

The secular and the supernatural: madness and psychiatry in the short stories of Muriel Spark

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ABSTRACT Edinburgh-born Muriel Spark is one of modern Scotland's greatest writers. Examination of her work reveals that the subjects of madness and psychiatry are recurrent themes in her writing. She herself had a mental breakdown when she was a young woman and she took an interest in the world of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. In her short stories, Spark approaches the subject of madness in a variety of ways: she relates it to the supernatural; to writing fiction; and to religion. She frequently juxtaposes secular and supernatural explanations of mental disturbance. Spark adopts a sceptical and, at times, mocking view of psychiatrists and psychiatric treatment. Both psychoanalysis and pills are seen as problematic.

KEYWORDS fiction, madness, Muriel Spark, psychiatry, secular, supernatural

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INTRODUCTION

Muriel Spark (1918–2006) is arguably the most important writer to emerge from Scotland since Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson.¹ She has an international reputation, and although best known for *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*,² she wrote 21 other novels, as well as plays, poetry, literary criticism, biographies and an autobiography.^{3,4}

Madness is a major theme in Spark's work. In her novels and short stories there are a large cast of mad characters as well as a succession of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts. It is clear that Spark was fascinated by the subject. As a child she spent many hours observing the eccentricities and foibles of the numerous visitors to her parents' flat in Edinburgh. Her husband was mentally ill and she witnessed his paranoid rages. Later in life she had a breakdown, due to her use of Dexedrine, which she depicted in her novel *The Comforters*.⁵ During her breakdown she consulted a Jungian priest and later wrote about Jung's approach to religion. She met Anna Freud and lived through the heyday of psychoanalysis. In the 1960s she moved to New York where psychoanalysis was in vogue, a period she satirised in *The Hothouse on the East River*.⁶

This paper will focus on Muriel Spark's short stories. In these, Spark approaches the subject of madness in a variety of ways: she relates it to the supernatural, to writing fiction, and to religion. She frequently juxtaposes secular and supernatural explanations of mental disturbance. Spark adopts a sceptical and, at times, mocking view of psychiatrists and psychiatric treatment. Both psychoanalysis and pills are seen as problematic.



FIGURE 1 Muriel Spark. Photo by Terence McCarten

SPARK'S BREAKDOWN

Muriel Spark had a mental breakdown when she was a young woman. In late January 1954 she began insisting that TS Eliot was sending her threatening messages. She had

been taking the slimming tablet, Dexedrine, an amphetamine known to induce paranoid psychosis. Spark thought there was a religious element to her breakdown. In the essay, *My Conversion*, she is quoted as saying:

Anyway, 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 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 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. (p. 25)⁷

Spark's breakdown could be interpreted in a religious light but it could also be seen, more prosaically, in terms of stress and the side-effects of medication. Spark, herself, left the question open and did not provide a definitive answer. In many of the portrayals of madness in her work, she is deliberately ambiguous as to whether she is depicting spiritual or clinical phenomena. Spark recovered after she stopped taking Dexedrine and consulted a doctor who prescribed chlorpromazine, an anti-psychotic which had just been introduced to psychiatry.⁸ She spent a period of recuperation at The Friars at Aylesford Priory, a Carmelite retreat. She also consulted Father Frank O'Malley, a lay-psychologist and Jungian. Spark became interested in Jung, who wrote extensively about religion and was certainly more sympathetic to it than Freud, who notoriously saw belief in God as evidence of mental pathology. However, Spark was critical of Jung. In an essay reviewing his book, *Answer to Job*,⁹ she commented that Jung treated 'God' as a psychic concept, rather than as a theological subject.

