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The Generic Flamboyance of Muriel Spark



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

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Abstract

In her 1970 speech, “The Desegregation of Art” Scottish author Muriel Spark suggests that art has become overly sentimental and ultimately ineffective in its aims of social change. While scholars have used this speech to understand the importance of humor in Spark’s work, unexplored has been the use of genre as a means of social critique. In analyzing Spark’s novellas *The Public Image* and *The Driver’s Seat*, I argue that Spark uses archetypes to demonstrate the limited agency of women and the disturbing implications of all too familiar conventions.

Dedication

This thesis is truly a reflection of the love and support I’ve received in every facet of my academic and personal life. Thank you to everyone dear in Dayton, Reynoldston, and all of the stops in between.



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The 2012 film *Ruby Sparks* is a dream come true. A once famous young author, Calvin, literally finds the woman of his dreams come to life and controlled by his typewriter. The manifested girl from Dayton, Ohio, speaks French because Calvin has written it, she paints because he says it is so. Ruby exists in the space between real woman and invented manic-pixie-dream-girl. She's whimsical, but devoted; charming, but nonchalant; she loves Calvin. She loves Calvin, until he stops writing about how much she loves him.

After making the decision to stop scripting Ruby, we watch Ruby lose interest in Calvin. He fails to return her love of magic and she stops indulging in his miserable streaks. Calvin frantically begins writing once again, allowing Ruby only to exist in extremes of unbridled depression and crippling joy. Trying once again to balance his conception of Ruby, she returns to her almost unaltered state. As she sits curled into herself and deeper into the couch, and after snapping at Calvin, sits and says to him "I'm sorry. Everything's been so up and down lately, you know? It's like my internal compass is gone" (*Ruby Sparks* 1:12:28). Ruby recognizes the fact that she has been controlled by a higher script, but also that she possesses something that feels like agency. She is neither fully herself, nor anyone else's. We see her grapple with the idea that she had been created, controlled, manipulated, pulled from an archetype.

This is one moment of many in *Ruby Sparks* that we see a tension between person and archetype. Ruby's oscillating relationship between agentic being and living trope creates a disturbing image of what it might mean to take a generic trope to its fullest extreme. The manic-pixie-dream-girl trope becomes claustrophobic and entrapping, even as Ruby remains whimsical, devoted, charming, and nonchalant.

While *Ruby Sparks*' writer and leading actress, Zoe Kazan, has never named Muriel Spark as a direct inspiration for *Ruby Sparks*, it's difficult to ignore the parallels between *Sparks* and Spark. A character being controlled and haunted by a typewriter might very well describe the plot of either Spark's *The Comforters* or Kazan's *Ruby Sparks*. Most captivating for my purposes though are the ways in which we can see that Spark and *Sparks* each center themselves around trope and genre as a means of critique. While Muriel Spark has often been explored as an author interested in themes of predestination, authorship, and control, her own interest in and exaggeration of tropes and genres often remain unexplored.

Among the mostly unexplored notes, calendars, and fan letters in the National Library of Scotland, there is an index note that reads "the story is just one of the things that happen to a ~~book~~-novel." It is true that Spark's stories often come secondary to their form. The details are often overshadowed by what Hélène Cixous describes as her "flamboyant sadism" (Cixous 207). The story seems indeed incidental to the ways in which Spark crafts characters to use as "the toys of [her] rightly famous satiric verve, which haunts, harasses, judges, and scatters them" (Cixous 204). When examining these characters, they remain shockingly familiar, even archetypal. Spark's unique style is partially characterized by her ability to subvert convention by adhering carefully to archetypal and generic conventions. Rather than treating her toys with a challenging depth or nuance, Spark strips them to their base roles—heroine, actress, victim-in-waiting, etc.

This isn't to say that Spark's use of generic convention deprives her writing of nuance and depth; rather the bareness of her style makes manifest the underlying

assumptions of the conventions she exacerbates. She follows generic conventions to their fullest extent, pursuing them to their darkest extremes. Her satirical adherence to genre isn't simply stylistic but marks a defining characteristic in both her writing and activism, as she outlines in her 1970 speech "The Desegregation of Art." It's here that Spark states the importance she sees in humor and unsentimental art. However, as much as Spark argues for a move toward humor, she also argues for a return to the common. In writing that "Literature, of all the arts, is the most penetrable into the human life of the world, for the simple reason that words are our common currency," we can begin to understand the way that Spark weaponizes generic tropes to pierce her readers ("Desegregation of Art" 77). Beginning with words as common currency, we might also think of genre fiction as the most basic unit of literature. This article will explore the ways in which Spark's use of generic tropes serves as a means of criticism. In examining *The Public Image* and *The Driver's Seat* alongside Spark's 1970 speech, "The Desegregation of Art," I argue that Spark uses genre as a tool of disruption and disturbance. Spark's primary aim is to disturb; in using generic convention to meet this aim, she demonstrates the various ways that we should find the familiar disturbing.

