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Exploratory Theatrics

Muriel Spark's Treatment of a Woman's Absurd in *The Driver's Seat*, *Memento Mori*, and "The Portobello Road"

A Thesis in English

by

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Today, when death and old age are increasingly concealed behind euphemisms and comforting baby talk, and life is threatened with being smothered in the mass consumption of hypnotic mechanized vulgarity, the need to confront man with the reality of his situation is greater than ever for the dignity of man lies and his ability to face reality and all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions — and to laugh at it. (Esslin 419)

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I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (Sisyphus 123*)*

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'Leave me alone! It doesn't matter. What does it matter?' Half an hour later they said, 'You need a good holiday, Lise. You need your vacation.' 'I'm going to have it,' she said, 'I'm going to have the time of my life'. (*The Driver's Seat* 7)

Kusama, Yayoi. *Kusama in a Foreign Country*.

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Part I: Establishing the Grounds for a Woman's Absurd

Absurdism through Whose Eyes?

The absurd in literature and in theater is generally thought to have arisen from post-war anomie among a small 'school' of authors and playwrights in Europe and the United States during the mid-twentieth century. Largely considered a feat of drama, absurdism took precedence in the 1950s and 1960s, with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* thought to be the foremost emergent piece. As people were reckoning with a lost generation and the mass destruction of what many of them knew to be home, the absurd rose to prominence as a way of reconciling existential suffering and a desire for relief with a profoundly felt sense that life is essentially meaningless. The absurd in theater — and later, in literature — was met with critical acclaim and it's clear that the cultural moment of post-war devastation facilitated its success.

I argue that the current cultural moment also could be fertile ground for absurdist literature given the extreme proliferation of global stressors such as the rapid progression of technological advance, climate change, war and famine, and the most recent, a pandemic. However, before clinging to the absurd as a means of alleviating or even understanding suffering in the way that the prior generation did, the critical understanding and cultural reach of the absurd must be reestablished and refined to adapt to the vast differences that exist between the present day and the way of living during the mid-century. One way of linking the traditional absurd, though, with a neo-absurdism that adjusts for the rapidly changing socio-historical landscape is through looking at other authors who were not considered absurdist, and who were writing radical texts at the peak of absurdism. Texts that not only align with the absurd, but which clarify and sharpen a reader's comprehension of what the moment was trying to accomplish.

Muriel Spark is one such author. Spark was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1918 and died in 2006. She wrote her first book, *The Comforters*, in 1957, and she is one of a handful of transatlantic women writing in the post-war mode on post-war sentiments. I argue that there is a gap in our understanding of the absurd that is both genre- and gender-specific. That is, absurdism has historically been stringently considered as pertaining only to stage productions, a train of thought which is a direct impediment to understanding the project of the absurd as something radical and non-normative.[1] A more pressing issue, though, is that to my knowledge and according to my research, not one woman has ever been widely acknowledged as part of the absurdist movement. This is a huge failure of literary criticism of the period. This thesis aims to present a reformation of absurdism wherein women's voices matter and women's issues are represented. The goal is to destabilize what one might expect they understand about the absurd through the lens of this reformation, while using concrete, grounding texts that produce a, contrarily, sometimes stabilizing and clarifying effect. While analyzing the gap in the literature and the missteps of the moment, I aim to provide commentary on the pervasive and continuing relevance of absurdism in today's world. To do this, I first establish what the absurd is, what it is considered, and what its cultural significance has been. I then delineate the ways in which Spark fulfills these specifications, thus making her a writer of the absurd. More than this, though, Spark is a writer of a woman's absurd: she writes about the woman's condition as opposed to the proverbial human condition, and as such, her writing decentralizes the male-centric voice of the traditional absurd and ultimately creates something that is far more complex.

[1] Indeed, we may think of the modernist and postmodernist avant-garde movements as subcultural, but the absurd was spearheaded by some of the most influential and revered thinkers of the period.