THE MAD PERSON

*Come Along Marjorie*¹⁰ portrays a character called Marjorie Pettigrew who may be mad or undergoing a spiritual experience. The story relates the reaction of others to her difference from them. The tale is told by Gloria, who, like Spark herself, is a self-confessed 'neurotic'. Also, like Spark, she goes to recuperate from mental problems at a religious retreat. Gloria enlists as a pilgrim at Watling Abbey and writes: 'Not many days had passed since my arrival at Watling Abbey when I realized that most of us were recovering from nerves.' She adds: 'Neurotics are awfully quick to notice other people's mentalities, everyone goes into an exaggerated category'. Gloria gives her own classification of the residents of the Abbey: the 'visiting nervous pilgrims' like herself; the permanent lay residents who were 'cranks on the whole'; the monks who were 'non-individualized' and 'non-neurotic'; and in the fourth category, Miss Marjorie Pettigrew. So, from the outset, Miss Pettigrew is in a category of her own. The story compares the world of

the neurotic with that of someone who is either mad or who has a religious calling – or possibly both. As ever with Spark, she leaves the interpretation ambiguous.

Gloria observes of Miss Pettigrew:

Indeed, she did seem sane. I got the instant impression that she alone among the lay people, both pilgrims and Cloisters, understood the purpose of the place. I did get that impression. (p. 304).

She learns that Marjorie Pettigrew is either feared or disliked by other residents. Gloria concludes that this is because she wasn't a 'neurotic'. Spark is suggesting that people are wary of others who are not like them. In an amusing twist to this commonplace observation, her narrator adds: 'Usually, neurotics take against people whose nerves they can't jar upon'. Spark thus offers a critical view of 'neurotics', portraying them as individuals who need to provoke a reaction from others. The fact that Miss Pettigrew does not respond disconcerts them.

At first Gloria thinks that Miss Pettigrew does not speak because she is 'in Retreat', that she is observing a religious vow of silence. Miss Pettigrew seems to pray a lot in the chapel and doesn't join the rest of the company. Initially, then, Gloria perceives Miss Pettigrew's behaviour in religious terms and the tension between a spiritual and a psychiatric explanation underpins the story. Miss Pettigrew communicates her shopping needs by writing short notes to the laundry-girl who shows Gloria 'these slips of paper as proudly as if they were the relics of a saint'. This, once again, raises the question as to whether Miss Pettigrew should be seen in a holy light. The other residents, however, are suspicious of Miss Pettigrew. One resident thinks there is nothing wrong with her: she is not mentally ill and her behaviour is just a cunning 'pretence'. Others think she is 'touched in the head'. The monks want Miss Pettigrew to leave but feel they cannot force her out as it will damage their reputation.

One day Gloria is waiting for a phone call from her boyfriend. Miss Pettigrew advances towards her and Gloria thinks she is going to tell her she is wanted on the phone. Instead she says she has a message for her. The message is: 'The Lord is risen'. Gloria is shocked that Miss Pettigrew has actually spoken. She also has 'an odd focus in her eyes' that Gloria had not noticed before. She thinks: 'After all...she has a religious mania. She is different from the neurotics, but not because she is sane'. She starts to see Miss Pettigrew in terms of mental illness. Even so, she feels some loyalty to her and does not tell others about the incident as she thinks this would be a 'betrayal to reveal the first crack in Miss Pettigrew's control'.

Shortly after this, Miss Pettigrew goes off her food. She takes to locking herself in her room and becomes frailer.

One morning 'she did not rise...at her usual seven o' clock'. The use of the word 'rise' resonates with Miss Pettigrew's previous utterance that 'The Lord is risen'. Again there is the suggestion that she is a spiritual figure.

Gloria listens from the next room as Miss Pettigrew eventually gets up. Gloria thinks:

'Neurotics never go mad,' my friends had always told me. Now I realized the distinction between neurosis and madness, and in my agitation I half-envied the woman beyond my bedroom wall, the sheer cool sanity of her behaviour within the limits of her impracticable mania. Only the very mad, I thought, can come out with the information 'The Lord is Risen', in the same factual way as one might say, 'You are wanted on the telephone,' regardless of the time and place. (p. 313)

Gloria is reiterating a common perception of the supposedly sharp division between neurosis and insanity. She also suggests the mad have a special affinity to the religious realm.