Spark's defense of humor in "The Desegregation of Art" is positioned against "good" art. Early in her speech, Spark makes the distinction between effective art, good art, and bad art. The precise details of good and bad art are largely unimportant as Spark's main concern is a turn towards effective literature, or art that "infiltrates and should fertilise our minds. It is not a special department set aside for the entertainment and delight of the sophisticated minority" ("Desegregation of Art" 78). In making the distinction between effective art and art for the sophisticated, we see the ways in which

Spark prevents us from equivocating high art or “good art” from effective art. Further, in decentering the sophisticated minority, she tailors her message to the common good.

Spark appreciates the good, but aligns herself with the effective, stating “good things, when they begin no longer to apply, also must go. They must go before they turn bad on us. There is no more beautiful action than the sacrifice of good things at the intelligent season and by intelligent methods” (“Desegregation of Art” 79). Spark understands herself to be practicing such intelligent methods.

Spark closes in on the sentimental and serious socially-conscious art of the 20th century, accusing it of being largely an ineffective medium, whether done well or poorly. Rather than fulfilling a purpose of provocation, inspiration, or any other call to action, Spark argues that “a great number of the audience or of the readers feel that their moral responsibilities are sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions they have been induced to feel” (“Desegregation of Art” 79). Spark is specifically imagining the sophisticated minority enjoying an emotionally charged night at the theatre. The provocation of an uncomfortable feeling takes the place of action. The sophisticated minority braves an emotionally intense night at the theater and Spark argues their exposure to discomfort fulfills their “moral responsibilities” (“Desegregation of Art” 79). Otherwise, engagement with difficult emotions soothes any provocation to action. Spark’s answer against non-actionable emotional labor is to entertain and profoundly disturb. While Spark herself goes to say that her ability to “penetrate to the marrow...leave a salutary scar...paralyse its object” comes from the art of ridicule, I argue that her use of tropes and convention is just as effective a paralytic (“Desegregation of Art” 81).

The accessibility of Spark's prose comes in part through her precise language, but also the familiar repertoire from which she draws inspiration. Spark uses familiar genres, following their conventions to the letter. In doing so, she forces us to sit with their uncomfortable and problematic implications. In Spark's first novel, *The Comforters*, protagonist Caroline Rose finds herself haunted by an author narrating and at times controlling her every action. Caroline finds herself trapped in a novel—a novel that Caroline notes is rather generic and predictable. She describes the plot she's trapped in as “phoney” and “convenient[ly] slick” as she realizes she's trapped in schlock mystery novel (*Comforters* 113-114). When we think of truly generic fiction—romance, mystery, thriller, sci-fi—we understand them as easy, dull, predictable. Genre fiction is more often than not considered amongst “bad art.” Spark borrows the effectiveness of “bad art,” specifically its familiarity. The effectiveness of Spark's art comes not from the ease with which it might be consumed, but the penetrative consequences of its consumption.

While yes, Spark's humor is in part derived from her generic adherences and strategic subversions, we must also recognize that genre serves a purpose beyond humor in her work. Spark's “Desegregation” focuses on the ways in which sentimentality halts action, but we can also consider the ways in which intellectualism might also halt action. A complex philosophical piece might masterfully raise questions of justice; however the consideration of these questions becomes non-actionable intellectual labor. In using genre, Spark avoids the stunting effects of sentimentality and intellectualism.

The complexities of Spark's work are not in their illegibility or density, but in her uncanny ability to simply haunt. Spark writes effectively, above all else. Spark offers ridicule, but also an ease and accessibility in her fiction. We might imagine that Spark's

audience, “sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions they have been induced to feel” may have been just as satiated by an intellectually opaque social commentary (“Desegregation of Art” 79). If emotional labor can be understood as ceasing action, we can also understand intellectual labor as having a similarly halting effect. The difficulty of reading Spark rarely, if ever, comes from impenetrable prose. Emotionally or intellectually, the work of reading Spark doesn’t come from simply “getting through it.”

The Public Image serves as a compelling example of Spark’s ability to explore generic tropes and social critique. Spark’s 1968 novella *The Public Image* follows Annabel Christopher as she copes with her husband’s suicide. The event of his suicide is perhaps less disturbing than his posthumous plans to sabotage her career as a budding English film star in Italy. Frederick uses a series of suicide notes to frame Annabel, once known as a subtly seductive wife and mother, as an orgy-obsessed harlot. With the help of Frederick’s best friend, Billy, and Annabel’s producer and lover, Luigi, Annabel creates a series of elaborate tableaux in an effort to script the perfect inquest, avoid blame for Frederick’s suicide, and ultimately save her public image. The plan comes to a grinding halt when Billy produces copies of Frederick’s letters, the novella anticlimatically ending with Annabel boarding a plane with her infant and fading into an implied obscurity.