Absurdism has all but been left alone in the vein of literary criticism for a long time, in large part because it was en vogue for such a short period, but it was not relinquished entirely without a cultural clinging to some classics such as Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* or *L'Etranger*, or Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis.* These texts are important for a reason and provide a cultural backdrop for a still relatively new, post-war world and way of evincing this new world through literature. Muriel Spark provides a powerful starting point for thinking about women writers of the period who wrote in the absurdist mode and can perhaps prompt us to think about why women were left out of the conversation and what a woman's absurd may cultivate that a traditional absurd cannot.

Spark is not the only woman of the period who deserves recognition, there is Angela Carter, Marguerite Duras, and Lorraine Hansberry to name just a few, each of whom are assuaging and replacing what is typically thought of as absurdist and expanding its scope in order to give voice(s) to the experience(s) of women.[2] In Spark's novels, we see many resonances of the absurd and, as a force to be reckoned with — even at that point in history when women's voices carried less weight — she provides the ideal character study for determining some of the potential reasons even renowned women writers have been disregarded in the genre of the absurd, and what their texts bring to the conversation.

[2] It must be said, of course, that not all women experience social stratification, and therefore "women's issues" in the same way. There are many intersections of identity that result in varying levels of subjugation and disregard, which this thesis aims not to ignore. To acknowledge the dissonance and disparity of varying degrees of women's oppression, I must acknowledge my own position as a European white woman with a lack of experience that allows me to speak adequately to the experiences of other women, instead I urge you to read these women writers and draw your own conclusions.

Spark has a vast portfolio of twenty-two novels, as well as an autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, a large collection of short stories,[3] seventy-three poems, as well as a substantive volume of essays spanning a wide-arching spectrum of subject matter, and multiple biographies of her contemporaries and predecessors. By using a selection of her texts, this discussion will explore themes that resemble those of traditional absurdist literature, but which rightfully build upon preexisting notions of the absurd to present something more elaborate and robust than the typical way one construes what 'the absurd' means. Through Spark, this thesis will begin to determine how absurdism pertains to women and why this is important. The conversation to follow on a woman's absurd aptly demonstrate why Spark belongs in the ongoing conversations first presented by the traditional absurd and hopefully expanded upon by neo-absurdists in years to come.

Spark as a woman absurdist writes with a broad audience in mind. She does not pander or weaken any part of her impact to please or appease. She writes on sex, death, and sickness of the mind and body. She has a wicked mind and a sharp tongue, both of which come alive on the page in a kaleidoscopic experience. Her writing shocks — and means to do so — but it also lures and keeps her far-reaching readership wanting more. Her name rarely comes up in popular culture anymore, but if someone knows her writing, they *will* have feelings about it. A woman's absurd, insofar as one can be conceived through discussing one singular author, shines through in Spark's form, her style, her content, and her embodiment. What makes Spark's writing seem timeless unlike her male contemporaries', though, is a daring boldness to write what she pleased without regard for the opinion of others. She never cared to be liked, and this is what makes her an excellent experimental candidate for reconstruing the absurd through a woman's eyes.

[3] The short story, "The Seraph and the Zambesi," won a contest and consequently launched her professional writing career.

Approaching the essential questions that allow us to posit and examine a woman's absurd is contingent upon an understanding of the layering of interlaced themes that absurdist literature — and certainly, Muriel Spark — practices. The overarching theme binding the texts in this study is the question of death as an end to suffering from life's essential meaninglessness. Death and meaninglessness are then linked to the seeming lack of logic inhered in elemental and formal devices Spark uses. This lack of logic — lack of reality — ultimately promotes subjective agency[4] through a freedom that comes only with conceding to one's position within a meaningless world and finding one's own way to achieve joy and hope. Finally, undergirding the whole project of ascertaining whether Spark is a woman absurdist is her use of humor. Spark's writing leverages dissonant plot with subtle moments of ease in the search for meaning to promote catharsis, empower and liberate its female characters, and provide comic relief to readers amidst the discomfort the text presents, resulting in an ultimately enjoyable — if unsettling — reading experience.

