grave-stone to write her poems. In so doing, past and present seem to be connected while writing. The policeman representing human laws is a funny figure among the peaceful atmosphere of the graveyard. Life and death seem to fuse in this novel. Fleur writes fiction while she is in contact with the graves which can be understood as material recalls of an otherworldly existence. Similarly, Spark, while writing her poems in the graveyard seems to be suspended between two worlds: the physical and the

spiritual. There is a sense that this connection between these two conceptions of our existence is necessary for Spark to write. Her fiction is then the result of her involvement in both dimensions of the self and her understanding of them through her conversion. Thus, from the very beginning the novel seems to be a tribute to literary transcendence in the same way as the rest of the novels from this period. The novel closes with a significant scene where Spark makes a sudden change of tone in her narration which leaves the reader astonished with the revelation:

The other day when I had looked in on Dottie, in her little flat, and had a row with her on the subject of my wriggling out of real life, unlike herself, I came out into the courtyard exasperated as usual. Some small boys were playing football, and the ball came flying straight towards me. I kicked it with *a change grace*, which, *if I had studied the affair and tried hard, I never could have done*. Away into the air it went, and landed in the small boy's waiting hands. The boy grinned. And so, having entered the fullness of my years, from there by the grace of God *I go on my way rejoicing*. (my emphasis) (Spark, 2014: 129)

The use of the present tense in the last sentence gives the narration immediacy a sense of contemporaneity and eternity through the passing of time and space. Fleur's last words make the narration transcend the boundaries of the novel and predispose us to analyze next works from a different perspective. We can also appreciate a subtle critique upon predestination, one of the characteristics of Calvinism, when she affirms that *if [she] had studied the affair and tried hard, [she] never could have done [it]*. Additionally, she kicks the ball with a *change grace* which may be a clear allusion to the Catholic doctrine she has eventually apprehended. The author's fictional double seems to be looking directly to the implied reader; thus, the *small boy's waiting hands* may be those of the reader

whom she reveals her secrets privately: that she has been able to wriggle out of real life; that she has been collecting information secretly for her own benefit; that she has been *loitering with intent*.

From now on, most of the novels belonging to this last stage of Spark's career will present a man instead of a female as the main character and sometimes there is more than one protagonist. This technique permits Spark to distance herself from her plots as a way of imposing her authorial influence in a subtle way. This substantial change in the portrayal of her fictional double leads her to develop what we can label as an almost perfect autobiography since it complicates identification. Thus, the fiction-writing self can perfect her self-effacement technique soothing the way for the therapeutic effect of the narrative.

In the novels belonging to Spark's last period, two characters are presented as complementary parts of a whole. In these cases, *the author's fictional double* and *the author's hybrid character* have many characteristics in common, except for a slight but crucial difference: their relationship with the author. This propensity to introduce two characters instead of one playing the leading role gets more frequent as we approximate her final novel, *The Finishing School*. Even the titles of these works give the effect of a dual structure. This is the case of *Reality and Dreams* (1996), *Aiding and Abetting* (2000), and the work we have chosen to exemplify this last period in her novelistic career, *The Finishing School* (2004) whose ambivalent title reflects its ambiguity. These plots are built around a series of games of doubles where Spark displays her twofold conception of the self.

On the one hand, in this third stage, Spark is supposed to have surmounted her traumatic conversion and all the difficulties implied in what happens to be the forging of a new identity. On the other, she masterly dominates the secrets of *form in the novel* that caused grave concern to Caroline in *The Comforters*. Spark's aesthetic representation of reality has worked as a therapeutic remedy against her inner anxieties and fears. Eventually, her narrative production succeeds in its healing effect.

We have chosen *The Finishing School* as the representative of Spark's last period because of many reasons: firstly, because it is the last novel Spark wrote and informs us of Spark's last considerations; secondly, because it is an in-depth analysis of the intriguing theme of authorship long-treated by Spark; finally, because it contemplates the double motif as a convincing remedy for the identity self-identification. The very title of this last novel seems to foresee the future. Even when Muriel did not know that this novel would complete her work, she wrote it as if it would. Thus,

It orchestrates many tiny references to her earlier work around that perennial theme: the threat of the mundane to take over the original (...) it is a contemplation of her life as an artist, as though asking herself why and how she did what she did, a celebration of the imagination, of youth, the Holy Spirit, another satire on the inauthentic. 'Finishing' here signifies several things: an education in manners; the final polish of a work of art, be it a book or a piece of furniture; and death, murder or 'polishing off'. (Stannard, 2009: 527)

*The Finishing School* is a kind of abridgement, a testimony which contains not only Spark's previous main fictional themes, but also personal experiences and remnants of inner conflicts. It can be considered as the final destiny towards which her whole

work points; the result of a series of transformations and acknowledgement of a whole life. Even Spark seems determined to give the novel a sort of happy ending, a fact not so common in her literary production.

The story is set in Switzerland. This fact supposes a radical change as opposed to *The Comforters* and *The Driver's Seat*, where Caroline and Lise, respectively, go from a Northern location to a place in the South. At the beginning of the novel Caroline is in a religious retreat in the North of England and moves back to the South, near London, to be next to her boyfriend; in *The Driver's Seat*, Lise moves from a European country in the North to a Southern country in search of a good location to end her existence. Similarly, Spark changes the gloomy and cold British weather for the sunny and warm Italy where *The Finishing School* was written. There is a sense that Spark's former self, in the same way as Lise's and Caroline's, 'died' on the way. In this regard, *The Finishing School* introduces a sharp difference since, as has been mentioned before, it was written in Italy, which apart from being a Southern, warm country, is, above all, a Catholic one. Although the fictional plot is set in Switzerland, the finishing school of the story is itinerant:

College Sunrise had begun in Brussels, a finishing school for both sexes and mixed nationalities. It was founded by Rowland Mahler, assisted by his wife, Nina Parker. The school had flourished on ten pupils aged sixteen and upward, but in spite of this flourishing, mainly by reputation, Rowland had barely been able to square the books at the end of the first year. So he moved the school to Vienna, increased the fees, wrote to the parents that he and Nina were making an exciting experiment: College Sunrise was to be a mobile school which would move somewhere new every year.



They had moved, leaving commendably few debts behind, from Vienna to Lausanne the next year. At present they had nine students at College Sunrise at Ouchy on the lake. (Spark, 2016: 2)

The school is presented as an “exciting experiment” from the beginning and shares that nomadic feature with Spark’s own life. It is mobile, it has no fixed location; this trait seems to reflect Spark’s sense of exile at the same time which gives the story an international projection. Nevertheless, it is worth commenting that the finishing school moves along Europe toward the South-East:

Rowland was to continue to run College Sunrise with some success.

After another year at Ouchy he moved to Ravenna where the school specialized in the study of mosaics. From there he moved to Istanbul where he met with many problems too complicated to narrate here. (Spark, 2016: 121)

The school setting moves from one location to another heading South-East in a pilgrimage-like journey towards Holy Land. In this sense, this last novel points to the beginning of Spark’s literary production and displays its circular structure. This itinerant trait of Rowland’s finishing school stands for a metaphorical journey which seems to summarize Spark’s personal one. There is a quite significant scene where the main purpose of a finishing school is revealed:

“You are listed as a finishing school. What exactly is a finishing school?” said Israel.

“Generally,” said Rowland, “it’s a place where parents dump their teenage children after their schooldays and before their universities or their marriages or careers.”

Giovanna said, “Polished off?”

“Something like that,” Nina said. “We try to instruct them, though. I get scholars to come and lecture.” (Spark, 2016: 37-38)

The finishing school acts as a kind of bridge between school and adult life. In this special school people get *polished off* and ready to undertake the rest of their lives. In a sense, the author gets also *polished off* by writing. Spark's whole career as a novelist seems to have been a finishing school where, in an exercise of self-knowledge, she has managed to forge her identity as both a writer and a Catholic.

Rowland and Nina call their finishing school College Sunrise. This ambiguous name adds a great dose of significance to the school, which contributes to present this novel as a kind of compendium of Spark's literary production. This enigmatic name introduces an oxymoron which symbolizes the ambiguity present in Spark's last novels. While the concept of the school introduces an idea of conclusion, its title insinuates the opposite. "Sunrise" evokes an idea of beginning and hope while it represents the daily contrast between night and day; darkness and light, unconsciousness and consciousness. In *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Carl Jung compares the life of an individual with the stages of a day and states that in the morning the sun,

rises from the nocturnal sea of consciousness and looks upon the wide, bright world which lies before it in an expanse that steadily widens the higher it climbs in the firmament. In this extension of its field of action caused by its own rising, the sun will discover its significance; it will see the attainment of the greatest possible height - the widest possible dissemination of its blessings - as its goal. In this conviction the sun pursues its unforeseen course to the zenith; unforeseen, because its career is unique and individual, and its culminating point could not be calculated in advance. At the stroke of noon, the descent begins. And the descent means the reversal of all the ideals and values that were cherished in the morning, the sun falls

into contradiction with itself. It is as though it should draw in its rays instead of emitting them. Light and warmth decline and are at last extinguished. (Jung, 2001: 109)

Accordingly, the sun cycle exemplifying the cycle of life serves as a metaphoric representation of the different phases of human existence. Human beings in their youth are full of energy, eager to attain their goals and values; however, in the same way that the sun declines in the evening, they lose their vigour and determination as they get older. In this sense, the title of Spark's last novel and, particularly, the name given to this school in the story, function as a perfect conclusion for her novelistic production since it leaves an open ending. It leads us to elaborate the idea of Spark's writing career as a preparation for the rest of her life and, more importantly, after-life. The very notion of 'the Finishing School', then, as a preparation for future life, metaphorically puts an end to any mundane ties and opens the way for spiritual transcendence. The plot sets an obvious referential game between childhood and old age, between sunrise and sundown reflecting the cyclical pattern of our existence; the beginning tends to the end and the end tends to the beginning in a relentless exercise of self-reference.

