Michael Giffin

Spark on Evil

Literature

What is Evil?

Is evil anything that oughtn't to exist but persistently does? Is it a disembodied force, or an aspect of being human, or both? How do we locate it within the current global financial crisis? Does everyone within the human economy, as opposed to the divine economy, participate in what Hannah Arendt calls the banality of evil, by which she means not the will to do evil but the evil that occurs through an unawareness of self and other?

Arendt was thinking specifically of Adolf Eichmann in his bureaucratic role as chief architect and head executioner of the Shoah. During his trial, Eichmann seemed harmless to Arendt, exhibiting no character trait that accounted for the unspeakable evil of his actions. She concluded that he operated without any negative thoughts or feelings towards Jews; he simply followed orders and carried them out efficiently. Is each of us an Eichmann in one way or another, oblivious to the banality of our evil? Is such a proposition more probable the more we deny it? Is there potential for evil in our every transaction, verbal or non-verbal, social or economic, no matter how innocent or ordinary it seems, or how well it's disguised as something else: even as good? What forms does evil take, from sin to suffering, from gossip to genocide, from physical to metaphysical, from real to surreal; indeed, are these last two dichotomies true or is the distinction between them false? Can any metaphor adequately describe the metonymy of evil?

It's been said that no author of the twentieth century was more aware of the many forms evil takes than Muriel Spark. This awareness had something to do with her religious conversion, partly inspired by the church's teaching of the unity of spirit and matter, which also gave her a particular perspective of what the morally responsible author should do about evil. She rebelled against the literature of sentiment that, however beautiful in itself, however striking in its depiction of actuality, cheats the reader into a sense of social involvement but is in fact a segregated and segregating activity. She wanted to see

> a less impulsive generosity … a more derisive undermining of what is wrong … less emotion and more intelligence in these efforts to impress our minds and hearts.

Because she believed the victim–oppressor complex of socially conscious literature had become cliché and ineffective, she advocated satire and ridicule in its place as "the only honourable weapon we have left".

Most importantly, Spark wanted her writing to give pleasure; perhaps believing that, when it comes to fiction conveying a moral message, an inductive approach is more influential than a deductive one. She used satire and ridicule to great effect when portraying the banality of our evil. In her well-known *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), evil takes comic-tragic form through a schoolteacher who attempts to mould the identities of her students. In her lesser known *The Only Problem* (1984), contemporary evil of biblical proportions is visited upon the protagonist, in a re-working of the Book of Job, a story in which God permits evil as a way of testing human endurance and faith.

This article gives an overview of Spark's expositions of evil in three brilliant, short and immensely funny novels from her prime: *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974) and *The Takeover* (1976). In each novel, all that's metacritical is rendered hypocritical, in Spark's humorous but serious way, as she reminds us that evil is one of the Janus faces of our thoughts, words and deeds. I apologise in advance, though, since Spark's satirical genius can't be conveyed in a précis of each novel's ideas. I hope readers will be inspired to read the novels for themselves, as each is a virtuoso performance.

The Hothouse by the East River

During the twentieth century, psychoanalysis tried to understand and cure evil in the mind. Was it successful, though, or in its attempt to systematise the mind, into ego and id, or conscious and unconscious, did psychoanalysis ignore evils outside the mind, among people, in the local and national and international community? What of the archetypes that psychoanalysis inherited from Greek mythology and Hebrew scripture? Are they true or false, or can they be both? These are questions Spark explores in *The Hothouse by the East River*, a novel that moves between her characters' mortal lives in England during 1944 and their immortal lives in Manhattan in the early 1970s.