This thesis is comprised of two major analysis sections, each categorized by a theme that has origins in the traditional absurd, and with which Spark demarcates a woman's absurd. The first section discusses Spark's purposeful diminishment of reality and subversion of realism in her texts as a means of promoting agency in her women characters through themes of lucidity and sex. The second section is concerned with play and humor. This section covers conceding to the absurd existence through playing life like a game in order to assuage the futile experience of living with the woman's absurd condition, alongside the use of humor in Spark's writing as a

[4] "Agency," can be defined as the idea that one can move through the world as 'free' and extricable from one's surroundings, and to be principally in charge of one's own thoughts and actions (Gallagher 16).

means of catharsis for the reader, revealed both by the levity held therein, and through the emancipation from male subordination that a woman's absurd enables.

I consider these issues through the novella, *The Driver's Seat*,[5] a novel, *Memento Mori*, and one of Spark's short stories, "The Portobello Road". These texts, aside from the variance in genre, provide different narrative contexts for thinking about Spark's work as absurd, and this allows for a more robust argument in favor of Spark as presenting the project of a woman's absurd. Each text is richly packed with arguably empowering arcs that works to restore the women protagonists' sense of authority and autonomy, while leaving no direct answers to the questions it generates leading the reader directly into the sense that life is essentially meaningless but still, perhaps, not without value.

In *The Driver's Seat*, we meet Lise, a highly emotive young woman who takes a vacation to an unnamed Western European country from an unnamed Scandinavian country where she will seek out a man — the perfect man — to execute her murder (I will refer to this as a suicide-by-proxy throughout the discussion). Lise behaves erratically throughout and the reader is forced to doubt her reliability and stability as the story proceeds. This text sets up sexual repulsion and desire for death as two of the most salient themes in the text, and, for Lise, the two go hand-in-hand. In this psychological thriller, readers are left wondering: *why, though?* right up until the end, and they are left somewhere between satisfied and dizzied. Lise finds her special person: someone who is resistant to her charm — the only male character who isn't pursuing her until she forcefully pursues him and weakens his resolve — at which point he strips away any sense of control Lise thought she had over her final plan. This novella is fundamentally about control and regaining one's sense of agency. It is also about repudiation, desire, and is fraught with an all-

[5] Whenever asked, Spark has expressed invariably that she felt *The Driver's Seat* was her best work.

consuming tension. Throughout this strange and thought-provoking story, the woman's absurd is hanging in the air like static electricity. Through use of negative associations with the sexual desire of men, and Lise's attempt and subsequent failure to overturn that narrative, the futility of trying to fulfill one's desires and purpose becomes prevalent, leading the reader into a nihilistic melancholy that Lise didn't get the perfect murder she had imagined for herself.

While *The Driver's Seat* deals with themes of ostensible mental illness, death and sexual violence, *Memento Mori* deals with aging, losing one's faculties, and again uses pernicious male characters to drive forward the plot. The premise for *Memento Mori* is that Dame Lettie, the character we are introduced to in the first line of the book, has been getting telephone calls from a mysterious man who says only, "Remember you must die" (7). She gets these calls frequently and soon her whole community and the whole cast of characters that we meet are receiving calls with this same refrain. What sets *Memento Mori* apart is its treatment of aging and how it gives agency to the elderly through the inherent senselessness and incongruity associated with growing older and becoming more and more remote from oneself as death encroaches. This text uses humor in a particularly adroit way, especially in the context of a woman's absurd. In spite of the overbearing feeling that anybody could die at any given time, Spark offers the reader an opportunity to genuinely enjoy the company of the women in this story who are funny both in wholesome and condemning ways, sometimes at once. The men, however, are distinctly unlikeable, and this element promotes absurd humor as a means of liberating and distancing the women characters from their male counterparts, making space for levity among the particularly troubling aspects of the story.