It was getting dark. As he entered the hall of College Sunrise he heard, from Rowland's television, the familiar voice of Hazel on Sky News: "As we go through this evening and into tonight . . ." The weather in England was warm, scattered showers in the southeast and rain in the north of Scotland. (Spark, 2016: 15)

This scene takes place by the beginning of the novel when Chris, Rowland's best pupil and *the author's hybrid character* in our study, enters the College while in a

voice-over a broadcaster called Hazel gives the weather forecast. That voice recreates a domestic scene and, immediately, takes us back home and even to our childhood. This image of the school as home endows the whole novel with a peaceful sense of reconciliation and reassurance. The name of Hazel has almost magical connotations since Witch Hazel in ancient folklore represents hidden wisdom, dousing and divination and possessing cleansing healing powers. According to this, Hazel's words at the end of the novel provide extra valuable information about the story and its role in Spark's whole literary production. Thus, Hazel's voice, which from a metafictional approach we identify as the author's voice, leads the reader through Spark's final fiction which as a kind of compendium summarizes Spark's fictional world of symbolism and signification/ identifications and representations. This otherworldly-like voice introduces us into the hybrid pattern which characterizes Spark's last novels, where the complementarity between opposites reflects the eternal opposition between reality and fiction. Hazel's words foreshadow the end of the story when her voice, again, closes the novel and, hence, concludes Spark's literary career with the notion of a never-ending process of self-knowledge,

Nina, now finding herself obliged to give dinner parties at Ouchy for the sophisticated world of art dealers, would arrange with the hotel to provide the catering. And once, on her way to the hotel on just such an errand, on a summer evening, she heard once more from the open windows, the chatter of young voices, so that it seemed almost like College Sunrise again. She waved to Albert. And she heard the dear voice of Hazel forecasting the weather on Sky News: "As we go through this evening and into tonight..." (Spark, 2016: 181)

This ending forces the reader to go back to the story and interpret the novel as well as Spark's whole work as an unconscious quest for identity. Therefore, while the nature of Rowlands's finishing school denotes a certain meaning of conclusion, its name, Sunrise, symbolizes a new beginning. College Sunrise encompasses both completion and renewal.

The end of the novel implies a prosperous beginning for the protagonists in the same way that Spark finds freedom and peace of mind in old age; hers is also a new beginning. But it seems as if a development has been necessary to achieve the final completion. The very last words of the novel, "As we go through this evening and into tonight..." also evoke the mystic soul transmigration in search of its creator transcending this world through the *dark night*. In this sense, and remembering other Spark's works such as *Memento Mori*, we can elaborate the idea of death implicit in the novel as an inherent element of life, a necessary step to meet our destiny.

This conception of death, as it is presented in Spark's work, does not have final connotations but signifies transition and evolution at the same time that entertains the idea of a new beginning. Life and death are complementary states of human existence and one cannot be without the other. This opposite but complementary relation works as a pattern upon which Spark seems to build her hybrid narratives. This idea is developed in *The Finishing School* in the course of a conversation between Rowland and Chris:

A novel has a beginning, a middle and an end. So said Aristotle and so he had advised his creative writing class. A beginning, a middle and an end. Chris had said,

“Do you need to begin at the beginning and end at the end? Can’t a writer begin in the middle?”

“That has been tried quite often,” Rowland replied, “but it tends toward confusion.” Chris didn’t seem to care about this aspect. He seemed to have a built-in sense of narrative architecture and balance. (Spark, 2016: 62-63)

In this scene the questioning of the traditional order of a story, exemplifying the cycle of life, mirrors the conventional rules which govern fiction and contemplates multiple possibilities in the relation between a writer and their work. The figures of *the author’s fictional double* and *the author’s hybrid character* are exposed as opposite interpretations of the notion of the writer. In the finishing school students undergo their transition from youth to adulthood; they depart from their previous ignorant existence to a smarter, freer one; there is a feeling that something is left behind in favour of the forge of a new identity. In this sense, as a fictional exercise of self-interpretation, the novel presents an inversion of the idea of a finishing school since Rowland, representing adulthood and experience, goes through a gradual process of personal transformation under the influence of Chris, a young and, apparently, inexpert student of creative writing. The *a priori* conflictive interrelation between these two characters leads Rowland, the author’s fictional double, to experience a kind of unconscious metamorphosis which ends up with the union of both characters in a “Same-sex Affirmation Ceremony” (Spark, 2016: 179).

This physical joining is an obvious metaphor of a more profound association between two opposite conceptions of life and the world. The result would be a double conception of the self as the only way to reach perfect completion. Thus,

Rowland's finishing school, College Sunrise, implies the end of his previous existence in favour of the assimilation of a new complete identity. Nina describes this process as follows: "'When you finish at College Sunrise you should be really and truly finished,' Nina told the girls. 'Like the finish on a rare piece of furniture (...)'"' (Spark, 2016: 8). A piece of furniture is just a wooden block which, in the craftsman's hands, has been transformed into something more perfect and valuable, a work of art.

From a metafictional perspective, the therapeutic effect of Spark's writing reaches its peak here with an extreme exercise of self-representation. The depiction of a man instead of a woman as *the author's fictional double* favours the authorial self-effacement. The union between two male characters emphasizes the distance between the fiction-writing self and the healing effect of her writing. This last novel, *The Finishing School*, then, functions as a kind of compendium of Spark's work, an exercise of self-reconciliation. The itinerant concept of the school makes its issue universal and eternal; it seems to improve as it lasts in time, nurturing from past and present experiences mirroring the individual's maturation process. Rowland and Chris stand for two different representations of the author's twofold conception of the individual: the *self* and the *other*; their final union represents a kind of *hybrid identity* resulting from the mixture of the two former ones. These two characters are subject to the school itself, that Sparkian abstract construction which, as the writer herself seems "to belong nowhere and to no one" (Stannard, 2009: 2).

### 3.3.1 The author's *Fictional Double*: Rowland Mahler

Rowland teaches creative writing. He is also trying hopelessly to write a novel. This artistic trait in Rowland's personality immediately leads us to portray him as an author within fiction and, hence, relate him with former representations of *the author's fictional double*. We are also informed of Rowland's unbalanced state of mind – a characteristic shared by most of Sparkian fictional doubles – by means of a conversation between Nina, his wife, and Israel Brown.

Israel Brown said to Nina, "He should go on a spiritual retreat. I know of a Catholic monastery in the mountains. They don't try to convert you, they just give peace of mind. If you like I'll get them to arrange something for Rowland. It's obviously what he needs."

"He's already a Catholic," Nina said, "nominally". In desperation, she had been describing Rowland's condition to Israel on one of her afternoon visits. She had said, "He needs a psychiatrist," but Israel had said, "No, I think it's a spiritual problem." (Spark, 2016: 99-100)

This scene reminds us of the opening stage in *The Comforters*. The setting is just the same: Laurence, Caroline's boyfriend, is talking to another character – Laurence's grandmother – about Caroline's state of mind. Caroline, who, in the same way as Rowland in *The Finishing School*, happens to be the protagonist of the novel, and, thus, plays the role of *the author's fictional double*, has just become a Catholic and is at St. Philumena's – a religious retreat – to think and recover from some kind of spiritual crisis. Laurence is worried about Caroline and his grandmother, Mrs Jepp, advises him that "[s]he won't get much of a rest in a religious place" (Spark, 1999: 19). Religious worship and places are rather



negatively portrayed in *The Comforters*; their effect on the soul is at least questionable in those novels belonging to the first stage of Spark's literary production.

Similarly, Nina seems desperate to help Rowland in his decline and tells Israel about her fears. Israel, unlike Mrs Jepp in *The Comforters*, encourages Nina to take him to a religious retreat in the mountains which, inevitably, reminds us of St. Philumena's. Although there is an obvious shift in the treatment of Catholic themes which affects the relation between the fiction-writing self and her characters, an obvious parallelism can be established between the first and the last of Spark's novels. The beginning and the end of Spark's work follow a similar pattern thus revealing the circular structure which characterizes Spark's novelistic production. However, both novels mirror each other in a never-ending identification process and, in so doing, their plots present inverted structures. *The Comforters* opens with Caroline coming back from her religious retreat; in *The Finishing School*, Rowland goes to the Monastery of St. Justin Amadeus in Switzerland, by the middle of the novel and, in some way, this is the beginning of Rowland and Chris's story together. This emulates Chris's premise of beginning a story in the middle and threatens the linear traditional sequence.

This time there is no threat within the monastery walls, as it occurs in *The Comforters* with the presence of Mrs Hogg, but outside the monastery with Chris's disruptive influence preventing Rowland from writing his novel.

It was the end of October and Rowland had been three weeks at the Monastery of St. Justin Amadeus on a Swiss mountain plateau near the French border. He was soothed; he was calm. (...)

Rowland had managed to put the thought of Chris aside, as something to be dealt with when he should later “return to reality,” as he told himself. When he thought of Chris, he felt a decided simmering of resentment. (Spark, 2016: 106)

A moral tone is perceived in the portrayal of the author’s fictional double since he is described as a Catholic nominally. His stay at the monastery proves not to be sufficient to erase Chris’s thought from Rowland’s mind. There is a feeling that religion is presented as an inherent aspect of the human condition instead of the main issue of human experience. This novel, as opposed to *The Comforters*, is not the story of a conversion but the account of an identification process.

“Could Rowland be an unconscious gay?”

“He could be, but how would I know?”

“You would know,” said Israel.

“He’s hypnotized by Chris.”

“By Chris or by his novel?”

“How would I know?”

“You would know,” said Israel.

“I know you’re right,” she said. “In fact our marriage is all washed up. I’m just waiting till the end of term.” (...)

“He no longer thinks of me, his marriage, the school or anything at all but Chris, his novel.” (100-101)

Rowland’s problems at writing his novel reminds us of Spark’s problems at writing her first novel which, together with the rest of the similitudes commented before, helps us to identify Rowland as *the author’s fictional double* in *The Finishing School*. The introduction of a male character as the protagonist of the novel implies a harsh difference from most of the previous works where a female character leads the plot.

Rowland, too, was tall; he was well-built, with a crop of hair neither dark nor fair and a blade-like face which he occasionally framed with a pointed beard. At the present time he had shaved his face clean, feeling more like a brilliant young novelist under this appearance. (Spark, 2016: 49)

The narrative describes Rowland's physical appearance in detail. There seems to be an interest in showing that he does not share any physical feature with the writer what is another characteristic of *the author's fictional double*. The more the narrative focus on their differences, the more their connection is emphasized. Therefore, in this last stage of her career, Spark seems to resume the figure of the artist-protagonist. In doing this, the introduction of an innovative leading character gains a relevant significance and an essential shift in her narrative structure. This masculine figure as *the author's fictional double* enables Spark to distance herself from this character avoiding any kind of identification. In so doing, the narrative creates the illusion of a biography when, in fact, what we are reading is a veiled autobiography.

As it occurs in *The Comforters*, *The Finishing School* opens with a couple, Rowland and Nina, having a sentimental relationship – they are married – and running the finishing school, College Sunrise, together. Theirs is an “academic” relation more than a sexual one. It seems as if Rowland's marriage depends on his potency, or lack of it, as a writer:

She had married Rowland largely because of her esteem for scholarship.