Gloria is informed she has to vacate her room as nurses are coming from the asylum to fetch Miss Pettigrew and there will also be a 'man with a stretcher'. Although the other residents have also been asked to clear the area, most of the 'neurotics' linger nearby to witness the spectacle. Gloria recalls:

Insanity was my great sort of enemy at that time. And here, clothed in the innocence and dignity of Miss Pettigrew, was my next-door enemy being removed by ambulance. I would not miss it. (p. 314)

Gloria voices her fear of going mad and it is tempting to regard this as Spark talking about her own fears. But Gloria is ambivalent, because she has also detected something admirable about Miss Pettigrew in her 'innocence and dignity'. Even so, Gloria relishes the opportunity to witness events.

Gloria hears the men from the asylum knock on Miss Pettigrew's door. One asks the other what her name is and, on being told, calls through the door, 'Come along Marjorie'. Miss Pettigrew goes with them to the asylum. The residents talk excitedly among themselves, trying to reassure themselves that Miss Pettigrew will be well cared for. Several maintain that they always had 'respect' for her. Then they are suddenly struck that the men called her 'Marjorie'. They are clearly put out. The story ends:

After this the incident was little discussed. But the community was sobered and united for a brief time, contemplating with fear and pity the calling of Miss Pettigrew Marjorie'. (p.315)

Spark captures the reaction of others to madness. It is something to be shunned until Miss Pettigrew is to be taken away. Then there is a frisson of excitement and a



FIGURE 2 Muriel Spark. Photo by Penelope Jardine

prurient interest in viewing the spectacle. By this stage, the other residents convince themselves that they were always kindly disposed towards Miss Pettigrew and that they wish her well. This does not last very long and they go back to avoiding the subject of madness. They have been struck by the fact she was called by her Christian name. Did they not know her name because they had ostracised her? Does the use of her first name make her more human? Does all this make them feel guilty?

What of Marjorie Pettigrew? How do we understand her? Is she the only person in the Abbey authentically engaged with the spiritual? Does one have to be mad in order to do so? Or does engaging with the divine make one mad? Spark deliberately leaves the question unresolved but she does end by referring to 'the calling' of Miss Pettigrew.

THE PSYCHIATRIST

In *The Dark Glasses*,¹¹ Spark portrays a female psychiatrist, Dr Gray. The story is related by a historian, Joan, who meets Dr Gray at a summer school where the latter is lecturing on psychology. She recognises the psychiatrist as a figure from her past, but, because Joan is wearing dark glasses, Dr Gray does not recognise her. However the doctor observes: 'The wearing of dark glasses...is a modern psychological phenomenon. It signifies the trend towards impersonalization, the weapon of the modern Inquisitor...'. The term 'inquisitor' is significant because, as the story unfolds, Joan is revealed to be something of an inquisitor. The term also has religious associations and the doctor's moral values come under scrutiny.

Meeting Dr Gray leads Joan to recall an episode from her youth. When she was a child, she had an appointment

with a local optician, Mr Basil Simmonds, who lived with his mother and sister. He sexually harassed Joan at the appointment. Following this, Joan starts to spy on him and becomes convinced that he has tried to forge his mother's will and that he has also tried to blind his sister by giving her the wrong eye drops. She wonders about the role of Dr Gray, who, at this stage, is a general practitioner. Joan sees her drinking with Basil shortly after the blinding episode and feels this is evidence that they have conspired together against the sister.

The story returns to the present where Joan is attending Dr Gray's first lecture at the summer school on 'the psychic manifestations of sex'. The doctor talks about 'child-poltergeists' and Joan is bored. She notes the 'curious language' of the psychiatric profession, especially the doctor's statement: 'Adolescents in a state of sexual arousal...may become possessed of almost psychic insight'. This allows Spark to mock what she sees as the absurdity of psychoanalytical language and theory. It also provides another commentary on the story. Was Joan a sexually aroused adolescent who developed 'psychic insight' into the true nature of Basil Simmonds' behaviour? Later in the story the doctor is amazed by Joan's 'psychic' understanding of the Simmonds case. The reference to a 'child-poltergeist' is also significant: a poltergeist is a spirit who creates mischief and Joan will certainly rattle Dr Gray as the story goes on.