This thesis also examines Spark's short story "The Portobello Road" which offers equal reason to argue that Spark belongs firmly rooted within the woman's absurd. Like *Memento*

Mori and *The Driver's Seat*, this story deals with death and a thin grip on logic, points to the mundanity and meaninglessness of life, and is oddly funny in parts. With the story narrated by Needle, the reader learns about the banality of her existence (an existence she seemed to quite enjoy) when she was younger and alive. We witness her escapades with three friends in childhood and we watch her and her best friend, Kathleen, grow up as they frequently traipse around the marketplace at the Portobello Road in London. The reader then learns that Needle was killed five years ago by George, one of the friend group for threatening to stand in the way of his engagement to Kathleen. The premise of the story is that Needle, appearing before him as a specter when he is walking down the Portobello Road alongside Kathleen, drives George steadily toward insanity.[6] The narrative style and form of this text are what lend themselves to the absurd. Through melding a wavering sense of reality with monotonal narration and toying with cyclicality in the telling of the story, Spark solidifies her position in the reader's mind as qualified to play a part in representing a woman's absurd.[7]

[6] A caveat to this text is that it is incredibly colonial and racist language and typecasting is used, something we see a lot less often in her texts set outside of an African context.

[7] While this thesis defines and describes specific issues, scenes, and lines of inquiry within the texts that may disregard that, likely, much of the readership have not read these texts, the content of the texts is compelling enough that one may be enticed into reading them despite knowing all that this thesis might teach you in advance. This is a study in the specificities and minutiae of the discussed texts, but this should not deter those who have not read them from either reading ahead *or* picking up the literature afterwards. I hope I leave enough to the imagination to make this allowable.

Defining the Absurd

The literary absurd (also known as absurdist literature; closely associated with the theatre of the absurd) is a vein of literature wherein the texts toy with the metaphysical quandaries of life and living, usually in an incredibly funny or darkly amusing way. The absurd is, pointedly, not a movement. The writers of this time who were characterized as absurdists did not conjure this label for themselves. Martin Esslin, in his 1961 book, *The Theatre of the Absurd,* which was the first commentary on the still new phenomenon, arbitrarily ascribed this label to a series of playwrights who were writing in the mode of what we now call the absurd, and set up some parameters for absurdist theater, basically, as he saw fit (Bennett 1). This is how the likes of Beckett and Pinter are now synonymous with the epithet "absurdist" and also why a woman's absurd must be proffered: Esslin did not care to include any women in his analysis and rare few people have tried to rectify this in the sixty years since.

The dictionary definition of "absurd" is "out of harmony with reason or propriety" (Hinchliffe 1), and we can consider this definition a powerful tool for thinking about absurdist literature in a meaningful way. Often, absurdist texts unsettle their readers. The disharmony, often manifesting in a lack of order or an inherent malaise, presents a specific problem for readers of absurdist texts. The problem is concerned with what to do about the absurd as readers or theorists begin comprehending and trying to reconcile what this disharmony means in the context of unsettling and destabilizing literature. In other words, *what role does absurdist literature fulfill?* There may be many answers to this, of course, but it seems to me that any singular understanding of the absurd is necessarily deficient. More than anything, absurdism can be considered a phenomenon — philosophy as expressed through literature — which pertinently and aptly helps us understand the reticence of considering absurdist writers a "school" since the boundaries that mark a text absurd were somewhat arbitrarily drawn by Esslin.

Absurdists never considered themselves part of a movement, either (Bennett 4-5, Gavins 62, Hinchliffe 1). They instead saw themselves as individual writers, who simply pondered the world in their writings without much of an ecosystem of genre to lean on. While many people were writing in the same mode during the midcentury, which is generally considered the time at which the absurd was most prevalent, it seems that it was undertaken as an individual plight. This is interesting primarily because of the subject matter of absurdist literature — pondering questions that center around the essential meaninglessness of life must get lonely and believing further that one is writing from an entirely individualistic standpoint cannot help this matter.