As Spark’s biographer points out *The Public Image* was met with mixed, but ultimately unfavorable reviews. It was derided for its length, its focus on celebrity culture, and most prominently for its “obtuse” protagonist, Annabel (Stannard 350-354). The critical conversation has largely reached the consensus that Annabel offers little more than a trite lesson in vanity. Regarded as an empty being, we’re meant to learn that

an obsession with appearances will never replace substance. Yet in only reading Annabel in this dismissive manner, there has been a critical failure to appreciate and understand the ways in which Spark exaggerates archetype to explore feminine entrapment and agency.

In fact, it's the critical reception of *The Public Image* that helps us to understand the distinctions Spark makes between good, bad, and effective art. Annabel Christopher inarguably resembles an archetypical vane celebrity wife. She is not an intensely original character. Yet in borrowing from a familiar repertoire of characters—a repertoire accused of having origins in bad—Spark creates an effective image of agency. *The Public Image*'s reputation is mistaken for a morality tale about fame and vanity. However, if we read *The Public Image* as instead commenting on feminine labor and agency, we're then able to understand the ways that Spark is deliberately placing Annabel's adherence to archetype in tension with her humanity, or the ways that Annabel can in fact be read as a developed character. Spark creates an uncomfortable air as Annabel is forced to exhibit agency through the adherence to archetypical images of femininity, motherhood, and celebrity culture. Spark ultimately chooses to subvert these archetypes by anticlimactically denying her audience of the archetypical satisfaction they expect. Annabel doesn't lose all; she subverts expectations and leaves it all. This is a subtle distinction that ultimately makes the point that Annabel is exhibiting an agentic effort—albeit an effort of destruction.

We must first begin by examining the ways in which Annabel embodies archetype, both as a character and in her fictionalized world. The driving anxiety of the narrative comes from Annabel's need to continually replicate an image proposed by

archetype, specifically striving to portray herself as a caring wife and mother. This is hardly an abstraction but is instead stated explicitly as the novella works its way to Frederick's suicide. Annabel's image is given the name "English Lady-Tiger" after playing a governess in the fictional film *The House on the Piazza* and is henceforth assigned to be a politely seductive wife (*Public Image* 5). She establishes her image in the Italian tabloids in which there was a

range of emotions [that] was as grand as Grand Opera, but no subtler. A clandestine child, preferably a son, of a film star is discovered; or an opera singer tells of the persecution she currently endures at the hands of the tenor's wife (under the headline 'Assunta Is Jealous of Me'); divorce in a royal family is a standard thriller, or any story involving mother-love, especially when the theme turns on the sacrifice of a steady lover. Sheer villains, utter innocents—the world's most complicated celebrities have been cast anew in these simple roles...Never a week but one of these pure vices formed the topic of a new sensation at the time Annabel Christopher's public image was launched and beyond that time. For these happy launchings were inevitably presented with the optimism of Act I, but bearing within them all the potentials of Act III and its doomed revelations, sooner or later. (*Public Image* 24-25)

The importance of this excerpt is hard to overstate. It's here as we see the repeated emphasis on martial, familial, and romantic relationships that we understand the dramatic weight that Frederick places on Annabel's life. Annabel understands that she must become an "utter innocent" in order to avoid becoming a "sheer villain" (*Public Image* 25). There's an indisputable value placed on Annabel's role as a mother, wife, and sexual

being, particularly as they're established with the promise of eventual downfall in "the potentials of Act III and its doomed revelations" (*Public Image* 25). Frederick's scheme is so disturbingly effective because it further forces Annabel to reproduce her archetypal roles or fall into a doomed image of womanhood.

The relationship that Annabel holds to archetype within the novella exists alongside the archetype that she fulfills in our experience of her as readers. We read her as an archetypal celebrity. The narrator describes Annabel and her acting as follows: "she did not need to be clever, she only had to exist; she did not need to perform, she only had to be there in front of the cameras" (*Public Image* 10). There are myriad celebrities whose own images come to mind. As we're granted insight to Annabel's private life, we associate Annabel with the archetype of celebrity itself. Annabel meets the death of her husband by calculating the toll his death might have on her public perception, and so clearly, we might think, she lacks substance.

The archetypal image of celebrity encourages readers to assume shallowness in her every action. Take for instance the moment she reads the paper's report on her first post-Frederick press appearance. She reads "the front pages before her, and she took in the headlines and paragraphs at the same time as she dressed the baby, and even while she let her head be pulled forward and sideways according as the baby tugged her hair, she managed to gather from the papers that she was so far blameless" (*Public Image* 84). The question of her blame relies on her adherence to archetype, to such a degree that her actual adherence to her role of mother in this moment is negated by her concern to be read as such. We see her as shallowly reading around the baby, caring for the image

above the baby. Even as she plays with and engages the infant, her performance of motherhood seems to overshadow the fact that she is being a mother in this moment.