The mortal strand of the novel occurs in rural England in the months before D-Day, in an intelligence compound engaged in black propaganda and psychological warfare; what Spark describes as "the propagation of the Allied point of view under the guise of the German point of view", which involves a "tangled mixture" of damaging lies, flattering, and plausible truths. Spark is qualified to write about life in such a compound, having been an intelligence officer in one herself. In fact, her autobiography says she was hired by Sefton Delmer, author of *Black Boomerang* (1962), and notes that his account of the Allies' black propaganda and psychological warfare is "well worth reading"; an understated way of saying Delmer's book helps us understand the literary style of *The Hothouse by the East River* and many of her other novels. The compound's inhabitants are English intelligence officers and German prisoners of war who chose to "leave their camps and work for their enemy". The central on-stage characters are Paul and Elsa, both intelligence officers; the central off-stage character is Kiel, a German prisoner with an eponymous name, an anagram of *like*, who might be involved in a bisexual eternal triangle with Paul and Elsa. The truth about the off-stage Kiel, and his relationship with Paul and Elsa, is a mystery. Who is Kiel? What is he like? Does he represent disembodied evil or simply mirror human evil? Spark is ambiguous here.

Paul is twenty-eight. Although now British, he was born into impoverished nobility in Montenegro. His knowledge of Serbo-Croat affairs means that, when not at the compound, he's an aide on trans-Atlantic trips whenever the Balkan situation is to be discussed. Elsa is twenty-three. When walking about the countryside with German prisoners, she's fond of sharing stories about her family life in Kent, and about her education at boarding school. She refuses to share a room at the compound, something all women under thirty are expected to do, explaining that it "wouldn't be comfortable for the other girl" since she sees things, is uncanny, and has supernatural communications. A senior officer tells Elsa she's out of her element at the compound and doesn't understand the value of what's being accomplished there. She's even declared the compound to be ridiculous. All of this suggests Elsa is a security risk. Kiel arrives a few weeks before Paul. They have a fight in a field behind the compound, which starts with a trivial argument over their work but is really about Elsa.

Kiel is a double agent who arranged to have himself taken prisoner before getting a job with the intelligence compound on the pretext of being anti-Nazi. Elsa, already seen as a security risk, gets herself into difficulty and is suspected of having an affair with Kiel. Paul gets her out of that difficulty. But after Kiel has been broadcasting for their compound for six months, he picks a fight with another man and gets himself sent back to his prison camp. Three days later Kiel goes on air, in a prisoner exchange-of-greeting program, and sends a coded message that betrays the compound's identity. This results in a major breach of security. Paul and Elsa are investigated but as they close ranks and tough out the investigation it leads nowhere.

There are other intelligence officers at the compound: Poppy Xavier, Miles Bunting and Colonel Tylden. Each contributes to the ambiguity Spark creates around the relationship between the on-stage Paul and Elsa and the off-stage Kiel. In the final chapter, at the end of the mortal strand, we learn that in the late spring of 1944, not long before D-Day, all the intelligence officers are attending a conference of other intelligence units and are staying at the same hotel in London. Given their friendly off-duty alliance, "which disappears when they are back in the country, hemmed in with their German collaborators", the reader occasionally wonders whether the eternal triangle may be a quadrangle, or a pentangle, or more. How culpable are these intelligence officers, wittingly or unwittingly? Does each of them represent the banality of evil? Spark is ambiguous here as well.

The immortal strand of the novel occurs in Manhattan. After the war, Paul and Elsa marry, migrate to the United States, and have two children. Pierre, their son, is gay, avant-garde, and unable to empathise with Paul's anxious memories about the war and Kiel. "What does it matter?" Pierre says to his father. "There isn't any war or peace anymore, no good and evil, no communism, no capitalism, no fascism. There's only one area of conflict left and that's between absurdity and intelligence." Katerina, their daughter, is promiscuous and takes drugs. As adults, both children live independently of their parents but remain financially dependent on them, especially on Elsa who has inexplicably become immensely wealthy.

Elsa spends most of her days in their old overheated apartment gazing out a picture window that frames her view of the East River and the United Nations. She sees

things no one else can see. Her shadow falls at unnatural angles in relation to her body because, in Paul's words, she "gets light or something from elsewhere"; in this way the uncanniness of her youth is elevated to a higher plane. Paul is busy pathologising Elsa, and tries to manage her as a problem, as if his life depends on it; in this way the jealousy of his youth is also elevated to a higher plane.