His thesis on the German poet Rilke had clinched the deal so far as her consent to marry him was concerned. The fact of his academic achievements stimulated her sex life. He, on the other hand, was in love, basically, with her practical

dependability. It had been her idea to run a finishing school. She had wanted him to call himself Dr. Mahler, but he had sensed that the title would interfere with his main ambition: to write a wonderful novel. (Spark, 2016: 48)

Nina seems to be in love with Rowland's academic achievements more than with him and Rowland enjoys at being admired, so the nature of their attraction suggests its fragility. This foretells their future breakup. According to Gregson, "Husband and wife regard each other – as so many Spark characters have done – as objects of use rather than love" (Gregson, 2008: 99). Rowland and Nina tend to objectify each other, and, in so doing, they dehumanize one another:

I am awfully young, thought Nina, to be tied to a man who is married to a novel. Or perhaps engaged to a novel as it isn't yet real. She longed for Rowland to become Master of an Oxford or Cambridge college. She wanted to be married to a scholar. She had thought he was a playwright when she had married him; that didn't last. (...) Meanwhile at College Sunrise, she was saying to herself, I am married to a state of mind. (Spark, 2016: 63)

Even when she tries to appear as a common married couple, their union seems to be fostered by business more than love; theirs is a business-like engagement and "the whole point of the enterprise was decidedly Rowland's novel" (Spark, 2016: 6). Once again, Rowland's detachment about love or sex makes him fit the demands of *the author's fictional double* whose isolation from mundane relationships emphasizes their higher preoccupations.

We soon realise that the action will be around a different relationship, that between Rowland and Chris. Rowland and Nina's almost non-existing relation worsens by the presence of Chris, a new pupil who enrolls in College Sunrise. Nina is repelled by Rowland's growing obsession with his pupil Chris and finds it weird since she cannot understand a jealousy which is not sexual but aroused by "a book, a work of art, a piece of writing" (Spark, 2016: 56). Rowland and Nina are portrayed as two cold characters who are more preoccupied with the school affairs more than her mutual love, "Both Nina and Rowland aimed principally at affording Rowland the time and space and other opportunities to complete his novel, while passing their lives pleasantly. They in fact loved the school" (Spark, 2016: 5).

Eventually, Rowland and Nina's marriage collapses and Nina takes a lover, Israel Brown, an Art gallerist, and marries him. Nina seems to be the only character in the College Sunrise who has not suffered from any essential transformation. She has got her goal of marrying a successful man whose business is related to the world of Art and for whom she does not seem to be in love either.

Nina settled in London, married to Israel Brown and happy with her studies and his gallery. She returned with him to his villa at Ouchy from time to time. The house of College Sunrise was now a youth hostel. When she passed the house, she sometimes felt nostalgia, not at all for Rowland, but for College Sunrise itself. (Spark, 2016: 179-180)

In the quotation above, Nina shows her disaffection with Rowland in favor of the institution they rule together; their life as a married couple seems to be directly linked with the existence of College Sunrise. Once the school moves to another location and changes its name, their relation, necessary, comes to an end. In this

sense, as it has been mentioned before, Rowland's portrayal fits that of the Spark's traditional figure of the fictional double who, most of the times, is a single or has troublesome relationships with the opposite sex. These characters seem to be sexually castrated in favor of their symbolic signification. For Spark, spiritual and physical fulfillment cannot be concomitant.

Rowland, as the rest of the main characters in Spark's literary production, seems to be deprived of any former identity. We are not informed of his previous life nor any trait of his family or background apart from that of the novel. Only some friends and Chris's family attend their union ceremony at the end of the novel (179). There is not a trace of Rowland's family. This fact contributes to portray him as a secluded character in the same way as Caroline and Lise before. Therefore, we can identify solitude as one of the characteristics share by Spark's fictional doubles since the only company they seem to be allowed to is that of the author.

He felt affectionate toward Rowland, almost protective. His own sense of security was so strong as to be unnoticeable. He knew himself. He felt his talent. It was all a question of time and exercise. Because he was himself unusual, Chris perceived everyone else to be so. He could not think of people as masses except when the question of organizing society arose, and that, thought Chris, should be a far simpler affair than the organizers made out. Left to themselves, people would arrange themselves in harmony. So he should be left alone to pursue . . . well, anything. It was a good theory. (Spark, 2016: 9-10)

From a metafictional approach, this quotation seems to insinuate the authorial voice speaking through Chris, *the author's hybrid character*, fantasizing about the long-discussed issue of the death of the author which, although Chris describes it as "a good theory", it is probed to be impossible in Spark's self-centred writing where

the authorial presence is “so strong as to be unnoticeable”. At the same time, Chris’s interior monologue pretends to emphasize the authorial supremacy in the text whose fictional experiment of self-representation, in the same way that Chris’s or Rowland’s novel is “a question of time and exercise”.

In Spark’s last novels, the fictional representation of the author comprises both, *the author’s fictional double* and *the author’s hybrid character*: Rowland and Chris, two discrete units forming part of a twofold fictional representation which stands for the authorial notion of identity in this latter phase.

Rowland and Chris have an ambiguous relationship which bears jealousy and admiration at the same time. Rowland’s unhealthy obsession with Chris prevents him from writing his novel. He perceives Chris’s intrusion into his personal issues as a kind of alienation. He is jealous of Chris’s ability to write a novel. The more Chris’s novel progresses, the more Rowland’s gets stuck. Rowland suspects Chris is following dubious ways to get success as a novelist; his obsession with Chris leads him to elaborate the idea of getting rid of him.

“Rowland was not listening. He said, “I could even take out a boat on the lake and tip all Chris’s possessions, all of them including his computer, his discs, his printouts, into the lake . . .”

“And Chris as well,” said Nina.

Yes, I could tip him over the edge. He stopped me writing my novel. I have a book of observations about Chris that would make you shriek and shiver. I could ...”

“Enough,” said Nina. “You’re ill.” (Spark, 2016: 105)

In the same way that Mrs Hogg in *The Comforters* seems to have the authorial license to be aware of some of the secrets of the narrative, Chris is thought to have some kind of contact with the author since sometimes he knows things which are

unknown for the rest of the characters in the plot. This fact makes us think of Chris as the author's hybrid character, since he seems to be half-way between reality and fiction. Rowland, in the same way as Caroline in *The Comforters*, feels oppressed by the hybrid character's closeness and starts to fabulate intricate stories about Chris which questions his actual identity.

The strain of Rowland's efforts to cope with his novel was felt more by Nina than by Rowland himself. He confidently talked of "author's birth pangs," "writer's block," "professional distractions" (reading the school essays); he was full of such phrases, so much that Nina in her accesses of sympathy would even invent them for him. "How can you give a creative writing course," she said, "while trying to write creatively yourself? No wonder you feel put off, Rowland."

"Yes, it's almost impossible," he said, "to describe *a process you are actually involved in.*" (My emphasis) (Spark, 2016: 49)

Rowland's remarks on the difficulties he finds in writing about a process he is involved in, seems to be a clear reference to the impossibility of writing one's autobiography. The action of writing implies artistic creation and personal facts and events lose objectiveness when they are fictionalized. The plot displays a kind of contest between the two Sparkian types of characters: Rowland, *the author's fictional double*, and Chris, *the author's hybrid character*. This is an artistic confrontation since both are determined to be the first to write a novel. While Rowland seems to be writing about himself, he suspects Chris is writing about him. This thought tortures Rowland who is afraid of ending up being a character in Chris's plot. The only way to avoid this fact is introducing Chris in his "personal story". This *mise-en-abyme* technique introduces the authorial self-representation



and displays varying degrees of autobiography by means of writing the biography of “the others”.

Spark’s real volume of autobiography ends with her conversion to Catholicism. Then she continued her autobiographical narration, this dissertation aims to show, by means of her novels. Under the veil of fiction, she writes about her own life in a fictional game which bounces between attempts at self-affirmation and self-effacement through the use of multiple characters. At the same time, her fiction is a therapeutic attempt to deal with her traumatic process of conversion, a process which, as she stated in an interview, “took such a long time and it did cover the whole of [her] life in retrospect” (Hosmer, 2005: 131). As Stannard explains, “No contradiction existed in her mind between artistic and spiritual vocation. Both derived from the consciousness of exile. Both required an act of faith, of renunciation, disaffection” (Stannard, 2009: 150). Her last *authorial double character* was about to merge with her last *authorial hybrid character*, in what is the most problematic relationship between characters in Spark’s fiction. Rowland, *the author’s fictional character*, is trying to succeed in writing his great novel. Chris, *the author’s hybrid character*, is writing a novel. Chris’s success torments Rowland both because his student’s novel is attracting the publishers’ attention and because he thinks he may be the object of that fiction. This *mise en abîme* technique mirroring each other’s writing invites a creative communion with the author in a deconstructive autobiographical effect. Art and life, “matter and spirit were held in balance by a sense of the sacramental” (Stannard, 2009: 150).

### 3.3.2 The *author's hybrid character*: Chris Wiley

Chris Wiley is a seventeen-year-old student who attends Rowland's creative writing class. This red-haired boy happens to be a literary prodigy whose historical novel-in-progress, on Mary Queen of Scots, has already excited the interest of publishers. Curiously enough, this fact reminds the reader of Spark's surrealist play on Mary Queen of Scots when she was herself a struggling author in London during the late 1940s. In this sense, Wiley seems to be completing Spark's unfinished work.

Rowland wanted greatly to enter Chris's mind. He was ostensibly a close warm friend of Chris—and in a way it was a true friendship— Where did Chris get his talent? He was self-assured. “You know, Chris,” Rowland had said, “I don't think you're on the right lines. You might scrap it and start again.”

“When it's finished,” said Chris, “I could scrap it and start again. Not before I've finished the novel, though.”

“Why?” said Rowland.

“I want to see what I write.” (Spark, 2016: 4-5)

Chris is a would-be novelist; this autobiographic peculiarity positions him closer to the author than any other *hybrid character* in Spark's fiction; in fact, this is a recurring characteristic of *the author's fictional double*. Therefore, Chris is “doubly” hybrid because he shares characteristics of both the *author's hybrid character* and *the author's fictional double*. In this sense, Chris is an innovative character. The fiction-writing self, making no secret of their identification, shows herself openly through Chris, thus threatening her traditional self-effacement. Thus, Chris's extraordinary talent at writing has its roots in the author's. Chris's final

statement in the above quotation, “I want to see what I write”, seems to be a clear authorial resolution; it is the author’s voice, not Chris’s. That is why Rowland feels so alienated by Chris’s closeness, because he thinks Chris is trafficking information to write the novel he is in. Their rivalry to become the best writer *in* the novel hides a bitter contest to become the writer *of* the novel.