By the nature of her celebrity, Annabel must be a professional archetypical woman, adopting the various guises of the quietly seductive wife, the doting mother, and the grieving widow. These are the images that Annabel is constantly trying to replicate in the droning concern of the public image. However, we can read this with varying degrees of generosity and nuance. Annabel is typically read unsympathetically. Take for instance Hélène Cixous's review of *The Public Image* in which the famous French feminist calls Annabel "an ice-cold little vampire" who practices in "an art of the hollow" (208). In some of the most recent scholarship on Spark and *The Public Image*, James Bailey concludes that while Frederick's suicide might "be read, perversely, as a vengeful bid for posthumous *substance*," Annabel "does not traverse a diegetic boundary and become any more or less ontologically 'real' in the process" (82,86). I am in no way arguing that Annabel is unconcerned with her image, or even that she is innocent of all vapidty. Rather, I'm suggesting that her vapidty is exaggerated and overexamined as compared to the ways in which she *must* operate as a reproductive force.

The uncharitable way Annabel is read is particularly striking when compared to the way that Frederick is believed and trusted in his assessment of Annabel. It's crucial to recognize the severe favoring toward Frederick and his perspective during the initial chapters of the novel. Annabel's method of acting, for instance, is mostly dismissed as simply posing. Yet it's first described as an "instinctive" act that Annabel "became skilled at... she became extremely expert" (*Public Image* 10). We're encouraged though to dismiss any expertise and focus only on her stupidity. We're told that Annabel is

stupid several times over in the novella's first chapter. The narrator introduces Annabel's stupidity, saying "she had no means of knowing that she was, in fact, stupid, for, after all, it is the deep core of stupidity that it thrives on the absence of a looking-glass" (*Public Image* 8). Despite the assertiveness of the statement, we'd do well to read it skeptically. The looking-glass hardly seems absent. On one hand, we're also immediately told that Frederick "affectionately insinuated the fact of her stupidity, and she accepted this without resentment" (*Public Image* 8). Annabel cannot logically be said to be both unaware of her stupidity, but also accepting of the insinuation. Further, Annabel is under constant observation and scrutiny. Even in metaphor the absence of a looking glass, an awareness of image, seems antithetical to her character.

The novella's detached narrator perhaps hides the ways in which the opening chapters heavily favor Frederick's perspective. If Annabel is "in fact, stupid," it seems to be fact according only to Frederick. Frederick is both resentful and cruel to Annabel. He's described as "continually overcome by a dazzled exasperation at her capacity for achieving the most impressive effects by the most superficial means" (*Public Image* 17). He meets her with little more than denigration even commanding her at one point, "please do not talk of "significance" because you do not understand it. And that is because you are insignificant yourself" (*Public Image* 16). Even recognizing the cruelty of the quip, we've been primed to accept Frederick at his word and disregard Annabel as an idiot, in fact.

Our trust in Spark's narrator to speak in harsh objective statements is a staple of her writing. Literary scholars and critics often turn their analysis towards Spark's distinct narration as well as her playful treatment of time. Across her fiction, Spark writes with a

quick and sharp tongue. There's a detached observational quality to the narrator as they omnisciently comment on the often ridiculous and cruel happenings of Spark's novels, leaving readers with a sense of Spark's "flamboyant sadism," as Cixous calls it. Read in tandem with Spark's identity as a Catholic author, early scholarship argued for a reading of Spark's narrator as an example of God as author. David Lodge notes in his article, "The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience: Method and Meaning in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*" that the anachronous structure of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, demonstrates Spark's primary concern in the identity of God, authorship, and free will. He argues that Spark "denies solipsism and posits the existence of some divine providence at work in the world; but this providence remains ultimately mysterious and incomprehensible because the world is a fallen one and not even the novelist can claim to understand it fully" (Lodge 238). Spark places herself in the position of God and novelist—all knowing but mystified by the freewill of her subjects. Malcolm Bradbury expands this idea noting that Spark presents an image of the world and God that avoids contingency altogether. Arguing in his article "Muriel Spark's Fingernails" that while Spark positions the author as God within her works, her God is detached, not intervening but instead commenting "that plot is destiny" (Bradbury 245). While her characters all work to escape their various predicaments, they're ultimately practicing freewill in predetermined paths.