In Manhattan, Paul and Elsa have become metaphysical extensions of the man and woman who were two points of the eternal triangle in England during the war. They've become Greek archetypes: Paul is classical and represents, among other things, the masculine, the ego, the conscious mind, rationality, light, order, the Apollonian; Elsa is pre-classical and represents, among other things, the feminine, the id, the unconscious mind, irrationality, darkness, chaos, the Dionysian.

Are these archetypes real or imaginary? Are the dichotomies they represent true or false, or both? Spark isn't sure but acknowledges the normative role they've played in the Western imagination, as idea and as art. These archetypes appear as central characters here and in several of Spark's other novels beginning with *Robinson* (1958). The third point of that triangle, Kiel, a Hebrew archetype for Satan, still figures in their lives in an off-stage way. Paul imagines his life is threatened by Kiel. Elsa can't make up her mind whether Kiel is really in Manhattan, but even if he is she doesn't feel threatened by him.

Paul and Elsa's overheated apartment is hell; and, according to Western iconography, hell is both a place of eternal punishment for the wicked after death, and the forces of evil that reside there. So, given this archetypal framework, what's hellish about Manhattan in the early 1970s, what's evil about the archetypes that inhabit the hothouse by the East River, what did Paul and Elsa do in those months before D-Day to earn this damnation, and, in this surreal part of the novel, who is Kiel and what is he like? The reader is never sure, since Spark is a master at disguising her moral among the satire and ridicule of her fable. But there definitely is a moral.

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As two halves of one whole, like Waldo and Arthur in *The Solid Mandala*, Paul and Elsa can't live without each other, just as *logos* can't live without *mythos*, but their antithetical relationship is difficult. As *logos*, Paul's existence seems to depend on coping with the "problem" of Elsa, while Elsa gets on with the uncanny mystery of her own existence, and humouring or eluding Paul as much as she can within the limits of her *mythos*. Paul's fear of Elsa is archetypal; it's the Greek fear of the irrational; greatly written about over the millennia; often translated into paradigms, theories and policies; much interrogated in philosophy and literature. The classical Paul once had the pre-classical Elsa committed to an asylum but she bought her way out. He would have her committed again, if their son, Pierre, didn't insist on psychotherapy as a conscience-salving alternative.

Sending up psychoanalysis is a favourite theme of Spark's. Elsa's relationship with her psychoanalyst, Garven, is a hilarious example of that. The more Garven analyses Elsa the more elusive and paradoxical she becomes, and she reminds him that he may have a problem rather than her. Eventually Garven moves in with Paul and Elsa and becomes their butler. When Elsa's behaviour becomes too distracting for Paul, and too exasperating for Garven, they conspire to have her committed for observation. Elsa will have none of this. It's eventually revealed that Paul is also seeing a psychoanalyst, Annie, who eventually forms a partnership with Garven so the two of them can try to understand both Elsa and Paul. Elsa sends up this partnership: "They will have to come to an agreement," she says. "Fifty-fifty on the proceeds of my shadow."

At the end of the novel, we learn that back in 1944, not long before D-Day, the conference in London is over and the intelligence officers are all boarding the same train to return to their compound. As the train pulls out of the station, a V-2 bomb makes a direct hit and they are demolished. So, in the Manhattan of the 1970s, the Greek archetypes representing the ego–conscious and id–unconscious, Paul and Elsa, aren't physically real even though they're metaphysically surreal. As far as Spark is concerned, psychoanalysing them has become a local preoccupation:

> New York, home of the vivisectors of the mind, and of the mentally vivisected still to be reassembled, of those who live intact, habitually wondering about their states of sanity, and home of those whose minds have been dead, bearing the scars of resurrection.

Outside the consultant's office, though, a different city is "heaving" with myriad problems, social and economic and moral, which psychoanalysis ignores.

Spark wants us to notice these myriad problems without ignoring those influential archetypes living in their contemporary hell. At the end of the novel, after spending all night out on the town, Paul and Elsa return home to find their old apartment building torn down to make way for a more modern or postmodern structure. "Now we can have some peace," says Elsa. But that's not true. Poppy Xavier, Miles Bunting, Colonel Tylden,

and Kiel too, are waiting for them nearby in a Rolls Royce. "Come Elsa," Paul says, "we can go back with them", wherever back may be. He follows her, "watching as she moves how she trails her faithful and lithe cloud of unknowing across the pavement", towards the Rolls that drives them to their next hellish residence.