Chris’s identification with the author develops on a par with his relationship with Rowland. Chris is a mystery for the rest of the characters in the plot, especially Rowland who doubts about the origin of Chris’s talent;

Rowland later wrote in his book of observations:

*Chris knows all about fraudulent bankruptcy. How did he come by this knowledge? Is he the son of a fraudulent bankrupt?* (Spark, 2016: 83)

Although Rowland and Chris are portrayed as antagonistic characters at the beginning, their relationship progresses in the novel until it is revealed as an interdependent relationship. The plot is built around them following a kind of two-protagonist pattern where the prominence of one or the other is balanced in favor of a hybrid ending. Their description is contradictory from the beginning: both are men, both are interested in writing, and both are determined to write a novel. However, they are completely different in many aspects. As has been mentioned before, Rowland is a middle-aged teacher who has dedicated most of his life to teach students the secrets of writing, but who appears to be unable to write a good novel. On the contrary, Chris is a teenager who attends Rowland’s creative writing classes and who, against all odds, appears to be more gifted than his tutor at composing a novel. The inevitable result is a great dose of keen envy on Rowland’s

part, which precipitates a thriller-like plot where Chris, as led by some “omniscient authority”, seems to be aware of his artistic superiority and enjoys emphasizing Rowland’s lacks. Chris even attempts to overcome his initial unfavorable situation in the plot. Thus, Rowland gets increasingly jealous of Chris’s success:

He was writing a novel, yes. Rowland, too, was writing a novel, and he wasn’t going to say how good he thought Chris was. A faint twinge of that jealousy which was to mastermind Rowland’s coming months, growing in intensity small hour by hour, seized Rowland as he looked (Spark, 2016: 4)

There is a revelatory scene when Rowland is asking Chris about the historical novel he is writing and Chris displays his supremacy once again, revealing his actual nature:

“Oh, you read a lot, I see. For an historical novel you have to . . . And what, how . . . Do you intend to finish it?”

“Oh, fully.”

“What is the story? How does it develop? Historical novels—they have to develop. How . . . ?”

“No idea, Rowland. I can’t foresee the future. *All I know is the story will happen.*”

“And you find our creative writing classes a help, of course . . .”

“They’re beside the point, in fact, but quite useful in many other respects.”

Rowland was frightened; he felt again that stab of jealous envy, envious jealousy that he had already experienced, on touching and reading *Chris’s typescript*. (My emphasis) (Spark, 2016: 11)

Rowland, as the author’s fictional double suspects Chris of plagiarizing someone’s novel and tries to unmask the author as the writer behind him. It is the author through Chris’s voice who reveals Rowland that *the story is going to happen*. This categorical assertion threatens Rowland’s authorial aspirations and seems to frame

him as a mere character in Chris's plot, which in fact is the author's plot. The novel seems to take sides for Chris apart from Rowland's depiction as a mediocre writer. Both characters seem to be fighting for some kind of pre-eminence in the plot. Rowland tries to display his power as Chris's teacher in an attempt to regain the protagonist role that the narrative seems determined to snatch from him. The fact that Chris is the author's ally is evident when the narrative makes reference to Rowland's fear of touching and reading *Chris's typescript*. This revelation reminds us of those besieging voices that terrorized Caroline, *the author's fictional double*, in *The Comforters*. Those voices, which were manifestations of the author from outside the plot, came together with the sound of a typewriter reproducing every single word of the novel she was in. This relation between Chris and the typewriter of Spark's first novel reinforces the idea of Spark's narrative following a circular structure and endows the character of Chris with a great dose of transcendence. This time, there are no ghostly voices but a written manuscript disturbing the author's fictional double. The author seems to have been able to enter her own narrative by means of her hybrid character whose role in the plot is displayed more powerful than ever. Throughout the novel there are several allusions that insinuate Chris's gifted nature;

Suddenly, as he was gazing into the impenetrable sheet of mist on the lake, a ray of light swung across his memory: it was the phrase used to advertise an English literary festival: In his *extraordinary mind* Chris remembered the brochure precisely. (My emphasis) (Spark, 2016: 9)

The narrative manifests once again the text's support for Chris, which contributes to highlight his hybridity. His mind is described as extraordinary because, in fact,

it seems to be closely related to the omniscient author's mind. Chris seems to be aware of his superiority over Rowland, his only possible rival in the plot.

He felt affectionate toward Rowland, almost protective. His own sense of security was so strong as to be unnoticeable. He knew himself. He felt his talent. It was all a question of time and exercise. Because he was himself unusual, Chris perceived everyone else to be so. (Spark, 2016: 10)

The narrative insists on his exceptional nature and plays with inversions. Chris, younger than Rowland as he is, seems to represent the authorial experience while Rowland appears to stand for the author's first steps in the literary world; an apprentice, still learning. Here, Spark presents an inversion of the teacher-student relationship, since Chris seems to be more trained as a novelist than Rowland, his teacher of creative writing. Chris represents everything that Rowland lacks.

Rowland had read the two opening chapters of the novel Chris was determined to write during his terms at College Sunrise. On his second reading: "But this is quite good," Rowland had whispered, as if speechless with amazement. *Chris remembered every slightest phrase of that reaction.* Rowland had read it over. "Are you sure," he said then, "that you want to go on with this, or would you rather . . ." "Rather what?"

Rowland did not continue that line of thought. (My emphasis) (Spark, 2016: 10)

The idea of Chris taking part in the making of the novel we are reading gathers strength. This revelatory scene enlightens us about this postulate. Rowland has only read the two opening chapters of Chris's novel, twice. He never reads the rest of the novel. From a metafictional perspective, the first two chapters of Chris's novel would correspond to the first stages of our division of Spark's work. Rowland cannot read more than those introductory chapters because the rest of Chris's novel

will not be finished until the novel that we are reading comes to an end. Rowland reads the first *two* parts of the novel *twice*, which seems to be reinforcing the twofold conception of the self just as it is elaborated in this last stage of Spark's work.

The novel Chris was writing was further advanced in his mind than he had conveyed to Rowland. A self-protective urge mixed with a desire to gain as much as possible from the creative writing class made him adopt the pose of a fairly blank set of intentions. In fact, he had a plot settled in his mind. (Spark, 2016: 12)

The scene displays the rivalry between Chris and Rowland and portrays Chris as a plotter within the author's plot. This equates Chris with both Caroline in *The Comforters* and Lise in *The Driver's Seat*. However, unlike his feminine counterparts, Chris is not punished for that; on the contrary, the narrative praises his abilities and skills not only at writing but also at trafficking information in the novel. This time, the plotter is the hybrid character of the novel.

This hybridity works also at the level of relationships. Nina intensifies this set of relations. Nina believes in her husband's genius as a writer as much as he does himself and it seems that her investment in this marriage depends on Rowland's talent, or lack of it, as a novelist. At a superficial level, the novel tells the collapse of their marriage because their relationship relies on "practical dependability" (Spark, 2016: 48). Nina suspects that Rowland may be sleeping with Elaine, the French teacher, but this does not bother her "unduly" (71). The game of doubles continues in the set of relationships since Elaine is Célestine's older sister, and "everyone knew Célestine was Chris's girl" (71). Both couples reinforce Rowland and Chris's connection. Although Rowland's extramarital relationship

does not bother Nina – who sees a local art dealer – she is rebuffed by the idea of Rowland's growing obsession with Chris and finds it bizarre because she cannot understand a jealousy which is not sexual but aroused by “a book, a work of art, a piece of writing” (80). Nina's impossibility to transcend the sexual/material limitation underscores the spiritual approach between Rowland and Chris. Chris is the novel's solution to Rowland's desperation. His “jealousy” points to a more spiritual reward in Spark's fictional world. It is a hunger, a craving, for accepting his “conversion”. Just after Nina begins to resent Rowland's closeness to Chris, Rowland informs Nina that he has “changed his mind about the type of book he was writing” (Spark, 2016: 80). Nina never understands Rowland's affliction and bases her husband's inability to write on tangible concerns such as being blocked by jealousy or some sort of psychological problem.

Ideal readers of Spark's fiction may identify in the relationship between Rowland and Chris a fictional account of Spark's identity issues and her process of conversion. When Israel tells Nina that Rowland should go on a spiritual retreat to a Catholic monastery in the mountains, she is unable to understand the heart of the matter and suggests that her husband should go and see a psychiatrist while dismissing any possibility of a spiritual problem. When Israel tries to reassure Nina on the fact that they will not try to convert Rowland at the monastery, Nina replies that her husband is already a Catholic, if only “nominally” (Spark, 2016: 99).

In a sense, Rowland's process of conversion to become more than a “nominal” Catholic seems the underlying motive. The novel points out that Rowland's sin is ‘Envy of Another's Spiritual Good’, that is, Chris's talent at



writing fictions is seen as a spiritual good, something given by God as a gift, and that is the reason why this offence is, according to the Catholic catechism, one of the sins against the Holy Spirit (Spark, 2016: 93). Rowland's jealousy grows to the point of arousing murderous thoughts in Rowland. However, Chris's hybrid nature reflects the authorial intrusion, more explicit than ever in Spark's fiction, turning himself into Rowland's obsession. In this line of argument, the novel works towards the inevitable union of Rowland and Chris. As Rowland confesses, "I know I'm obsessed with Chris, but I want my obsession. So does he." (Spark, 2016: 133). Thus, the narrative voice prepares us for the next turn of Spark's plot when we see how Rowland's jealousy also stimulates Chris's creativity to the point of giving him a false pleasure: "I need his jealousy", Chris confesses to Nina after Rowland absents himself for a healing religious retreat, "I can't work without it" (Spark, 2016: 118).

There is a point in the plot where both Rowland and Chris feed on the same toxic feeling, as the fiction-writing self warns us, jealousy, which "unlike some sins of the flesh, gives no one any pleasure. It is a miserable emotion for the jealous one with equally miserable effects on others" (Spark, 2016: 93). In fact, the student, whose unfinished novel's main theme is jealousy, exceeds his own limits and even suggests that Rowland kill his wife. It seems as if Chris were hiding a devil inside. That devil inside Chris turns out to be the fiction-writing self. In Spark's fictions, nothing happens out of the writer's control. That is the reason why Rowland has a writer's block and Chris does not:

"I haven't got writer's block," Rowland said. "It's only that my characters are so real, so very real. They have souls. If you are writing a novel from the heart you

have to deal with hearts and souls. The people you create are people. You can't control people just like that. Chris is writing a novel where he controls people."

"Oh leave Chris out of it. What do you know about him, after all? In five years' time he might be working in a private bank, managing a sandwich company, teaching history, anything."

"He told me he controls his characters. He creates them and they have no lives of their own." (Spark, 2016: 56)

The fiction-writing self in control of the narrative share and control both minds, Rowland's and Chris's. Thus, they show the different thoughts in a writer's mind. In Spark's fictional world, there is always a struggle for control and identity that points out to the author:

"Do you find," said Rowland to Chris, "that at a certain point your characters are taking over and living a life of their own?"

"I don't know what you mean," Chris said.

"I mean, once you have created the characters, don't you sort of dream of them or really dream of them so that they come to you and say "Hey, I didn't say that."

"No," said Chris.

"Your characters don't live their own lives?"

"No, they live the lives I give them."

"They don't take over? With me, the characters take over."