With these readings of Spark in mind, it's easy to see the ways in which we might be tempted to take the narrator's comment, that Annabel is "in fact, stupid," as a God ordained, inevitable truth. The narrator is not obviously unreliable, and indeed carries the weight of omnipotence in their objective, detached tone. If God calls Annabel stupid, so

it must be. However, both Lodge and Bradbury conflate the identity of author and God. As a Catholic convert and author, Spark does exhibit an interest in authorship, control, and freewill, but more recent scholarship from Bran Nichol forces us to question the treatment of narrator as God. Nichol's reading of Spark pushes us to consider the way that Spark implicates both author, narrator, and readers within her writing, effectively turning engagement with her writing into a criminal act. Citing *The Driver's Seat* Nichol notes that as the protagonist's "pursuit of the young man is shadowed by the reader. The reader has had no option but to become a willing accomplice in the author's crime" (127). Because Spark reveals the central crime in *The Driver's Seat*, as we follow the protagonist to her death, the reader becomes implicated in her death and reading the novella is a crime in itself. Understanding Spark this way in the context of Annabel and her stupidity, we become implicated in the repeated derision of Annabel. We cannot assume a purity in the narrator's intent, nor in our own experience as readers.

Still, there's an objectiveness assumed by Nichol in his argument that fails to encapsulate the narrative lens of *The Public Image*. There are three shifts in the voyeuristic lens of *The Public Image*. Staying a moment on the first two, we primarily follow Frederick before focusing more tightly on Annabel. Nichol doesn't see the way the shift in our voyeurism colors our perspective in *The Public Image* and further moves us away from objectivity. The omniscient narrator never explicitly takes the singular perspective of a character. However, in making Frederick the first voyeuristic object of interest, our introduction of Annabel is shown through Frederick's discontentment with her. Early moments of Annabel are followed with Frederick repeatedly expressing "he wanted to leave her, and made up his mind that he would do so, eventually" (*Public*

Image 17). These moments of course following or predeceasing a litany of grievances that Frederick has against Annabel. This initial interest in Frederick feeds our dismissal of Annabel and encourages the uncharitable readings of her character.

Carl, Annabel and Frederick's baby, is also notably introduced while we're still closely following Frederick. If we look at Carl's introduction,

Soon it was rumoured that Annabel had decided to save her marriage by having a baby. It was represented everywhere as her decision, which infuriated Frederick.

Twice he made huge scenes in public. Then he was infuriated by Annabel's alarm. A proper wife would have pacified him, not remonstrated with him about what people would say. He said, 'All you think of is your public image.'

'No. I'm thinking of the baby,' she said. 'I shouldn't have trouble at a time like this.'

'And the baby,' he said, 'the baby's only in aid of your public image.' (*Public Image 32-33*)

In this passage we see Frederick completely detach himself from his child. The baby becomes solely Annabel's, even as he refuses to consider her as a real mother. He accuses both her and the child of being simply images—even as Annabel insists that her concern lies with the baby and her pregnancy.

In introducing both Annabel and Carl while so tightly focused on Frederick, we're well prepared to dismiss Annabel as she examines the tabloids behind Carl. However, there's a way in which we could imagine reading this same moment as a genuine act of mothering. Returning to the text Annabel "[lets] her head be pulled forward and sideways according as the baby tugged her hair, she managed to gather from the papers that she

was so far blameless” (*Public Image* 84). In a moment of infantile play, the press intrudes to further enforce her public performance of archetypically feminine roles. However, we don’t think of Annabel as a real mother, we only see Frederick’s accusations of vapid stupidity.

The fact of Annabel’s stupidity becomes harder to believe as our voyeuristic interest shifts to follow Annabel after Frederick’s death. Her character takes a sharp shift from the stupidity asserted and assigned by Frederick: she begins directing. She justifies the necessity of a 2am post-tragedy press conference, saying “things like this are easily misconstrued, and I don’t want the whole world to get the wrong story” (*Public Image* 70). The awareness of narrative is crucial as Annabel begins to reconstruct that which will be misconstrued. Annabel isn’t working to uncover the right story; rather she is re-creating a cliched narrative of sympathy and avoiding falling into the wrong archetype in the wrong story. Annabel continues to follow archetype and we read this as stupid and vapid because Frederick has encouraged us to do so, despite the fact that she is exhibiting an acute and impressive narrative awareness and control. Annabel’s quick manipulations of the narrative are not met uncritically. The doctor’s wife is horrified with Annabel, even after the doctor’s reassurance that the conference is “a matter of [Annabel’s] profession,” the wife exclaims that it’s “ridiculous, for an actress to think of the public when there is a private tragedy” (*Public Image* 72). The brief debate over Annabel’s directorial decisions nod to the categorical tensions present within Annabel. We see here a clear way in which we must think of Annabel as both a worker and a performer. Her consideration of the press is not simply a matter of vanity, but a professional concern. Annabel must adopt a

reproductive agency, not because she is too vain to consider herself beyond her image an archetype, but as an act of labor.