The Abbess of Crewe

During the twentieth century, Vatican II was called with the goal of renewing the life of the church, bringing its teaching, discipline and organisation up to date, and unifying Christians. We're only just beginning to understand and appreciate the ways in which Vatican II has been successful. However, did those who negotiated and promoted Vatican II underestimate the potential for evil among the process of renewal? This is a question Spark explores in *The Abbess of Crewe*, a novel set in a fictitious Benedictine abbey, which uses the Watergate scandal as a scenario to satirise the struggle between conservatism and liberalism during a period of ecclesiological change. The struggle focuses on the election of a new abbess and the direction the successful candidate will take the order. To highlight their equal potential for evil, Spark caricatures conservatism and liberalism by making them much more extreme than they would ever be in a real religious order.

The forces of conservatism revolve around Sister Alexandra and a trio of nuns committed to her election: Mildred, Walburga and the dim but serviceable Winifrede. Narcissistic, materialistic and self-entitled, Alexandra represents a kind of *ancien régime*, with twenty-four generations of ruling ancestors in England and France behind her. She's fond of Sextus Propertius and, during daily offices, instead of the Psalter, she prefers to recite English poetry quietly to herself: Marvell, Milton, King, Pope, Yeats, Hopkins, Pound and Auden. She follows the political philosophy of Machiavelli's *The Discourses* and *The Art of War*.

If elected, Alexandra intends to ignore the latest ecclesiological reforms, return the order to an ancient and rigid rule, re-invent a system of double monastery with the Jesuits, and use Cistercians as discreet domestic servants. She knows it's absurd in modern times to reinstate the seven canonical hours, but she believes modernism exists in a historical context; and, as far as she's concerned, history doesn't work. She wants the abbey to discard history and enter the sphere of mythology. She assumes every nun in the abbey yearns to be part of a myth, whatever the price in comfort. She feels this mission is her destiny and she uses the language of predestination, including the Felix Culpa, to justify that destiny.

The forces of liberalism revolve around Sister Felicity and any impressionable nuns and novices influenced by her. Felicity's lineage is as noble as Alexandra's but she shows no trace of that lineage and her function in the novel is to represent a bourgeois threat to Alexandra's old order. She knows the Psalter by heart, and can chant it without the aid of an office book, but otherwise she's ignorant of the high culture Alexandra represents. She believes the abbey, being too prosperous and materialistic, should follow the teachings of Francis of Assisi, a saint who understood total dispossession and love, but her liberal vision is a perversion of Francis's radical vocation. If elected abbess she would turn the abbey into a love-nest in the heart of England. She leaves the abbey every night to copulate with her lover, Thomas the Jesuit. The reader is left in no doubt, if Felicity is elected, chastity will be abolished and the entire rationale for the religious life will be abolished with it.

Spark presents this stark choice between Felicity's pure libertarianism and Alexandra's pure determinism, but she sends them both up, since the dichotomy between them may be false even if the evil they each mask is certainly true. Felicity could well usher in a period of chaos, a kind of reign of terror, once Alexandra's newer version of the *ancien régime*, which masks its own hypocrisy and moral corruption, is prevented from materialising. In exploring this dilemma, between freedom and necessity, Spark is covering similar ground as other philosophers and authors of her generation, such as Iris Murdoch. It's a well-trodden path that once defined what was or wasn't literary.

There's another nun protagonist apart from Alexandra and Felicity, who remains off-stage. Sister Gertrude, a German nun, is a kind of Secretary of State for the abbey, a satire of Henry Kissinger, a member of Nixon's administration who emerged unscathed from the Watergate scandal. Gertrude is always overseas, studiously refusing to be drawn into the abbey's politics, contactable only by secure green phone, while conducting a broad variety of missionary negotiations: in the Congo, reconciling witch doctors' rituals with a specially adapted rite of the mass; in the Andes, converting cannibals with dietary concessions and suppressing the zeal of vegetarian heretics; in the Himalayas, preaching birth control. Alexandra defers to Gertrude, probably because of her popularity and gravitas, while finding the Teutonic logic of her *realpolitik* suspect. For her part, Gertrude is a master of not hearing what she shouldn't hear, pushing ecumenical boundaries, and surviving.