"I'm in full control," Chris said. "I never thought they could have another life but what I provide on the typed page. Perhaps the readers, later on, will absorb them in an extended imagination, but I don't. Nobody in my book so far could cross the road unless I make them do it." (Spark, 2016: 55)

Chris, the *author's hybrid character*, becomes the vehicle for the fiction-writing self to make herself present in her creation through Chris and Rowland's final union.

This novel encapsulates recurrent themes in Spark's fiction, but also works as a closure. This may be one of the reasons why Chris becomes the only hybrid character in Spark's fiction to be a plotter. However, the author's last exercise of self-affirmation can be observed when near the end of the novel, both *The Finishing School* and Chris's own novel-within-the-novel, the young student starts "struggling with his alternative endings, (...) now stuck in his final chapter" (Spark, 2016: 147). Like Caroline and Lise, Chris is also receiving a lesson in authorial control.

Jealousy, we have been told, is a sin against the Holy Spirit, both a metaphor for the numinous image of the author in fiction and the third person of the Divine Trinity. And every sin, as Augustine observes in *City of God*, has its origin in using our free will in arrogance (XII: 22). Indeed, one of Spark's main themes in her fiction is to deal with the idea of free will after her conversion to Catholicism. Her main characters use this fictional free will in arrogance to usurp the authorial role within the narrative. The difference with Chris is that, unlike Caroline and Lise, he is allowed to complete his fragmented identity through his union with Rowland. The novel does not tell whether Chris will eventually finish his book because it is not his story. Consequently, when Spark makes reference to her readers in the quotation above, "Perhaps the readers, later on, will absorb them in an extended imagination", is inviting us – for the first time – to complete that final chapter of her fictional autobiography, the story of her long process of conversion.

### 3.3.3 The author's third Spark

In this last stage, the creator and the created seem to intermingle in a relentless relation of interdependence. This dual structure is masterly represented in *The Finishing School* by the figure of the two protagonists of the plot: Rowland and Chris. The novel “investigates the mystery of the artistic process: its arbitrariness, its unteachable inspiration and the creator’s love affair with the created” (Stannard, 2009: 514). This opposition between the creator and the created reproduces the figure of the double. In literature the double is portrayed as a specifically fictional device for articulating the experience of self-division. The double, thus, stands for the tension between division and unity. It constitutes a powerful tool in the hands of postmodern writers whose metafictional tendency leads them to create complex characters sharing some of the authors’ characteristics. Hence, these authors’ fictional projections work as fictional doubles of the writers themselves. In the case of Muriel Spark and her last novel, the whole process gets even more complex since there are two characters aiming at playing the role of the author’s fictional double. The author is, thus, introduced in her narrative as a fragmented subject.

By the time she writes her last novel, Muriel Spark has lost many things: friends, property, family, and mobility. It seems as if she is planning her farewell. She also has serious problems related to her sight which, from the year 2001 prevent her from working for long hours and oblige her to use huge spectacles. Although she keeps “[h]er mind as sharp as ever, she [takes] to wearing huge designer

spectacles and often travelled back down the long escape road of her life, seeing it with fresh vision” (Stannard, 2009: 527). Spark saw reality in a different light. This new perspective gave her a fresh view to ‘set her own scene’ in life. This idea can be elicited from her last novel where, in the very first page, Rowland makes reference to this issue:

“You begin,” he said, “by setting your scene. You have to *see* your scene, either in reality or in imagination. For instance, from here you can see across the lake. But on a day like this you can’t see across the lake, it’s too misty. You can’t see the other side.” Rowland took off his reading glasses to stare at this creative writing class (...) “So,” he said, “you must just write, when you set your scene, the other side of the lake was hidden in mist. Or if you want to exercise imagination, on a day like today, you can write, The other side of the lake was just visible. But as you are setting the scene, don’t make any emphasis as yet. It’s too soon, for instance, for you to write, “The other side of the lake was hidden in the fucking mist.” That will come later. You are setting your scene. You don’t want to make a point as yet.” (Spark, 2016: 1)

This revelatory quotation seems to be a mature consideration of the author in the interpretation of reality through fiction. It may be a tribute to reflection and true interpretation. Spark seems to be expressing almost unnoticeably her very preoccupations on the art process. In the description of the lake hidden in the mist she seems to be setting even a discussion of how to describe not just what is right in front of us but its concealment too. From a metafictional reading, the scene seems to be an attempt to instruct the reader in the analysis of the sub-plots enclosed in the author’s narrative. Rowland’s meaningful words could also be interpreted as referring to set the scene of one’s life, to define one’s personal identity; this supposes the rejection of previous sketches or wrong postulates because while *you*

*are setting your scene [y]ou don't want to make a point as yet.* Immediately, the reader realizes the similitude between Spark and Rowland Mahler. Both are artists who are writing a novel, and both are deeply concerned with creative processes. Curiously enough, Rowland takes off his reading glasses to stare at his students; this image reminds us of Spark looking directly at the reader. The scene makes us think of Rowland as Spark's fictional double.

This period in the life of Muriel Spark coincides with her cohabitation with Penelope Jardine. There is no mention of any kind of sexual relationship but what seems clear is that this fact supposes a change in Spark's conception of human relations. She seems to have found in Jardine the perfect partner, since they appear as complementing each other. Therefore, the portrayal of Chris and Rowland's relationship seems to exemplify that of Spark and Jardine. Chris and Rowland are depicted as different halves of the author's identity. The only characteristic they seem to have in common is their determination to write a novel. At the beginning, professional admiration between them originates jealousy which, at the end of the novel, turn into the union of the two. The final twist presents them engaged in an enigmatic "Same-sex Affirmation Ceremony" (179). The novel shows the progressive encounter between Rowland and Chris, first as teacher and student, then as rivals, finally as one.

Olive turned to Rowland, "You must be terribly proud of your student-novelist. What a distinction for your school" (...)

"I could kill him," thought Rowland. "But would that be enough?"

Many times, now, Rowland thought of how it would be if Chris were dead. It wouldn't do. It wouldn't be enough. There would always remain the fact that Chris

had lived, had been writing a novel while still at school, had prevented Rowland from writing his novel. (Spark, 2016: 95)

Chris is writing a novel on Mary Queen of Scots; meanwhile, Rowland starts writing a novel about a callow Boy Novelist who happens to be Chris. He tells Nina about that,

“I’ve changed my mind, you know, about the book I’m writing. It won’t be a novel. It will eventually be a life study of a real person, Chris. At present I am accumulating the notes.”

“Well, that’s quite a sweet idea,” she said. “A study of a clever teenager. You’ll have to keep it anonymous. Chris wouldn’t like it.”

“Oh, yes, anonymous.” (Spark, 2016: 84)

The relationship between Rowland and Chris ends up becoming a situation in which each one is the object of the other. So the “real” enters the “art” in Rowland’s novel, which is about Chris writing a novel. This way, Spark, who is the creative force behind Rowland’s and Chris’s, constructs a *mise en abyme* which allows the author to ghost through the narrative.

Chris can be seen as a character in Rowland’s novel; Rowland’s creation. This time the character and the author, both fictional creations in Spark’s work, face each other in the same level of representation. We can state that Chris is Rowland’s double and vice versa since each one seems to have what the other lacks.

In this last stage of her work, Spark doubles the portrait of the self in two opposed characters who complement and complete each other, but also expose and stress their differences, throughout the whole narrative. There is a quite relevant moment in the work when Rowland and Chris appear to be measuring their abilities

as fictional writers. Whereas Rowland admits that his characters may live a life of their own, Chris categorically rejects that possibility and affirms that his never take over. He makes clear that he is an author in full control of his creation (Spark, 2016: 56).

These two opposed points of view stand for the idea of an author's fragmented identity. Chris acts as a tyrant writer in the construction of his characters' plots; conversely, Rowland experiments with the possibility of his characters' freedom within the plot. Chris transmits the author's dictates into the plot; then, Chris's point of view is that of the author. Rowland, on the other hand, is unable to control his own characters since they are at the same fictional level as their creator. In this game of Chinese boxes that the author proposes, the former opposition between Chris and Rowland becomes a relation of dependence:

Nina had said, the other day, "If Chris and his novel get on your nerves you know we can always send him home. We could say he was neglecting his studies for the book he's writing."

"They know he's writing a novel."

"Yes, but it could unsettle the others who have to show some interest in the curriculum."

*"I don't want to part with Chris."*

"Neither do I. Not at all. But he bothers you, I've noticed."

"You notice too much." (My emphasis) (Spark, 2016: 20-21)

This scene may be analysed as Rowland's declaration of dependence. He cannot write because of Chris but, conversely, he is writing about Chris so, paradoxically, Chris's presence enables Rowland to write. A similar feeling can be elicited from Chris's words:



“Hallo, Rowland,” said the youth, and drew up noisily, dramatically, at the doorway.

Rowland peered at his face. The boy took off his helmet and shook his red, red hair.

“Chris.”

“Yes, Rowland.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I phoned the prior. They’ve got a place for me.”

“You want to come here?”

*“I can’t work without you, Rowland. I need whatever it is you radiate. I have to finish my novel in peace.”*

“You’re mad.”

“And you?”

“I? —I’m going home with Nina this afternoon.”

Chris left his bike in the courtyard and pushed his way through the door into the house. He said, over his shoulder, “Nina isn’t coming this afternoon.” (My emphasis) (Spark, 2016: 108)

Chris’s words here can be understood as a veiled declaration of love. He even asks directly to Rowland who, trying not to give a straight answer, hurries to mention Nina. Rowland tries to avoid any identification with Chris, although some kind of attraction can be perceived between them. Finally, Chris manifests his supremacy in the novel and informs Rowland of the unknown fact that Nina is not coming. Chris is framed as the *author’s hybrid character* again, since he knows privileged information unknown for the rest of the characters in the plot, especially Rowland.

Both characters’ authorship is elaborated along the novel. Each one depends on the other to write their novels. They appear as two complementary halves. Chris because he needs something that Rowland “irradiates”; Rowland because Chris is the object of his novel. There is a revelatory scene where Chris reminds Rowland

of his father's death and, surprisingly, he does know that Rowland did not think of him while he was away. The fact that Chris has this extratextual and privileged information places him in an authorial position. Rowland resents Chris's creative position and tells him to leave him alone.

Rowland was impatient for the publisher to arrive and enjoy the fine scene while it was still daylight. He said, "Once the school breaks up and you go away, you know I'm going to reorganize my life. I want you to leave me alone, though." It was evident that he spoke as if he had a choking sensation, which in fact he had.

"You will not murder me," said Chris.

Rowland sipped his drink and gazed out of the window. Chris said, "You will murder Nina."

"What?"