After the lecture, Joan finds herself in the company of Dr Gray who tells her why she switched from general practice to psychiatry. Joan observes: 'Psychiatrists are very often ready to talk to strangers about their inmost lives. This is probably because they spend so much time hearing out their patients'. The roles have been reversed and the psychiatrist is now unburdening herself.

Dr Gray explains why she took up 'psychology'. She had married Basil Simmonds:

My...husband had a breakdown and was under a psychiatrist. Of course, he's incurable, but I decided... It's strange, but that's how I came to take it up. It saved my reason... there was what I'd now call an Oedipus-transference on his part...(p. 377–8)

Joan comments: 'How tedious I found these phrases!' Once again psychoanalytic language is held up for derision. The psychiatrist also refers to 'unconscious incest' between her husband, Basil, and his sister but says she was unaware of this before her marriage because she had not 'studied psychology at that time'. Joan reflects that she had not studied psychology either but, nevertheless, she was aware of the nature of the relationship between brother and sister. The implication is that the doctor lacks common sense and has to be guided by theory rather than her instincts.

Dr Gray goes on to give a 'psychological' explanation of

the episode when Mr Simmonds' sister uses the wrong eye drops:

Then there was an accident, one of those *psychological* accidents. She was a trained dispenser, but she mixed herself the wrong eye drops. Now it's very difficult to make a mistake like that, normally. But subconsciously the sister wanted to, she *wanted* to. But she wasn't normal, she was not normal. (p. 378)

Dr Gray continues:

Well, she went off her head completely and accused her brother of having put the wrong drugs in the bottle deliberately. That is interesting from a psychological point of view – she said she had seen something that he didn't want her to see, something disreputable. She said he wanted to blind the eye that saw it...(p.378)

Joan asks Dr Gray if it ever occurred to her that the sister was telling the truth: that she *had* been blinded. The doctor, however, is constructing an elaborate psychological explanation of events in which the sister's opinion is rejected and the clinician's version is privileged. Indeed the sister is regarded as mad, though she may well have been telling the truth. Her reward for being honest is to be bundled off to a home for the mentally ill.

Her husband accused himself of trying to blind his sister, but Dr Gray felt that he, too, had gone mad:

It can all be explained psychologically, as we tried to show to my husband. We've told him and told him, and given him every kind of treatment – shock, insulin, everything. (p. 378)

Dr Gray is referring to electroconvulsive therapy and insulin coma treatment, the standard psychiatric treatments used during the mid-20th century, the era in which this story is set. Dr Gray goes on to remark:

My husband had this breakdown...He had delusions. He kept imagining he saw eyes looking at him everywhere...But eyes, you see. That's significant. Unconsciously he felt he had blinded his sister. Because unconsciously he wanted to do so. He keeps confessing that he did so. (p. 379–40)

Joan asks the doctor why she didn't believe Basil's confession. Dr Gray replies: 'I'm a psychiatrist and we seldom believe confessions'. Joan suggests that he might have stopped seeing eyes if she had believed him. The story implies that the psychiatrist is blind to the obvious because she is seeing the situation from a psychoanalytic perspective. Psychoanalytic theory is serving to obfuscate matters. Instead of taking her husband's confession at face value, she thinks she is seeing a deeper truth by means of psychoanalytic theory. The term 'confession', of course, has a religious connotation and we could view the story as an illustration of the conflict between a secular, psychoanalytic approach and a religious one.

With the former approach, one is the passive victim of unconscious forces, while with the latter one takes responsibility for misdeeds and owns up to them. This conflict is underlined when Dr Gray tells Joan: 'As his wife,' she said, 'I know he's guilty. But as a psychiatrist I must regard him as innocent'. It could be argued that the doctor's psychiatric perspective has a certain humanity to it; on the other hand, she could just be using psychiatric theory to hide from unwelcome truths.