An extraordinary amount happens in this novel of scarcely 35,000 words. The narrative weaves back and forth, from the three-week period before the new abbess's election, to the two-year period after the election. Alexandra's agenda is to fulfil her destiny by winning the election. The polls favour her but she's taking

no chances. She arranges surveillance, for the abbey to be bugged, aurally and visually, while appearing to distance herself from the surveillance. She summons two senior Jesuits to a secret conference with Mildred and Walburga, instructs them to do something about the affair between Felicity and Thomas, and to leave her out of it. They arrange for two Jesuit novices to break into the abbey one night to steal Felicity's love letters, hidden in a secret drawer at the bottom of her work-box. But Felicity discovers the intruders, locks them in the embroidery room, and calls the police. No charges are laid, though, as Alexandra convinces the authorities that this is an internal church matter. The Jesuit novices are expelled from their order, Alexandra goes on to win the election, and Felicity flees the abbey "to join her Jesuit lover and to tell her familiar story to the entranced world".

From that point onwards, the eyes of the Vatican, and the media on both sides of the Atlantic, are on the abbey. Felicity becomes a perpetual media event, attacking Alexandra from outside the abbey and lobbying for a police investigation. But there's no evidence, and the police would prefer the affair remained within the church. None of this deters Alexandra from implementing her austere reforms while simultaneously renovating her apartments in a lavish style. She feeds her nuns tinned dog and cat food while her inner circle dines on pâté and fine wine. She increases audio and video surveillance, bugging every room and hallway, the trees in the garden, everywhere except the chapel and the confessional. In her office there's a two-foot-high Infant of Prague, which conceals the abbey's central transmitter:

> The infant is adorned with its traditional robes, the episcopal crown and vestments embedded with such large and so many rich and gleaming jewels it would seem they could not possibly be real. However, they are real.

Alexandra used the nuns' dowries to purchase the jewels.

Alexandra isn't worried about the publicity. "The more scandal there is from this point on the better," she tells Mildred and Walburga:

> We are truly moving in a mythological context. We are the actors; the press and the public are the chorus. Every columnist has his own version of the same old story, as it were Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides, only of course, let me tell you, of a far inferior dramatic style … the facts of the matter are with us no longer, but we have returned them to God who gave them … let Felicity tell it like it was as she may. You cannot bring a charge against Agamemnon or subpoena Clytemnestra, can you?

Like Richard Nixon, her contemporary among the elect and the elected, Alexandra is out of touch with reality. She behaves as if she's unaccountable. She's wholly within the world and yet beyond the world; she acts like a god, looking at what she's created and declaring it to be good.

Meanwhile, the expelled Jesuit novices have started blackmailing Alexandra, who's now forced to sell the jewels adorning the Infant of Prague, one by one, to prevent them from telling their story. Winifrede, the dim but serviceable go-between, eventually gets caught, dressed as a man, in a gentlemen's lavatory at the British Museum, hugging a plastic bag packed with thousands of pounds. She's released without charge, on Alexandra's assurances that this internal church matter is being intensively investigated.

The headlines on both sides of the Atlantic finally force the church hierarchy to act. Alexandra is delated to Rome to face possible excommunication. Unfazed, she allows edited versions of the surveillance tapes to be released. She takes confessions with her to Rome, extracted from every nun in the convent. These confessions, though, are simply printed and signed copies of the confiteor from the mass, through which every penitent, including the Pope, acknowledges a personal fault that's also universal.

The novel's final scene is of Alexandra sailing to Rome, unperturbed, standing on an upper deck: "straight as a white ship's funnel, marvelling how the wide sea billows from shore to shore like that cornfield of sublimity which never should be reaped nor was ever sown, orient and immortal wheat". Here Spark reminds us of the parable of the wheat and the tares. The sun shines on both of them, which means God allows good and evil to grow together. It's not up to humanity to winnow them, just to recognise them. They should be left to God, who will separate them on the last day.