Absurdist literature is heavily influenced by existentialist philosophy and is associated with other avant-garde art and literature movements that arose during the fifties and sixties such as surrealism and the nouveau roman. The simultaneous rise of these similar schools demonstrates the unprecedented times the world was witnessing: the new wave of artistic and cultural movements, all nested under the umbrella of postmodernism, were a reaction culminating from a painful realization that, much like its precursor, modernism,[8] the world would never be the same as it was following the global suffering inflicted by World War II.

Thought to be rooted in nineteenth- and twentieth century philosophy, absurdism comes from the same tradition as existentialism, and is most often firstly associated with Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard. In his 1843 novel, *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard explores the absurdity of God asking Abraham to demonstrate his allegiance to the Christian faith by sacrificing his son (Gavins 63). However, it has been postulated that Descartes can be credited with facilitating the onset of absurdist and other nihilistic philosophy in the sixteenth century (Sherman 26). This is because Descartes is the first philosopher to suggest a "philosophy of

[8] Modernism can itself be considered a response to the industrialization of the Western world and subsequently to the Great War.

subjectivity" (Sherman 26), and thus propels a shift toward a "godless" way of thinking that relies on individual knowledge of one's own truth. This means that it becomes easier to stray from a sense of purpose and harder to find intrinsic meaning in oneself and one's life due to the very nature of the individualism of agnostic philosophy.

The likes of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, and Eugène Ionesco are the individuals most closely associated with the literary absurd. Sartre and Camus, each of whom were extremely well-respected as existentialist philosophers and absurdist writers,[9] have especially been known to disagree and digress in a multitude of ways. Their political era was fraught with Communism, war, and pervasive threats of grand-scale violence, issues that raised the question of freedom and justice among the Existentialists. Camus and Sartre disagree on how to achieve freedom: while Sartre believes that violence may be a gateway to freedom, Camus asserts in *The Rebel* that freedom is achieved only through "lucid[ly]" accepting one's subject position in a meaningless world (19).[10] A fundamental way that Camus and Sartre's belief systems are married is in their shared concession that capitalism is symbolically violent[11] and inflicts arduous harm onto the proletariat. However, while Sartre quickly joins the Communist efforts in France and in Europe more broadly, Camus is more concerned with a sort of symbolic revolt.

[9] Sartre and Camus were really considered two of the foremost thinkers in history during this period so their political disputation wracked the foundations of contemporary philosophy and the fissure in their relationship may be responsible for the sometimes-antagonistic relationship between existentialism and absurdism (Aronson 302).

[10] The acceptance of one's subject position does not imply that one accepts oppression. This radical acceptance should be a revolt and ostensibly would occur on the interior as a means of reckoning with the institutions that have shaped the absurdity of one's condition.

[11] "Symbolic violence" is a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu to describe a sort of metaphysical violence that results from the subordination of one class of people to another (Bourdieu 21).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus says that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123). Reading Camus might be inspiring if his writing didn't reflect such a diseased world. Still, Camus' peaceful and leveled approach to conceptualizing freedom is an interesting one that illustrates the absurd as something hopeful, something that transcends the senselessness of humanity and allows one to, like Camus' imagined Sisyphus, make peace with their circumstances and find comfort in the acts that they pursue, rather than any desired outcome of hope for change.

In complete opposition to this sense that one must concede to a meaningless existence, Sartre argues that the superior approach to thinking about the absurdity of the human condition is to rail against that meaninglessness with fervor. He believes that the Communist project does exactly that, achieving both freedom and justice through force. This argument is complex but ultimately stems from the tension between systemic violence (perceived by Sartre as being inflicted by capitalism) and revolutionary violence (perceived by Camus as being inflicted by the Communist regime), resulting in a dissonance between the two men and their divergent viewpoints that was not — and in many ways, still isn't — able to be resolved (Aronson 303). Though Camus and Sartre began as friends, as their rivalry swelled over time so did the differences in their relationship to Existentialism, culminating in their irreconcilable and disharmonious understanding of what constitutes living with the absurdity of existing in an oppressive world.