Earlier, when Joan had briefly taken off her glasses, the doctor had not recognised her. Joan had commented: 'These fishers of the mind have no eye for outward things. Instead, she was 'recognizing' my mind: I dare say I came under some category of hers.' Again there is the implication that psychiatrists miss what is in front of their eyes and are blinded by their theories. Dr Gray doesn't see Joan as an individual but rather as an example of a psychological category. Later Joan feels that the doctor views her as a 'most endearing case history'.

At the end of the story Joan takes off her glasses and Dr Gray recognises her. She starts shouting at Joan, 'You damned inquisitor'. The doctor has been found out and the reader is left with a negative view of psychiatrists and psychoanalytic theory.

THE PROBLEMS WITH PSYCHIATRIC MEDICATION

*Another Pair of Hands*¹² relates the story of Winnie the maid. After the death of the housekeeper, Miss Rose Spigot, Winnie struggles with the running of the house which becomes chaotic. But then, miraculously, she becomes super-efficient. We are told:

But now something had happened to Winnie. She was perfectly happy, indeed almost blissful. She went around whispering to herself in a decidedly odd way. She served the vegetables with great care, but whispering, whispering all the time. (p.209)

She talks to herself and is observed shouting to herself in the kitchen. The narrator eventually confronts Winnie. He can't work with all the noise and urges her to see a psychiatrist. However the psychiatrist doesn't think there is much wrong with her and Winnie refuses to be admitted to hospital. The psychiatrist comments: 'She has a few hallucinations, nothing to worry about. She should get over it. Of course I can't diagnose in depth without her cooperation in a clinic'.

However Winnie does start taking pills. She stops shouting but her work deteriorates. Then she stops taking pills because, she claims, the deceased housekeeper disapproves. Winnie maintains that she was in contact with Rose but the housekeeper went away because the pills 'put her off her stroke'. Rose had been helpful as 'another pair of hands'. Rose re-appears to Winnie and

the house is transformed again. However, by this stage, it has all become too much for the narrator and his 'weak character'. He persuades Winnie to retire.

Again, Spark's story can be interpreted in several ways. Is Winnie simply mad or is she actually communicating with the late Rose Spigot? Whatever the explanation, Spark once again suggests that psychiatric medication is not helpful. Or rather, it can get rid of symptoms such as hearing voices, but this can be to the patient's detriment. On the other hand, Winnie without medication shouting at the deceased Rose Spigot is too much for the narrator. In this story then, Spark finds problems both with treating and not treating psychiatric symptoms.

MADNESS, FICTION AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Spark often compares the writing of fiction to madness. Both consist of creating imagined worlds. Spark is interested in the question: does the writer dictate the behaviour of her characters or do they take over – as some authors claim – and lead a life of their own? Likewise, is the mad person in control of his delusions or do they control him? Spark was very clear that, from her own perspective, she was in charge of her characters, and she thought it fanciful the notion they could start to influence the writer. Her fear of madness was the fear of losing control and being at the dictate of delusions or hallucinations.

In *Harper and Wilton*,¹³ the narrator is housesitting. She feels 'uneasy' and that there is an 'oddness in the house'. In the fourth week of her stay, the narrator hears the voices of young women. She tries to ignore them in order to finish writing her book, but hears the voices again. Two women in Edwardian clothes come into sight. She thinks she has seen them before. They come to the door and the narrator is 'smitten with nerves'. The two women give her 'the creeps'. They say the narrator has created them: they are Harper and Wilton, two Edwardian suffragettes from an unfinished story by the narrator. They tell her that they want it completed or they will haunt her. The narrator changes the ending of the story. It is not clear whether the narrator is actually mad or just imagining things. Or is there a supernatural explanation? What is the status of Harper and Wilton? Are they literary characters come to life? Here Spark is exploring the notion that characters take over a story and the author follows their lead. She takes the notion to absurd levels to undermine it.