The Takeover

DURING THE TWENTIETH century the term "paradigm shift" was first used to describe a change in the assumptions (or paradigm) that underpinned the ruling theory of science. Since then the term has been widely used beyond science and is now a cliché that applies more broadly to any change from one way of thinking to another. Modernism, an ideological and aesthetic movement that attempted to diverge from classical metaphysics, is one example of paradigm shift. One of the diverging concerns in some strands of modernism was the restoration of a pre-classical vision or power (*mythos*) that classical metaphysics (*logos*) is supposed to have either suppressed or erased.

Did those who advocated modernism, both within

and without the church, lose sight of the fact that evil continues regardless of any paradigm shift away from classical metaphysics? This is a question Spark explores in *The Takeover*, a novel set within the panorama of Lake Nemi: "the scene which had stirred the imagination of Sir James Frazer at the beginning of his massive testament to comparative religion, *The Golden Bough*", a book which proposed that human belief evolved or progressed through three stages: first magic, then religion, then science. If Nemi stirred Frazer's imagination to search for what Casaubon was also searching for in *Middlemarch*, the key to all mythologies, Spark is doing her own stirring of a different kind here.

The novel is about the evils of neo-paganism in the 1970s. The story revolves around Maggie and Hubert, two characters through which Spark satirises Frazer's theory of evolutionary progress, for much the same reason she satirises psychotherapy through Elsa and Paul. The symbiotic love–hate relationship between the archetypes Maggie and Hubert represent is distracting the West from something far more serious: the "complete mutation" in the meaning of property and money occurring at the time. Spark suggests the mutation is: "not merely to be defined as a collapse of the capitalist system, or a global recession, but such a sea-change in the nature of reality as could not have been envisaged by Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud". This sober observation is conveyed within the rich and comic plot of Spark's subversive satire. Given the current global financial crisis, that satire of paradigm shift is as relevant today as it was when the novel was first published.

The beautiful and elegant Maggie, an American, is the contemporary reworking of a literary archetype; its pre-classical status often represented by red hair and an association with the feminine, the id, the unconscious mind, irrationality, darkness, chaos, the Dionysian. This archetype owes something to *The Golden Bough* but it existed before Frazer and appears in a variety of positive and negative ways in nineteenth-century iconography: for example, in the idealised women of the Pre-Raphaelites, and the pathologised women of the Victorian novel such as Estella's natural mother in *Great Expectations*.

In the twentieth century it was a sort of literary apprenticeship for the aspiring author to consider what this archetype represents and to explore the limits of its power; they used it in similar ways but arrived at different positions on the relationship between imagination and reality, *logos* and *mythos*, and freedom and necessity. Spark had been using the archetype since *Robinson*; for a good example of how Iris Murdoch used it, read *The Bell*; Patrick White used it in several novels, pre-eminently so in *The Solid Mandala*, where the archetype is a male, Arthur; even Margaret Atwood used it in *Alias Grace*, although her heroine in that novel was a historical person, Grace Marks.

The handsome and sophisticated Hubert, a Briton, is the contemporary reworking of an opposite literary archetype; its classical status often represented by its attitude towards women and an association with the masculine, the ego, the conscious mind, rationality, light, order, the Apollonian. Again, this archetype owes something to *The Golden Bough*, but it also existed before Frazer and appears in a variety of positive and negative ways in nineteenth-century iconography: for example, in the misogynistic lawyer Jaggers, who dominates and controls Estella's natural mother in *Great Expectations*. The archetype doesn't always fear or hate women, though, as Spark noted eighteen years earlier in *Robinson*:

> There is easily discernible in some men a certain indifference, not to women precisely but to the feminine element in women, which might be interpreted in a number of ways. In Robinson I had detected something more than indifference: a kind of armed neutrality.