"Nina. The papers will say you found her in bed with her lover. *Crime passionnel*. Something you'd have to live with, and forget me. A death." (Spark, 2016: 144)

When Rowland tells Chris that he is going to reorganize his life, Chris feels his position threatened and starts discussing a possible "death of the author". However, Chris himself soon dismisses this option and offers privileged information again: he tells Rowland what is going to happen. The author is not the victim. While Rowland drinks in a perfect sacramental image, we learn that Nina, metaphorically speaking, is the victim. This way, both fictional representations of the author, Rowland and Chris, will be joined together through this *crime passionnel*. Rowland acquires more and more pre-eminence as the story develops:

She could see Rowland was less tense, even pleased at the awful meeting with the very busy publisher. She noticed he was making notes on his computer. He looked up and said, "*Practical jokers* can easily become psychopaths, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, but what has Chris actually done that's awful?" said Nina.

"He has *awful ideas*."

“Oh, ideas . . .” (My emphasis) (Spark, 2016: 148)

When Rowland, writing Chris’s story, insinuates he is a *practical joker*, he seems to be referring to the author behind him, that is why he speaks of Chris as having *awful ideas*. There is a similar allusion to the author in *The Comforters* when Caroline refers to this figure as *the mocker*.

She sat perfectly still while her thoughts became blind. Every now and then a cynical lucidity would overtake part of her mind, forcing her to comment on the fury of the other half. That was painful. She observed, “*The mocker* is taking over.” (My emphasis) (Spark, 1999: 30)

The more Rowland advances in his work, the more Chris gets stuck in his. Theirs is an antagonistic relationship: “That Chris’s book needed a whole lot of work on it was a story that soon caught on in the swift tale-bearing publishing world. Chris, struggling with his alternative endings, was now stuck in his final chapter.” (Spark, 2016: 99) There is an implied feeling that Chris cannot finish his novel until the novel we are reading comes to an end. This fact would entail Chris as a character writing his own story. Similarly, Spark succeeds in creating a fictional image of her authorship to write the biography of that fictional image, which is her own autobiography.

There is a twist at the end, one of those revelatory endings that Spark likes to perform in most of her novels where she seems to be playing with the reader’s interpretation of the plot until the very last word. The two last pages of the novel seem to be taken out of some local newspaper. The narrator sums up in a few lines what is going to happen with Rowland and Chris in the near future. Rowland

changes the subject of his book which is now entitled *The School Observed*, and eventually he publishes it. Chris's novel is also a success and establishes himself as a novelist. He joins Rowland at College Sunrise and after a year they engaged themselves in a "Same-Sex Affirmation Ceremony" (179). Rowland and Chris go on living their lives in exile and remain subject to the mobile finishing school, moving from one place to another. Rowland and Chris's union makes us think of them as two versions of the same individual. They form a whole together; a complete identity transfigured in the form of the finishing school that they rule. The finishing school's name, College Sunrise denotes a sense of beginning instead of finitude. It provides a sense of transcendence.

This move on the part of the author taking complete control of the narrative, as if she were in a hurry, trying to end as soon as possible the story, underscores the fact that both Rowland and Chris's halves are united in one creative drive forcing the reader to look at the author beyond the pages of the novel. However, in this novel Spark as the real author outside the novel wants to succeed in getting her fiction-writing self inside her own fiction. And she uses jealousy as the means to enter her fiction without being noticed. Jealousy becomes the driving force in *The Finishing School*, and jealousy is Chris's novel's main theme. Rowland becomes a character in Chris's fiction and both Rowland and Chris are characters in Spark's fiction. The connection between the sin of jealousy and the Holy Spirit turns our attention to the porous nature of narrative levels and the author's presence in the text without being 'physically' present. Thus, the theme of jealousy turns into a

mischievous allegory in which the real author of the book materializes to claim her creation.

The two-page epilogue of the novel ends tying up loose ends as it happens in some films when we are told at the end the fortunes of the characters. In this sense, it seems as if Spark knew that the fictional account of her story, her ‘second’ volume of autobiography was coming to an end. Finally, we are left with the image of Dame Muriel Spark, sitting in her living room watching TV and hearing “the dear voice of Hazel forecasting the weather on Sky News: ‘As we go through this evening and into tonight...’” (Spark, 2016: 181).

Peter Kemp observes the traditional quality of Spark’s endings: “Always keen to end her novels on a lingeringly resonant note, she does so here with special ingenuity by turning the routine words of a television weather girl into haunting and affecting intimations of mortality” (Kemp, 2004: 52). What resounds in ‘the dear voice of Hazel’ at the end of the novel may be gentle *intimations of immortality*. Kemp’s allusion to Wordsworth is interesting here for various reasons. On the one hand, Spark’s fiction invites readers to look back in retrospect, as if completing an autobiography in reverse, in an attempt to understand that process of conversion that started a long time before she decided to take the step. In that sense, from the advantageous perspective of old age, and tries to close the circle of life and get a glimpse of the child, who in that Romantic notion of the *divine child*, is more spiritually insightful and, consequently, closer to God. On the other, this Romantic idea of the child’s predisposition to transcendental experience is notable in Spark’s

autobiographical narrative. Whittaker connects this notion in Spark's writing with Newman's spiritual autobiography, *Apologia pro vita sua*:

Like Newman, too, [Spark] retained an awareness of childhood as extraordinary. In an interview she tries to describe this strangeness: 'I had the impression of childhood itself being unusual, life being unusual (...) I think children are capable of almost mystical experiences (...) I think that one had intimations of immortality'. Newman, writing about his childhood when he was a young man, recalls, 'I thought that life might be a dream, or I an Angel, and all this world a deception, my fellow-angels by a playful device concealing themselves from me, and deceiving me with the semblance of a material world. (Whittaker, 1982: 43)

Spark confirms in *Curriculum Vitae* that the writings of Cardinal Newman played an important role in her conversion to Catholicism (1982: 202) and had made that claim before in "My Conversion" (1961a: 55-56). In her published autobiography, Spark avoids discussing the particular and difficult process of religious conversion, but "it is the frequent subject of her fiction, and at the center of her most famous fiction" (Montgomery, 1997: 94).

As this dissertation argues, Spark's novelistic production is written both with the idea of completing a fictional autobiography which, in Spark's notion of fiction, may be a better way to get some sort of truth and with the purpose of dealing with her process of conversion. Both motives are connected in her last novel and this last scene we are analyzing is revelatory. Whereas we picture a fictional image of Spark hearing voice of the weather forecast, the novel had begun with Rowland saying: "You begin (...) by setting your scene. You have to see your scene, either in reality or in imagination" (2016: 1).

The last novel begins as if it were the first one. It is also a lesson in creative writing. However, the novel ends with the author calling the reader's attention and placing herself as her own character, as in an autobiography. The words from the weather forecast imply a sense of entering an unknown time and space. It is a call from destiny, from beyond, as the telephone calls in *Memento Mori*.

Muriel Spark was an eighty-six-year-old artist when she published her last novel. In an interview with Alan Taylor, she seems to look back at her life and her art:

With hindsight, (...) which is a wonderful thing, I could rewrite my life entirely. I can see motives that I couldn't see at the time for having done things. I can see very good motives, very good reasons, why I acted as I did. Generally speaking, I must say I approve of what I did. I often look back and think, "Should I have done that?" I think, "Given the circumstances, yes I should." And also, you know, looking back - if one must look back - it's sometimes good to look back - one can over-simplify. (Taylor, 2004)

*The Finishing School* has an evocative title taking into account that it is Muriel Spark's last novel. Spark's writing career should be understood as a personal exercise of self-knowledge and *The Finishing School* gives a symbolic ending to her work. However, the last transcendental words from this novel leave the door open for new interpretations. The implied reader's attention is focused on the subplots behind the narrative and is encouraged to look back and consider Spark's whole narrative. Spark indeed projects her authorial identity in complex ways while, at the same time, invites the reader to look for autobiographical truth in fictions where they can get glimpses of her life story. Her metafictional novels constructed with a Catholic imagination also tend to transcend the pages of the book

in search of the supreme author that creates. Spark's work, in the same way as Rowland and Chris's itinerant finishing school, seems to be still in progress.

In this last novel, a finale to her fictional autobiography, Spark leaves us with the image of her fiction-writing self hearing the Sky News weather forecast – which she never missed – making sense of her conversion while she *goes through this evening and into tonight...*



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## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

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Robert Alter, in his study *Partial Magic*, asserts that metafiction, though not realistic in nature, is a type of writing that nonetheless dialogues with extratextual realities. As he argues, “[a] self-conscious novel, briefly, is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and by doing so probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality” (Alter, 1975: 10). Accordingly, we can entertain the idea of art as mimesis; art as an imitation of reality. Aristotelian mimetic theory allowed room for the imitation of the creative process, since art was perceived as an active rival of the ordered and ordering processes of nature itself, as the act of creating a totality through a harmonious design to a logical end. In her study *Narcissistic Narratives*, Linda Hutcheon describes how metafiction makes this process conscious:

The writer has always had to try rhetorically to unite shared language and his private imaginative experience. The reader then approached that same language, bringing to it all his own experience of life, of literature, and of language, in order to accumulate enough fictive referents to bring the autonomous fictional universe into being. (Hutcheon, 1980: 41)

In postmodern writings the mimesis process seems to acquire different connotations. We can say that postmodern novels are not the expression of reality. They do not display reality as it is, but the imaginative processes of coming to terms with it by means of an aesthetic perspective. This characteristic makes art a powerful device to deal with the artist’s traumas and identity issues.

In Spark’s case, her process of conversion to Catholicism is taken as the driving force of her creative experience. She became a novelist soon after her conversion to Catholicism, which came together with a period of physical and

psychological crisis. Spark herself attributes this breakdown to her conversion: “I had a feeling while I was undergoing this real emotional suffering that it was all part of the conversion (...) I think there is a connection between my writing and my conversion (...) Certainly all my best work has come since then” (Spark, 1961a: 59-60). Much of Spark’s fiction shows a state of crisis reflected in a satirical portrayal of a society whose excess of secularity brings about spiritual dissolution. In numerous interviews and essays, Spark states that faith and art are connected in their concern to look for what she refers to as an “absolute truth”, which is the reason, as she admitted to Kermode, why she wrote fiction (Kermode, 1963: 80).

This thesis has shown that Spark’s texts are written as a study on the nature of fiction as art and its relation to real life. Spark’s personal and innovative conception of fiction “out of which a kind of truth emerges” celebrates plurality and difference in favour of a multifaceted conception of the self. In each novel Spark constructs, this thesis has demonstrated, her fiction-writing self (*implied author*) through a set of two main characters whose opposing characteristics paradoxically work as a unifying force. Consequently, the two main ideas that this dissertation has studied and defended are: firstly, Spark’s fiction is a lifetime exercise with which the author interiorized her own difficult and long-lasting process of conversion; secondly, besides her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae*, based on annotated details and documents, Spark invites readers to “complete” another autobiography out of her novels hoping that the relationship between art and life, fiction and reality, will produce a truer version of her fiction-writing self.