Even as we now read Annabel as a clever and agentic force, it doesn't erase the discomfort that arises from her dependence on image. While we can easily recognize the need for Annabel's quick and drastic damage control, it would be disingenuous to suggest that it's not at all disturbing. It's in fact quite disturbing to see Annabel begin a swift media campaign in the wake of Frederick's death. This is particularly true as it relates to Carl and as Annabel recognizes the tension between performing motherhood and mothering. Despite Frederick's insistence that the child is only image, Annabel feels that "the baby, Carl, was the only reality of her life. His existence gave her a sense of being permanently secured to the world" (*Public Image* 38). We see both that Carl is a beloved object, but also one that must be kept at the fringes, even as Annabel makes repeated effort to be reunited with him, her performance and reproduction of the archetype puts her at tension with the real thing that she deeply loves.

Annabel cares for Carl by protecting him from the image's control. Annabel is repeatedly shown to protect the child from becoming substance-less as she explicitly bans her team from including Carl in the media circus. The narrator notes that "it was not that the baby fitted the public image, it was rather that the image served the child so well" (Spark 34) This is an important subversion of Annabel's relationship to her image. Annabel works to ensure that she is reproducing her role as English Lady-Tiger and puts herself under the control of the image. Carl though, is able to be serviced by the image, in large part due to the efforts of Annabel. For instance, while Carl does appear briefly in the press, this was tightly controlled as "Annabel gave out a few charming photographs

of the baby, Carl, to the press, through Francesca. Annabel had taken them herself” (Spark 37). Even as she allows herself to be controlled by her image, she protects Carl from the same fate.

In protecting Carl from the performance of child and mother though, we see Annabel forced to distance herself from the baby. Following Frederick’s death, Carl is brought in and out of scenes. When Annabel is not actively tending to the public, she asks to be near her baby, to check on his sleeping, to feed him, etc. As much as Annabel must attend to her image, we also see her escaping scenes saying, “I’ve got to attend to my baby” (*Public Image* 122). However, Carl is also used to push nurses and prying eyes away. Annabel commands a nurse at one point “Go in there. Shut the door. Give Carl his bath. Feed him. Then bring him back to me here in bed, please,” these harsh commands serving as a measure to avoid eavesdropping and further sabotage (Spark 95). Annabel cannot simultaneously mother Carl and attend to her image. We see that despite Carl being a real thing to Annabel, the performance of motherhood leaves little room for the act itself.

These tensions collapse in the novella’s final chapter. Moments before the inquest, Frederick’s living accomplice and best friend, Billy, is revealed to have made copies of Frederick’s suicide notes. The moment comes as a shock as throughout the novella we’ve been assured that Billy made no such copies. Billy scoffing at the accusation himself, telling Annabel “there are no photo-copies...Do you think I’ve had nothing else on my mind since last night but go running around with a dead man’s deadly poison, getting them photographed—the letters photographed? Photographed.” (*Public Image* 90). The repetition of the word photograph serves the purpose of both dismissing

Annabel's concern while also degrading it. The assertion that there are no copies is repeated, until it comes as the "doomed revelation" of Act III (*Public Image* 25).

This revelation changes the tenor of the novella completely. Until this point, Annabel has deftly handled each emergency and successfully stages her public image. Rather than following the same damage control pattern of the rest of the plot—everything halts anti-climatically. The inquest takes place, and instead of following a carefully predetermined path in which Annabel meticulously becomes the grieving wronged widow she simply and unconvincingly says "I wish to say there is no truth in what my husband accuses me of in those letters. He was insane" (*Public Image* 142). She finally fails to reproduce her archetypal image.

We'll remember though that Annabel's relationship to archetype is grounded in an operatic structure. She's established as the initial archetype in Act I. While the final chapter certainly begins with its "doomed revelation" it fails to carry the full promise of a dramatic Act III (*Public Image* 25). This is not a failure of Annabel, but rather a choice to break script and deny the voyeur the satisfaction of a climax. The scene actually falls flatly and anti-climatically because Annabel chooses to stop reproducing the archetype. We see the loss of voyeuristic interest both narratively and structurally. She loses her audience, and the novella comes to an abrupt end with seemingly little purpose to the previous two acts. Spark presents the doomed revelation of Act III without presenting us the voyeuristic pleasure of an aria or headline.

Returning to the "Desegregation of Art" we might imagine Spark's "sophisticated minority" and their reaction to the anti-climax of Annabel Christopher. In failing to produce an aria or satisfactory outwitting of any nature, they are denied the sense that

their “moral responsibilities have been sufficiently fulfilled by the emotions they have been induced to feel” (“Desegregation of Art” 79). They have been neither touched by tragic demise of an actress nor have they been annoyed by her sheer vapidness. The sophisticated minority is left to wonder about the strange teasing of a doomed third act and why an actress they dismissed as archetypically dull might forgo her shining dramatic moment. Spark uses Annabel to reveal sexist assumptions present in the audience. They are not satiated, but they themselves are exposed.