In Hubert's case his homosexuality is more than a sexual preference for men. It's a metaphor for the classicism that's ironically dependent on Maggie's pre-classicism; they're two sides of the same Greek coin. But now Maggie wants Hubert out of her life, and his subversion of her every attempt to get rid of him is the basis of Spark's satire of the paradigm shift that had been occurring, in many ideological and aesthetic ways, since neoclassicism morphed into romanticism, which in turn morphed into modernism and postmodernism. For Spark, it's useless to take sides in the struggle between Maggie and Hubert, since they're immortal as well as immoral and the forces of evil can use either of them to advantage.

Maggie has become immensely wealthy from previous husbands; she belongs to an international set of the incredibly rich that treats the world as their playground. Her current husband, Berto, is an Italian nobleman, with a famous Palladian villa, who's romantic and chivalrous towards her. During a previous marriage, before she became a Marchesa, Maggie fell under the influence of Hubert, who believes he's directly descended from the goddess Diana. Hubert convinced Maggie to buy land around Lake Nemi, one of Diana's sanctuaries, and build a house for him with pre-eminent views of the lake.

For the first half of the novel, Maggie is obsessed with moving Hubert out of this house, and out of her life. She's ambivalent, though; she wants to protect him as much as destroy him; her attempts to get rid of him are half-hearted; and in the second half of the novel

more urgent socio-economic realities overtake her, once she places her financial affairs in the hands of a swindler who produces a "global" plan for her financial affairs: "so intricate that it might have been devised primordially by the angels as a mathematical blueprint to guide God in the creation of the world". The plan is unfathomable and mysterious, because it uses "the new crisis-terminology introduce by the current famous American Secretary of State", Henry Kissinger.

Under this unfathomable and mysterious plan: "money of Maggie's sort was able to take lightning trips around the world without ever packing its bags or booking a seat on a plane", from "Switzerland to the Dutch Antilles and the Bahamas, from the distilleries of Canada through New York to the chain-storedom of California, and from the military bases of Greenland's icy mountains to the hotel business of India's coral strand" before it ultimately disappears without trace. Spark's point is that, because Maggie's money is stolen during the financial crisis of the mid-1970s, she's forced to attend to other realities than Hubert, and in the process of trying to recover her money, she draws upon an indestructible archetypal power she didn't know she had. In the meantime, Hubert is busy arranging a replacement for Maggie in his life: a lucrative neo-pagan religion, devoted to the worship of his ancestress Diana, with himself at its head. While this central theme of the novel unfolds—how the paradigmatic relationship between pre-classical Maggie and classical Hubert distracts the world from more urgent social and economic realities—Spark weaves three supporting themes into her rich and comic plot, accomplishing an extraordinary amount in scarcely 70,000 words.

If Nemi stirred Frazer's imagination to search for what Casaubon was also searching for in "Middlemarch", the key to all mythologies, Spark is doing her own stirring of a different kind here.

First, the novel is full of masters and servants whose relationships mirror, in a systematic way, Hegel's theory of a master–servant dialectic in the development of consciousness. It isn't over-reading to notice this, since interrogating the dialectic was part of the literary apprenticeship and the psychology of consciousness was a major theme in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel. Hubert's servants were once young men, or "secretaries", the original meaning of which was "one who keeps secrets". They massaged his ego as well as his body, maintained his curia, and protected his paradigm. But they left Hubert once Maggie started evicting him, and were replaced by Pauline, a young Catholic woman, who's the antithesis of everything Hubert is attracted to. Worst of all, because Pauline is a loose cannon who can't be counted on to keep Hubert's secrets, he's forced to use his wits to protect his paradigm.

While that comic theme is unfolding, one of Hubert's former "secretaries", Lauro, becomes a servant in Maggie's household, where he wields immense power because he knows that household's secrets, and copulates with Maggie and most of her family regardless of their sex. Hubert's household is pagan and homosexual in the classical sense, and he struggles to remain master of his new female servant. Maggie's household is pagan and bisexual in the pre-classical sense, and she struggles to remain master of her new male servant.