By means of a close reading of Muriel Spark's works, this study has analysed the *Double Motif* in her fiction and its development throughout her work. The author uses this literary device to transcend the narrative levels by following a metafictional pattern, that is, self-conscious narratives which pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. As Patricia Waugh states in her work *Metafiction*, "authors enter texts and characters appear to step into the 'real' world of their authors" (1984: 102). Following this premise, we have proved that Muriel Spark, as a metafictional writer, experiments with fictional doubles to recreate an aesthetic version of reality. The most relevant characters, many of them with remarkable similarities to the author herself, undergo some kind of traumatic experience which is negotiated in terms of doubling and hybridization. Thus, throughout her work this game of doubles evolves with the aim to create a fictional version of the author within the text.

In Spark's fiction, therefore, there is a preoccupation with issues of presence, self-presence and absence which mirrors her own process of conversion and the identity crisis she suffered as a new Catholic. In a world increasingly devoid of a transcendental vision where there is no room for the sacred, Spark's fiction is concerned with the traumatic absence of God. Similar to other authors such as Graham Greene and Flannery O'Connor, Spark's fiction aims to uncover the traces and portents of God's grace "embedded" in life. In her narrative, these signs of God's presence are negotiated by the suffocating intrusion of authorial portents that haunt the main characters, who, ironically enough, are authors as well.

The best conception of a doubling process is depicted when the self confronts its other, which in Catholicism is carried out by the sacrament of Penance. Indeed, Augustine's *Confessions* set the model for autobiography in the Western literary tradition, and paved the way for future fictions with the illuminating narrative of his conversion. In this sense, Spark's narrative mirrors Augustine's in her attempt to shed some light on her conversion which, in her own words, she "felt it was a natural process" (Hosmer, 2005: 132). Conversion is a process of total and true communication with one's other self and with our Creator. Spark's fiction negotiates this process through a complex doubling of characters that both reflect the authorial control and share a certain hybridity because they move in and out of the narrative plot. They are subjected to the text but, at the same time, act as vehicles for the author's intentions. This double process of self-identification completes her fiction as an aesthetic therapy to go through conversion and understand our created nature.

By placing her characters' narratives within the real author's narrative, Spark's texts suggest that the strategies on which realism depends are not pure and they seem to be inhabited by otherness. In Spark's fiction, boundaries between interior and exterior, in perfect gothic fashion, are porous and even break down. Spark's experimental and radical style undermines the conventions realism uses to achieve its illusion of "truth to life" by embedding an autobiography through the double motif. By presenting autobiography, not as a conscious, self-present subject, but as a kind of literary epitaph marking an absence, Spark's novels work against

the foundations of realism presenting both a subject that is not unified and ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ as connected categories.

This dissertation has analysed Spark’s main characters dividing them into two categories: *the author’s fictional double*, which plays the role of the protagonist, and *the author’s hybrid character*, which performs a secondary, but significant role in the narrative. The *author’s fictional doubles* are usually artists and writers and, most of the times, bear a resemblance to the author. On the contrary, *the hybrid characters* hardly ever share any recognizable trait with the writer except for their desire to be noticed within the plot with their intrusions. The former have a clear fictional nature whereas the latter seem to be half-way between reality and fiction. These *hybrid characters* are like portents of the authorial voice, appearing and disappearing from the plot in mysterious and even eerie ways, transcending, thus, the narrative levels. They must not be confused with the figure of the narrator, as they carry the authorial voice and transformative action at the characters’ fictional level as this thesis has demonstrated. Sometimes, this figure is portrayed in an almost ghostly way haunting the text, jumping about the lines of the narrative, conveying information which is hidden to the rest of the characters. While *the author’s fictional doubles* play the main role and the narrative revolves around them, the *hybrid characters’* presence lasts as long as it is needed; after that, most of the times, they disappear from the plot. We could state that, while *the author’s fictional doubles* are just another element within the plot, *the hybrid characters* “work for” the plot to be brought about. The writer makes use of these antagonistic fictional creations to open virtual corridors which connect reality and fiction. This

resulting “porous” narrative enables the author to break the narrative levels and exert her influence and control over the plot. Therefore, these *hybrid characters* are a powerful authorial device to give the impression that the authorial writing self is present in the text. Although these characters appear as though they perform a supporting role in the story, their side effects influence significantly the resolution of the plot as well as the evolution of the protagonist.

This research has analysed the development of these two sets of characters throughout Spark’s novelistic production. The different treatment that the author gives them at different stages in her work, together with the progress in the relationship between them, from being portrayed as opposites in the first period of her production to become complementary characters in the last novels, has been one of the basis of our study. Another significant aspect in the evolution of Spark’s work is that, although she usually writes about women, this tendency changes gradually until her last novels where masculine characters play the role of both the *author’s fictional double* and the *author’s hybrid character*. This change in the portrayal of the formerly opposed characters responds to a variation of perspective in Spark’s work, which seems to achieve some sort of communion in the relationship between opposites. In so doing, she succeeds in showing a version of her fiction-writing self with no regard for the sex of her protagonists. This move only reinforces their fictional nature and the authorial creative force behind them.

For a full understanding of Spark’s fiction, this dissertation has divided her novelistic production into three parts which meet the demands of the universal organization of a story: beginning, plot and ending. It has been necessary to deal

with every stage separately in order to understand the development of her work as a whole. On the other hand, this division also reflects the Holy Trinity, an idea that stems from the fact that Muriel Spark started to write soon after her conversion to Catholicism and she was interested in the Christian mystery. As has been explained, Spark seriously considered the mystery of the Divine Trinity to the point of leaving an imprint both in her Catholicism and in her writing. In a 1954 letter to Stanford she writes: “The Old Testament God the Father had always presented her with a problem. God the Son required selfless charity. As an artist, the Holy Ghost was to her the most important element of the Trinity” (Stanford, 2009: 159). As is inferred in the letter, she considers the Holy Spirit as the very essence of Catholic Faith and doctrine. Following with the parallelism between her fiction and this Christian image, her works progressively evolve from being focused on a porous narrative that exposes the struggle between authorial intrusion and the characters’ attempts to usurp the creative role, towards a more numinous textual reality, where the authorial figure and the creative characters coalesce.

Each period has been studied through a profound analysis of a representative novel: *The Comforters* (1957), her first novel, *The Driver’s Seat* (1970), the author’s favourite, and *The Finishing School* (2004), the last novel she published. In the first stage of her work, Spark had just started her career as a novelist and had just adhered to Catholicism. In this period, Spark’s fictional doubles suffer from the same anxiety and distress as the author, but from a different perspective. All the doubts which seem to have assaulted Spark from the difficult rejection of her former spiritual precepts and the assimilation and accomplishment of the new doctrine,



which also implies the acquisition of a new identity, are portrayed in her work in terms of isolation and alienation. In *The Comforters*, Caroline has to fit the boundaries of her recently revealed fictive nature; in so doing, she suffers from the authorial alienation which as a ghostly presence haunts not only the narrative but also Caroline's thoughts; that is why any hint of authorial presence in the plot is considered as an otherworldly manifestation and, as a result, a cause of fear and rejection. Spark as a God-like author establishes a parallelism between the fictional plot and her own story by creating a complex pattern of meaningful concordances and correlations. Caroline stands for Muriel Spark at this stage of her development as a Catholic metafictional – and postmodern – artist, with all her insecurities and anxieties, and Spark plays the role of a sort of alienating and restricting God, as the author understands Him in this period of her life.

Spark adopts a paternal attitude towards Caroline and by means of authorial strategies of self-effacement tries to inform her of the very truth of her existence in spite of the distress and suffering that this revelation may cause to Caroline. The author, then, makes use of Mrs Hogg, one of those Sparkian hybrid characters, a kind of authorial messenger whose main goal is to lead the narrative from inside and make the author's dictates be accomplished. Mrs Hogg is negatively portrayed because she represents all those fervent Catholics Spark distrusts. As an authorial manifestation, her presence is a cause of distress and rejection among the rest of the characters in the plot. After a series of rebellious actions and failed attempts to escape the narrative, Caroline ends up accepting her fictional condition. She seems to surrender to the charms of the author and, eventually, we are revealed of their

almost symbiotic relationship. Caroline's acceptance can be interpreted in psychological terms as Spark's overcoming of her first stage in her development as both a Catholic and an experimental writer.

In the second period of Spark's work, the author deals with the themes of the narrative from a much more apparently secular and mature perspective. This stage can be considered as the most critical and subversive since she exerts a harsh but subtle critique upon the lack of spirituality in the society of the time. This period in Spark's fiction coincides with important socio-political changes including the second wave of Feminism, the end of Vietnam war, the anti-war movements and the consolidation of the Second Vatican Council. Many changes resulted from the Council, including the renewal of consecrated life with a revised charism, ecumenical efforts towards dialogue with other religions, and the call to holiness for everyone including the laity. This relevant fact had great influence in the way Catholics considered their lives and their place in society. This change had a great impact on those Catholic converts as Spark, who resented at first any modification in the norms and precepts of their faith resulting from an emphasis on the laity and the vernacular and a decline in the mystery, beauty and exclusiveness of Catholic rituals and spirituality.

We have chosen *The Driver's Seat* as the novel which best exemplifies this second stage in Spark's work. Lise, who plays the role of the *author's fictional double*, aware of her fictional condition, seems to be determined to take the control of the narrative and put an end to her own existence in an attempt to transcend the boundaries of the novel and get the long desired fusion with the author. Lise

sacrifices her own body in favour of a greater goal. A clear parallelism can be established here between Lise's attempts to transcend the fictional boundaries and those of Spark to find signs and symbols which may help her reinforce her Catholic faith and her belief in an otherworldly existence. Lise's transgressive attitude leads her to take over the role of the author. This fact hastens the unnatural development of the narrative which will culminate with her horrific finale.

From the very beginning, Lise is portrayed as an artificial character in an artificial plot (her own plot) which, in turn, is being developed within another plot, that of Spark. This time the author does not look after her fictional double but reveals herself few times in the novel only to control the action of the narrative which can be understood as an attempt to alleviate Lise's suffering by making her change her mind. The author seems to give Lise the possibility of salvation by means of acceptance; but this time it is not enough for Lise whose main goal seems to force the author's exposure in the plot.

Lise's 'sin' is represented by her continuous attempts to remove any shadow of doubt and transcend her own fictional world to meet the author precisely by means of 'authoring' her own plot. Her insistence to control her own body, her own life, in short, her own destiny, must be eventually punished by the omnipotent author who turns her authorial game for control into a tragedy. The final unplanned rape represents both the authorial final intrusion, Spark's "plunge into her creation", and the impossibility to usurp the God-like role in a world that has lost direction and transcendence.