In *The Executor*,¹⁴ Spark again examines the writing of fiction, but this time it seems that the author is actually dead. Is he really creating work from the grave or is his literary executor going mad and imagining that he is? Susan Kyle, puritanical, organised and hypocritical, becomes the literary executor of her dead uncle's work. She holds back an unfinished novel from the Foundation,

a literary organisation that has paid a lot of money for her uncle's manuscripts. The novel is set in the 17th century and concerns a witch called Edith who is on trial. The last chapter, which was to reveal her fate, had not been written. Susan plans to finish the novel and claim it as her own. However, when she looks at the unfinished manuscript each morning, she discovers that her dead uncle is writing new entries, in which he accuses her of greed because she has not handed over all his work to the Foundation.

She panics but thinks if she tells people of her dead uncle's apparently new entries in the manuscript, her story 'would sound like that of a woman gone crazy'. She wonders if she is dreaming. Is she overworked? Is she mad? She had described her uncle's writing as 'scribbling' and he begins to taunt her with this term. He also tells her to look up the Acts of the Apostles to see 'what happened to Ananias and Sapphira'. This biblical couple had sold a plot of land to donate money to the Apostles but kept back some for themselves; by doing so they lied to God and their fate was sudden death. Susan reads the passage but not all of it as she knows how it ends. She thinks her uncle is being 'impudent' as he was a 'sinner'.

Each time there is a new entry by her uncle, Susan burns the page, but the next day discovers there is a new message. Her uncle seems to know all about her. She begins to think he listens into her phone calls and eavesdrops when she goes to the toilet. The home help, Mrs Donaldson suggests she see a doctor.

The man from the Foundation rings to say that they have found the last chapter. He asks her the whereabouts of the preceding ten chapters. In the last chapter, Edith the witch is condemned to be executed but kills herself beforehand. Susan hands the manuscript back and finds a last triumphant note from her uncle. She takes a whisky and soda, and admits she has been drinking throughout her stay at her uncle's house.

Spark leaves it open as to whether the story is to be understood in terms of the supernatural or madness or even alcoholic intoxication. Whatever the explanation, there is a moral element to the story: Susan Kyle is being punished for being greedy and hypocritical.

In *The Pearly Shadow*,¹⁵ Spark once again provides a supernatural context to a story involving madness. The title of the story is possibly a reference to Jung's idea of the shadow, an unconscious entity which is visible to everybody except the person to whom it belongs. Dr Felicity Garland, a psychiatrist, has a patient who sees a 'pearly shadow'. Curiously, Dr Garland sees the shadow too. The Pearly Shadow appears in the clinic and upsets the nurse by walking through her. The Shadow is worried that the doctor will give him medication and thereby kill him. How do we understand this? Is the Shadow an

actual entity? Why should medication kill it? Is it because the Shadow is really a symptom of mental illness? Spark does not provide an easy solution.

Dr Garland worries about her own sanity and decides to go to the Chief about her 'confused delusion'. Unfortunately everyone has gone home. She goes home too, but the Pearly Shadow comes to her house. He is worried she will take a pill and get rid of him. She takes a pill and he disappears. The next day he is at the clinic, but the other patients do not notice him. The narrator observes of the waiting room: 'Most psychiatric patients look weird, especially while waiting for consultation'. The nurse is distraught at the presence of the Shadow and has to be treated. She goes home to her family to recuperate but every time she forgot to take her pills, she felt a 'presence' in the room.

The Shadow is upset but the doctor says his only hope is to go elsewhere and get treatment. The narrator concludes the story by stating:

Nurse Simmons improved. Neither she nor Dr Felicity Garland saw Pearly Shadow again, but a few years later they heard of a psychiatrist in the north who had died of an overdose of barbiturates which had curiously made his skin translucent and pearly. (p.237)

We are left with an ambiguous ending. Was Dr Garland overworked and stressed? Did this cause her to lose touch with reality? She certainly worries that she is deluded. Is there a supernatural explanation? Was there a strange, unearthly being in the clinic? Did psychiatric science in the shape of medication destroy it? Has psychiatric science no conception of other realms of reality? Is it poetic justice that a psychiatrist dies at the end of the story and from an overdose of medicine? Again Spark points to the parallels between creating fiction, where characters can be viewed by the reader as real people, and insanity, where delusions and hallucinations seem to intrude into reality.