Second, the novel explores the issue of title and entitlement, particularly to land. The American Maggie buys acreage above Lake Nemi, builds a new house for the British Hubert, with its views of the lake, and restores two other houses nearby; one is for her American son and daughter-in-law, Michael and Mary; another is rented by a wealthy Italian businessman, Emilio, whose daughter Letizia resents foreign ownership without realising that it suits her father to rent from a foreign landlord. But who really owns this land? During the lengthy and comically fraught eviction process, a lawyer engaged by Maggie, who eventually acts for Hubert instead, discovers that Maggie bought the land from a fake lawyer who told her it was church land, now on the market, and issued her with fake title deeds. So Maggie doesn't really own the land and the house she built for Hubert is *abusivo*, which means it doesn't really exist under Italian law. For at least five generations, the acreage above Lake Nemi has belonged to an Italian family, some of whom live overseas among the diaspora, and the irony is that Lauro, Maggie's servant, is about to marry into this family. Once he does, Lauro will have more claim to the land than either Maggie or Hubert.

Third, the novel sends up the way in which the church was caught up in paradigm shift, through two pesky American Jesuits, as well as Pauline. Fathers Cuthbert and Gerard, who function on the level of gossip rather than academic rigour, are in Lake Nemi studying ecological paganism, including the paganism that was absorbed into, and remains within, the legends and beliefs of local Christians. First they try to insinuate themselves with Hubert and his classical paradigm, but when he brushes them off, as politely as he can, they try to insinuate themselves with Maggie and her pre-classical paradigm. Finally, they return to Hubert's classical paradigm, once his new religion becomes

popular among the locals. Cuthbert and Gerard start attending Hubert's services; they give out charismatic smiles in all directions; they wink at and whisper to and nudge each other; they become ecstatic whenever they see syncretic possibilities between Hubert's religion and theirs. Cuthbert occasionally becomes so excited he jumps up and down in his seat.

At the end of the novel, Hubert has transferred or sold all the possessions Maggie left in his care and is preparing to leave Nemi for Rome. Maggie is preparing to move into the empty house she built for Hubert, which doesn't legally exist, on land she doesn't legally own. On his last night in Nemi, Hubert takes a walk in the forest, towards the ruins of Diana's temple, under a moon three-quarters full and almost on the wane. He meets Maggie in the forest, disguised as an old gipsy or hag or crone, which is the disguise she used to recover her fortune. They resume friendly relations, for a brief while, before going their separate ways. Maggie explains how she's recovered her fortune by kidnapping the man who stole it and blackmailing his family. Hubert asks her whether the man can be trusted not to report her. Maggie points out that the man can't indict her, since he's too indictable himself. Her final words to him are: "There are times when one can trust a crook." His final words to her are: "There's something in that."

The Idea and Art of Evil

I hope this article summarises how Spark presents evil, physical and metaphysical, in three novels that, although written in the 1970s, are still relevant today and ought to be widely read. Few authors are capable of weaving together so many complex layers with such astonishing literary economy.

It remains to be seen whether Spark is justified in believing the victim–oppressor complex depicted in socially conscious literature has become cliché and ineffective, and in advocating satire and ridicule as "the only honourable weapon we have left". It seems more certain Spark has been justified in exploring the creative potential of female evil, in both the real and surreal spheres, as an equal counterpart of male evil: in psychoanalysis and what it ignores, in the struggle for ecclesiological change, and in the folly of paradigm shift.

Ultimately, though, where is evil among her satire and ridicule? Is it in the sum of each novel as a whole, or in each transaction within it? Are Paul and Elsa, Alexandra and Felicity, and Hubert and Maggie, still among us, or within us? Is the comic-tragic banality of evil Spark represents, inductively rather than deductively, so deceptive that it's likely to be overlooked by a world, and by a church, that can't recognise it?

Paradox

Rain and dark roads brew a black-tea storm:
Waiting—waiting—you do not arrive—
My teacup-storm erupts—your phone unanswered—
Full-scale panic—flashing lights—
Tight-faced doctor—"he was in no pain"—
And always waiting; how can silence
Be so loud? How can absence be so busy?
Nurses rush, police make notes, priest rolls up stole,
And like the cyclone's Cyclops eye I stand stock still:
An open grave flies past me, and then what?

Then you arrived; you'd stopped to buy a cake.
Relief is such a transient thing. Then anger roars:
"How dare you survive, when I have grieved for you!"

Philippa Martyr