In choosing to forgo the public image, an image we’ve seen could be easily maintained via bribe, further scripting, or other witty maneuver, we see the beginning of Annabel asserting herself as a creative force rather than a reproductive force. The novella closes with this image of Annabel:

Waiting for the order to board, she felt both free and unfree. The heavy weight of the bags was gone; she felt as if she was still, curiously, pregnant with the baby, but not pregnant in fact. She was pale as a shell. She did not wear her dark glasses. Nobody recognised her as she stood, having moved the baby to rest on her hip, conscious also of the baby in a sense weightlessly and perpetually within her, as an empty shell contains, by its very structure, the echo and harking image of former and former seas. (*Public Image* 144)

In this moment, we see that Annabel is no longer bridging the tension between performing as mother and mothering. Her new sense of pregnancy signals the way in which she is finally able to carry the baby outside of playing the role of pregnancy. She is engaging in a new act of creation that she had previously been alienated from.

Rather than being an obstacle for performance and reproduction, we see Carl become a new medium for freedom and creation himself. When Annabel's lawyer asks her why she abandoned her image, she answers, "I want to be free like my baby. I hope he's recording this noise" (*Public Image* 142). Carl himself becomes a new medium for creation. Annabel breaks script and begins to make noise outside the reproduction of archetype. Rather than recording the same cycles his mother had become enmeshed in, Carl becomes the record and product of a new act of creation. Her relationship to mothering is no longer represented as vapid posing.

My reading of *The Public Image* relies on Spark having created a series of deliberate signals that Annabel Christopher should be read as an archetype with humanity. She is neither entirely human nor entirely character. Spark ultimately makes the choice to entirely subvert archetype and opt Annabel out of the created narrative. She provides an anticlimactic ending showing Annabel stepping out of role and into humanity and the creation of further humanity. While my previous analysis of these events demonstrates that this method is hardly ineffective, it stands in stark contrast to the penetrative effect that *The Driver's Seat* carries as it fully commits to following the generic conventions of a murder mystery thriller.

The Driver's Seat follows the peculiar actions of Lise as she travels from her UK home to an unnamed European city in the day before her gruesome murder. In her travels, Lise meets an unsettled man in a dark suit, a macrobiotics enthusiast, a car mechanic, an old lady, and several student protesters. It's a true list of usual suspects as each character appears to be at least a little suspicious in the details of Lise's murder. While we follow a very alive Lise, her murder and the subsequent investigation are

revealed in flashforwards throughout the novel. The first concrete example coming at the beginning of chapter three in which the narrator reveals “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” (*Driver’s Seat* 25). In this quick sentence, the cause of death, location and positioning of the body, and several additional clues are revealed. We have the beginnings of a classic whodunnit.

Returning to Nichol’s analysis of the narrator role in Spark’s works though, he makes the argument that *The Driver’s Seat* is not a whodunit, but borrows Spark’s phrase deeming the novella a “whydunnit” after it’s revealed that Lise has orchestrated her own murder. He argues that taking seriously the notion of why rather than who “would underline the fact that Spark’s novel is not driven by the investigation to find out who is responsible for the murder, but rather the question of why the murder takes place” (Nichol 120). While this is certainly the case on further readings of the novella, it ignores the experience of a reader encountering Lise for the first time. While the novella’s final lines leave little to the imagination, until that point the reader is given several opportunities to read the characters surrounding Lise with a watchful eye indeed asking who might’ve killed her. Nichol notes that *The Driver’s Seat* “is a detective story in reverse: it ends with a murder instead of beginning with one” (120). However, this is only chronologically true. The narrative indeed still begins with a murder that Spark gives any investigative-ly inclined reader ample opportunity to solve.

Looking at the body of evidence, Spark specifically weaves in elements of Lise’s bindings within the story. When we first learn that Lise was found “bound with a silk

scarf and her ankles bound with a man's necktie" we are subsequently primed to find the scarf and necktie (*Driver's Seat* 25). Spark knows this and thus plants ties and scarves throughout the plot. We notice then as Lise buys scarves and neckties and pay even closer attention when Lise packages a necktie for "Papa" and a scarf for "Olga" (*Driver's Seat* 92). We never discover who Papa or Olga might be, and by the novella's end they're entirely irrelevant. Yet this moment is an important example in the way that Spark creates a classic mystery tale, complete with clues.