In *The Leaf Sweeper*,¹⁶ Spark again presents an ambiguous account of madness where supernatural elements may play a part. The story also deals with the theme of the double, a theme which has been a recurring feature in Scottish literature since James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Spark knew Hogg's work well and was clearly influenced by him.

The Leaf Sweeper tells of Johnnie Geddes who has learnt to sweep leaves during the years he spent in an asylum. He keeps it up after his discharge and works for the town council. We learn that, 20 years before, he had founded the Society for the Abolition of Christmas. His book, *Abolish Christmas or We Die* set out to prove 'conclusively that Christmas is a national crime.' He becomes fanatical, gives up his job and all his prospects

to fight the cause. His second book is a failure and his girlfriend breaks off their engagement. He speaks at Hyde Park Corner, where he is 'taken up for insulting language'. The narrator tells us that 'a few months later I heard that poor Johnnie was in a mental home, because he had Christmas on the brain and couldn't stop shouting about it'.

Later the narrator sees Johnnie in the grounds of an asylum. He's shouting about Christmas. The narrator then calls at Johnnie's aunt's house and discovers that there is an alternative Johnnie in residence. He loves Christmas and is obsessed with it. He is said to be Johnnie's ghost and comes home every Christmas. As evidence of his ghostly qualities, it is noted he does not bleed when he cuts his finger.

Johnnie's ghost asks to spend Christmas with the narrator, who, instead, brings him to the asylum to meet Johnnie. He starts sweeping. The narrator recalls:

But it was still misty, and really, I can't say whether, when I looked a second time, there were two men or one man sweeping the leaves. Johnnie began to improve in the New Year. At least, he stopped shouting about Christmas, and then he never mentioned it at all; in a few months, when he had almost stopped saying anything, they discharged him. (p. 190)

The story suggests some sort of reconciliation between the two opposing sides of Johnnie. How do we interpret this? Are the two Johnnies really just different aspects of the same person? Or is the second Johnnie actually a ghost. In *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Hogg deliberately provides both a supposedly rational and a supernatural explanation of the divided character of Robert Wringhim. He leaves it to the reader to decide which interpretation to favour. Spark also leaves the ending of *The Leaf Sweeper* ambiguous, and there is the added complication of how much we can trust the narrator's account. Is the account reliable? The story is also equivocal in that we cannot be sure Johnnie has truly given up his ideas about Christmas or whether he has learned to keep quiet about them in order to get out of the asylum.

OTHER SHORT STORIES

In *Bang-Bang you're Dead*,¹⁷ madness is portrayed as an alcohol-fuelled crime of passion. David Carter has an affair with Sybil and proposes marriage. He feels that she alone understands his ambitions and his art. He is a poet, though a bad one. She rejects him and he demands she marry him, telling her it is 'your duty to me as a man and a poet'. He goes 'on the bottle' and Sybil's friend, Desiree observes: 'I think he's bats, myself.' David mopes and is 'miserable'. He shoots Desiree by mistake, thinking she is Sybil, and then he shoots himself. Another character,

Barry asks Sybil why he did it. She replies, 'He was mad'. 'Not all that mad,' Barry judges. Again we have an ambiguous verdict on a character's sanity.

In *Miss Pinkerton's Apocalypse*,¹⁸ alcohol may also play a part in the character's madness. Miss Pinkerton sees an antique saucer fly in the room. Her male friend, George also sees something but they disagree as to what it is. She claims to have seen a tiny pilot in the saucer. George says she is 'overwrought'. A reporter from the local newspaper interviews Miss Pinkerton and suggests she may have been subject to a 'hallucination'. Miss Pinkerton starts giggling and says they aren't used to drinking. It looks like the strange experience can all be explained by drink and the reporter goes away. However, at the end of the story, the narrator reveals that she believes it was a flying saucer as she, herself, has recently seen a saucer with a pilot. So the ending is ambiguous and the reader is left to ponder whether the story is about madness, alcoholic intoxication or real events. The title with its reference to 'apocalypse' hints at a biblical interpretation. Spark may also be alluding to Jung who was notoriously preoccupied with flying saucers.