Similarly, Spark seems to be ready to surmount another stage in her identity process, even when that means the sacrifice of her former self. Thus, she kills her fictional double and, metaphorically, puts an end to her former identity. In this novel, Spark makes use of a different kind of *hybrid character*: Mrs Fiedke. She is an old lady who lost her husband some time back. She is also a Jehovah's Witness. An interesting game of words can be made here, since Mrs Fiedke acts as an 'author's witness' in the plot. From a metafictional point of view, we can consider this anecdote as an author's wink to her hesitant attitude towards Catholic faith and precepts, which, after the Second Vatican Council, she takes on as a completely new faith. Unlike Mrs Hogg, Mrs Fiedke is not negatively portrayed but, on the contrary, she is depicted as a charming old lady who, far from disturbing Lise, comforts and helps her to reach her goals. Eventually, it happens to be Mrs Fiedke's nephew, Richard, who murders Lise. Richard, who had tried to follow Lise's directions until the end, is forced to obey his *God-like author*: now he has to depart from the script, rape Lise before finishing her, and keep waiting aimlessly in *indecent exposure*. However, this unexpected turn is also a lesson in authorial control for using free-will in arrogance, a recurrent concern in Spark's novels.

The phrase *indecent exposure* summarizes Spark's intention with an ending that many readers and even critics have found pointless and unnecessarily cruel. Spark, however, makes use of a "metaphysical shocker" – as the novel was described on the cover at the time of its publication – to reject the secular materialism of society and open our minds to a more spiritual sensibility. Lise's sentimental attachment to reality and her materialist organization of life

metaphorically shows spiritual dissolution and apathy. Spark uses Lise, more specifically, Lise's body, to satirize this materialist society. Spark ridicules a possible reading of her novel from a sentimental point of view problematizing Lise's image as victim. Spark tries to show the wasteland of Lise's life and her hopeless prospect for the future. Some readers may interpret the novel as the story of the trauma of a middle-aged woman whose life expectations have failed and gets trapped by a death drive that compels her to commit suicide. Some may see a lack of spiritual or religious sensibility in the face of desperation. Connecting fiction with life, in the relationship between the character of Lise, who writes her own end, and the author who continuously reminds us that everything has already been written (even Lise carries the book under her arm), the novel implies a world where the absence of God leaves humans in a state of shock. As the fiction-writing self reveals itself in a narrative apparently controlled by Lise, Spark – following the tradition of other writers such as Flannery O'Connor – depicts those moments of revelation, when the sacred surfaces from the material, in a shocking and un sentimental way.

Lise's arrogant attempt to usurp the authorial role is punished with the hardest lesson: the imaginary prospect of a world without any sense or transcendence, without a God; the hopeless idea that there is nothing beyond the end. However, if we take death as part of the expectancy of life, that is, if we read again Lise's story and join the dots, we can see in every scene not Lise's actions, but the author's. Lise's *whydunnit* is a life of pressed lips, hopeless and death oriented. Spark proposes the opposite. Spark does not imply an opposition between

secular and sacred but uses the form of the novel as a way to understand her place in the world, the truth of her existence: not herself, the who, but the reason, the why.

For Spark, however, that same sense of being aware of the absence of God serves only to reinforce that creative presence which her fiction-writing self emulates through self-effacement in fiction. In this sense, *The Driver's Seat* is a radical experiment. By the end of the novel the reader perceives the inexorable connections between contingency and plot which are so common to all Spark's novels, but which are made obvious in this novel because all contingent events are revealed finally to be necessary. There is no superfluous material. Thus, *The Driver's Seat* succeeds at both levels, as a secular thriller (an inversion of the traditional detective story) that serves as a practical analysis on the novel form, and as an allegory of the trauma of our contingency. This novel and, by extension, this second period in Spark's fiction, ends the traumatic side of the process of conversion and inaugurates a new phase whose main feature is the interiorization of that process.

Finally, the third phase of Spark's personal process culminates with works which contemplate a double perspective as the only possibility for the Self to reach completion. In this third stage of her novelistic career, Spark makes use of a dialogic pattern to express her personal conception of reality and the self. Hybridity here reaches its peak. Unity and completion can only be understood as the mixture of oppositions and complementarities which conform Spark's notion of the Self.

The whole of Spark's work is characterized by a sense of duplicity which can be perceived in the parallelism established between the author and the main

protagonist of most of her works, her *fictional double*. Her hybrid religious background and her later conversion to Catholicism together with her permanent feeling of exile contributed to her twofold perception of herself and the world. Therefore, Spark's fictional pattern mirrors that of a fragmented identity. This third stage in Spark's work has been related to the idea of The Holy Spirit which occupies a relevant position in the Christian Trinity and, according to Cavallaro, "requires two taps, one on each shoulder, in the act of crossing oneself, whereas the Father and the Son only require one" (Cavallaro, 2002: 76). This double conception of the Holy Spirit helps us to illustrate the complexity and transcendence of Spark's last works. Thus, in *The Finishing School* (2004), the novel chosen to analyse Spark's last phase, we can appreciate a noticeable change in the organization of the narrative. Firstly, we find that there are two protagonists instead of only one, which marks the duplicity of the author's fictional double motif. Additionally, both protagonists are masculine figures instead of the heroines in former works.

In this stage of Spark's work, we can entertain some kind of alliance between the Self and the Other. The double motif has always dealt with the unconscious part of the Self and, subsequently, with psychoanalytical theories and their application in the analysis of texts. Following Freud's postulates many critics have tended to depict the double motif as a reason of unreason or desire. Jung, thus, sees the Self as a twofold entity where good and evil are displayed as complementary opposites; that is to say, the balance between these two forces constitutes the essence of Jung's conception of the Self; they are reciprocal concepts since each one is a necessary condition for the existence of the other. Thus, he

defines the double as neither good nor bad, but as "a replica of one's own unknown face" (Jung, 1983: 92). In this sense, and from a Catholic perspective, this dialogical representation of the author's fictional double can be understood as an attempt to display the intimate relationship between the body and the soul. In the first stage of her work, Spark protects her protagonist; in the second, she kills her; and in the third she tries to emphasize 'their' transcendence as a complex subject which has both material and spiritual dimensions.

From a psychological perspective and according to Lacan's psychoanalytic theory we can describe this dual structure as the union between the Self and the Other. This psychological perspective of the function of the double helps us to analyse Spark's last works as the representation of the culmination of Spark's personal development. The figure of the double seems to underline man's eternal conflict with himself and others; the paradox between his need for likeness and his desire for difference. This conflict leads the artist to the creation of a spiritual double which may assure self-perpetuation. This is the case of the fictional double which helps the writer to experience both separation, since it adopts the form of an independent item belonging to the fictional world, and union as long as they share similar characteristics.

Rowland and Chris are the two masculine protagonists of *The Finishing School*. One of the few points in common between them is that they are trying to write a novel. Both are artists; plotters within a fictional plot; both aim at transcending fiction through art. The tension between both characters, who do not get on well at the beginning, may represent the strong opposition between the Self



and the Other in this tale of jealousy and love-hate relationship. Rowland is twenty-nine, Chris is only seventeen; Rowland is a teacher and Chris a student; Rowland has serious personal problems, not to mention his constant failed attempts to write a novel, whereas Chris is a successful teenager who seems to be a better writer than his master. However, after a series of bizarre confrontations and even one homicidal attempt, both characters seem to reassure their claims for independence and transcend their troublesome relationship as different parts of a whole.

Chris plays the role of the hybrid character. He appears and disappears from the plot in rather mysterious ways and he seems to enjoy the authorial secrets. He differs from other Spark's *hybrid characters* such as Mrs Hogg or Mrs Fiedke but is also endowed with a mischievous halo which relates him with the dark side of the narrative; that is to say, the looming author. Choosing two men instead of a woman to play the role of the protagonists of the novel, corresponds to a need on the part of the author to transcend limits and culminate her personal transformation through the possibilities that a fictional dialogic pattern provides.

Rowland's finishing school is an itinerant school which, as Muriel Spark herself, seems to be constantly moving from one place to another; it appears to be permanently in exile. This fact introduces a new perception of the idea of home and personal identity. It links with the concept of the transfiguration of the common place. The idea is that we can recreate our own Holy Land wherever we are thanks to the grace that God gives us by means of the Holy Spirit. From a metafictional perspective, Muriel Spark seems to have assumed that the sense of belonging is not subject to a place but an identity. An identity which purges her traumas by means

of fiction whose aesthetic pattern mirrors reality as a relentless process of identifications and oppositions which culminate in the long-lasting transcendence between reality and fiction.

This study on Spark's fiction has tried to shed some light on the close relationship between her writing and her (spiritual) life after her conversion. Spark left the clues in her few interviews and her biography. She stated that writing an autobiography was similar to (she actually said "the same as") writing someone else's biography. Thus, she projects herself into her fiction by means of two kind of characters: an authorial double, who impersonates all her actual features and circumstances, and an authorial hybrid, a sort of disturbing character who interferes in the text by breaking the narrative levels to remind the characters of their own fictionality and the readers of their transcendence. The aesthetic world of Spark's fiction mirrors a Catholic sensibility: a world sustained by doubt and hope in the possibility of running through the physical trappings of a fictitious existence only sustained by certain glimpses of the Creator.

Spark avoided discussing the difficult process of religious conversion in her autobiography, although "it is the frequent subject of her fiction, and at the center of her most famous fiction" (1997: 94). Consequently, as this dissertation has demonstrated, Spark's novelistic production is written both with the idea of completing a fictional autobiography which, in Spark's notion of fiction, may be a better way to get some sort of truth than a factual account of events, and it is a necessary exercise to deal with her process of conversion. In an interview with Robert Hosmer a few months after the publication of her last novel, Spark made

some revelatory remarks when asked about the fact that in her published autobiography her process of conversion – being the central event in her life – had been compressed in only 200 words:

I think there's a very, very different book to be written on my conversion. It took such a long time and it did cover the whole of my life in retrospect and, in fact the whole of my life would be a process towards conversion into....so you would hardly call it conversion, it was just a moving into a place I was destined for. (2005: 131).

Spark has succeeded in writing a sort of experimental autobiography, fictionalizing the biography of a fiction-writing self called Muriel Spark and developing the ethical implications of the relationship between art and life. She supports this claim in another interview with Alan Taylor: “With hindsight, (...) which is a wonderful thing, I could rewrite my life entirely. I can see motives that I couldn't see at the time for having done things. I can see very good motives, very good reasons, why I acted as I did” (2004).

Spark's aesthetic pattern develops from the doubts of the first stage represented by confessional voices of a God-like author, going through the physicality of the second one, reflected in the pity and fear of a Christ-like authorial sacrifice, to the final stage, the completion of a spiritual (holy) Ghost-like author. The aim of any author is to be present in their creation while pretending to be absent. Spark's fiction does not tend to show the death of the author, but the existence of a creator. She blurs the narrative levels by bouncing back and forth from self-effacement to self-affirmation, forcing us to witness her ways of fictional self-representation, but also the sparks of truth in fiction.

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