Spark repeatedly tricks us into believing we might solve Lise's murder. She has in her possession the necessary scarves, ties, and a potential knife, all that seems to be missing is a murderer. The natural suspect is Bill and his obsessively macrobiotic diet. His interest in Lise seems a bit too intense, particularly as we know her fate. Saying to Lise "I'm your type...and you're mine" makes us question the extent to which Bill is keen to make Lise "his" (*Driver's Seat* 37). When he adds that his diet strictly recommends "one orgasm a day," suspicions only deepen. She will be his. When Bill then has Lise alone in a park of a foreign city, the following only seems inevitable:

He pulls her towards a hedge separating the back yard of the Pavilion from a foot-path which can be seen through a partly-open iron gate. A band of very tall fair young men.. stops to watch and comment buoyantly on the tussle that ensues between Bill and Lise, she proclaiming that she doesn't like sex and he explaining that if he misses his daily orgasm he has to fit in two the next day. (*Driver's Seat* 106).

The clues we've collected have led us to this exact moment of Lise's death as we watch Bill struggle to take her. And yet this is not the moment of Lise's death.

Lise escapes her encounter with Bill. We're lulled into an uneasy sense of safety as Spark works in a final misdirection in the concluding pages of the novella. While Lise's murder is disturbing, it's worth noting that a significant part of that discomfort comes from Lise's role in the murder rather than the murder itself. In the moments of Lise's encounter with Bill, we expect it as she "shrieks for help in four languages," an unpleasant, but expected moment. However when it's revealed by her actual murderer that "she told [him] to kill her and [he] killed her. She spoke in several languages, but she was telling [him] to kill her all the time" (*Driver's Seat* 117). It's both unexpected and profoundly disturbing. The details of Lise's murder are unchanged, except for her cries and commands. We must ask ourselves why it's so deeply disturbing and impactful when Lise is revealed to have directed her own demise, particularly when the idea of her demise was made clear from the beginning.

Whereas the disturbance of Annabel's story came in the form of anti-climax, Spark delivers on the climax that was promised to Lise. In Annabel's case, her sudden subversion of the archetypal and generic conventions creates a confusion and loss of tension that leaves readers questioning the novella's purpose. The purpose of *The Driver's Seat* is slightly more apparent as Spark brings questions of feminine agency to a disturbing light. We see Lise literally driving her own murder. Spark both highlights the assumed mistreatment of women and a disturbing agentic notion that we might be able to enjoy and control our own demises.

The case of Lise remains the most extreme case of a feminine desire to destroy oneself in order to deny men the pleasure of access. Yet we can see a clearer example of

a feminine agentic destruction in the words of Mrs. Feidke, who laments on the state of gender;

Fur coats and flowered poplin shirts on their backs,' says Mrs Fiedke as she winds along, conducted by Lise this way and that to avoid the oncoming people in the street. '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. They won't be content with equal rights only. Next thing they'll want the upper hand, mark my words. Diamond earrings, I've read in the paper. (*Driver's Seat* 78).

It's an odd passage that lies contrary to usual feminist thought; however we can see the ways that Mrs. Feidke is expressing a similar tie to agency and motherhood as Annabel. Agency is limited to a diamond encrusted script. Rather than presenting an image of empowerment, we see a realist resignation to enjoy diamonds and begrudge hippies. If Lise is operating in a world in which she is able to act as consumer and prey, she is able to reclaim a sense of agency in her ability to deny men the pleasure of preying on her.

These questions of agency might seem perverse and trivial. Why pursue questions of the agentic ability to destroy oneself? In these novella's specifically, Spark chooses to focus on themes of self-controlled feminine destruction rather than empowerment. Spark's feminism does not seek to empower; rather it seeks to undermine and question. In the case of Annabel, we follow as she conforms and contorts herself into a successful image, then undermining the work altogether and choosing to step into a full form of agency. Lise gives us a much darker line of reasoning and questioning. Lise takes complete control over an all too familiar narrative of the violent murder of a woman. This

forces the important questions: why are we so familiar, accepting, prepared, and eager to consume a woman's murder? Why if we're all expecting carnage is she unable to control the carnage? What Spark offers in her use of generic conventions is a critique as to why we're so familiar with deeply disturbing predestinations for women. In offering disturbing pictures of agency, we're forced to grapple with the limitations of predestined patriarchy.

Rather than the familiar notions of feminist empowerment, Spark practices feminist spite and critique. In following generic convention, Spark demonstrates the disturbing ways that women are scripted and confined to certain models. Agency is practiced within those models, but only in an effort to undermine their authority. The solution Spark offers to these predestined patriarchal scripted efforts is pure disruption. In the case of Annabel, critics see only the archetype. She becomes little more than a vapid little thing, despite the ways that Spark also writes her to be conniving, clever, and ultimately in control of her conformity, as demonstrated by the relinquishing of her public image. Conversely, Lise disappears in the genre she's placed in. We're comfortable with her victimization, until she is shown to be in control of it. The destruction of Annabel's career and Lise's life are uncomfortable to sit through. Even as they follow a predictable script, they fail to offer satisfaction.

Spark is not a satisfactory artist—she's effective.

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