In *Daisy Overend*,¹⁹ Tom Pfeffer, a poet, is 'saved from lunacy' by Daisy who prevents him 'being taken to a mental home for treatment'. However he is jealous of her relationship with another man. As evidence of this 'there were signs of the awful neurotic dance of his facial muscles which were later to distort him utterly before he died insane'. In *Christmas Fugue*,²⁰ a woman seems to have a romantic encounter with a pilot while flying home for Christmas. However, when she returns home and tries to contact her lover there is no evidence that he ever existed. Was it her imagination? Was she mad? In *The Portobello Road*,²¹ George murders a woman called Needle who comes back as a ghost to speak to him. He sees her in the Portobello Road but is considered mad when he tells people about it and he is put in a home. He escapes and confesses to the police but they declare him insane and return him to the home. The narrator observes: 'Dozens of poor mad fellows confess to every murder'. As in *The Dark Glasses*, confessions are not taken at face value, but instead are viewed as evidence of madness.

In *The Gentile Jewesses*,²² we have a stock representation of a madman. The narrator tells us: 'One day a madman came into my little grandmother's shop at Watford.' She goes on:

'I shall murder you,' said the madman, standing with legs straddled in the door frame, holding up his dark big hands as one about to pounce and strangle. His eyes stared from a face covered with tangled eyebrows and beard'. (p. 347)

However, the grandmother says to him that he'll be 'hung' and he shuffles away. The madman is not really

dangerous, and is there to illustrate the fearless character of the grandmother. In *Alice Long's Dachshunds*,²³ we encounter a madman who is violent. This is Hamilton, a handyman, who hangs five dogs and runs away. He's a drinker and we learn that 'He's a bit of a lunatic'.

Finally, in *The First Year of My Life*,²⁴ Spark has great fun inventing a psychological theory. The story starts by telling us of 'a new school of psychology...which after long and far-adventuring research and experiment has established that all the young of the human species are born omniscient'. The story relates the case of a baby that can tune into any conversation in the world. We are told: 'It is not a new theory. Poets and philosophers, as usual, have been there first'. Spark uses this conceit to comment on the madness of the world as seen through the eyes of a baby.

CONCLUSIONS

In these stories Spark adopts a variety of approaches to madness. She was certainly not trying to provide a textbook description of mental illness and it would be misguided to expect such. Rather she questions the nature of reality, often in a playful and amusing manner. But she is also aware of the spiritual dimension to human distress. For Spark this was fundamental to her existence and her work as an artist. She was concerned that the sacred was being forgotten or explained away by the rise of secular theorising. This, in part, accounts for her often hostile attitude to psychoanalysis, whose founder Sigmund Freud had portrayed religion as a manifestation of neurosis. She also felt that psychoanalysis

as well as psychiatry undermined notions of free will and individual responsibility: a person was held to be at the mercy of unconscious forces or delusions and could not be blamed for their actions. Spark was alive to some of the absurdities of psychoanalytic thinking and enjoyed parodying and exposing it. It might have been thought, given that psychiatric medication had helped her, she would have been more favourably disposed towards it but she was, at best, ambivalent about its benefits.

As we have seen, Spark does not provide neat resolutions to her stories. In part, she did this for artistic reasons: she wanted to produce work that was subtle, complex and which made the reader ponder. However, she also thought that human beings are, ultimately, not fully understandable: there is an essential mystery to them. As Goldie²⁵ has observed of Spark: 'One of the principal questions asked of her work – related to the philosophical 'problem of other minds'...concerns how much we can ever truly know what is going on in other lives'. For Spark, psychological theories were guilty of arrogance in maintaining that they possessed the answer to the riddle of human nature when, in her opinion, only God knows.

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