The Absurd in the Current Moment

Invariably hard to categorize or qualify, given the absurd's cultural conception, it's clear that the moment from which it arose was incredibly powerful for creation and dissemination of art and literature. This also means there is a lot of overlap between movements and it becomes

difficult to identify clearly demarcated differences. Absurdism is often described by literary critics as “nebulous” (Gavins 62). Although people often don’t know how to define or characterize it, one thing critics do agree on is the absurd being a “literary expression of human beings’ inability to find inherent meaning in their existence” (Gavins 62). My discussion of Muriel Spark and the absurd is primarily concerned with absurdism’s blatant defiance of genre and its wide-arching — and often contending — authorship.

Despite its nebulosity, absurdism is typically and canonically confined to and reserved for white, central- and western-European men who are necessarily restricted in the scope of what they can convey in their writing because of the homogeneity of the experiences they bring to absurdist literature. What I hope to argue is that the ‘typical’ lens through which we view absurdism can and should be expanded since it currently only formally has credence among, and only represents experience of, white men. Here, I hope to discuss the influence and benefit of the perspective given by women writers of the literary absurd. Muriel Spark herself is a white woman who was born, raised, and spent the majority of her life in central and western Europe. However, what I hope to do is initiate a conversation that imparts an understanding that the current considerations of the absurd are bereft of many different voices, and women’s issues — particularly those most pressing to white women — are merely scratching the surface of what we should be paying attention to — that is, the many perspectives and interests beyond the white cisgendered male — in the incredibly pertinent questions that are raised within the realm of the literary absurd.

Contention has arisen among certain scholars surrounding whether the absurd, as it is conceived, deserves the power critics and readers on a wider scale give it. Bennett, in his 2011 book, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, argues against Esslin, who wrote the original

'blueprint' to the theatre of the absurd in his book of the same name. Bennett says, "Esslin posits that the theater of the absurd contemplates the 'metaphysical anguish of the absurdity of the of the human condition.' I will suggest, instead, that these texts, rather, revolt against existentialism and are ethical parables about force the audience to make life meaningful" (2). With this, Bennett forces scholars of the absurd to question why they subscribe to Esslin's theories about the absurd, or at least to justify their perspective. Esslin is not my main source of theory and information regarding the absurd — especially given that I am writing on an alternative absurd, as Bennett is. However, one cannot disregard the historical foundations upon which this scholarly work has been built, and Bennett argues that no one has ever ventured to do what he is doing. I disagree with this.

While Bennett construes a "Female Absurd" and I am construing the absurd also through the lens of gender, that is where our commonalities diverge. Bennett argues that Esslin is wrong about the absurd based on two basic claims, neither of which he substantiates: 1) that Esslin mistranslated and miscontextualized a quote by Ionesco, and 2) that he misread Camus as an existentialist (*Reassessing* 2). When I try to follow these threads to the endnotes, Bennett cites only conferences he attended where he spoke on the subject more thoroughly. On the basic premise that Bennett's analysis is hard to substantiate, and regarding his disregard for the work that has been done before him, it's hard to agree — or disagree — with his basic argument. Instead, we can bear in mind that there are veins of thought that absurdist literature is, in fact, a parody of itself, and should be taken as such. There is some evidence to suggest that Spark felt the same way about her own writing, and so this may be pertinent to our discussion in places.

What is widely agreed upon within scholarship of absurdist literature in — at least — the twenty-first century is that current conceptions and criticisms are not expansive enough. Joanna

Gavins, for example, discusses that the state of criticism around the absurd today lacks "an adequate account of the discoursal features which connect these texts over centuries and genres" (67). In other words, we must look to the rhetorical components of texts that are considered absurdist to understand them as such. Thus, the four basic components that are most often present in absurdist literature discussed in this thesis include: 1) concern with death and dying, 2) use of nonsense and incongruity in plot, 3) operate using a framework of life's essential meaninglessness, and 4) writing that is satirical — outwardly funny, even. By focusing on these components, it is my hope to illustrate how an absurdist text takes its shape, and how Spark navigates these facets of the absurd to construe a woman's absurd as something that is important to today's critical conversation.

Muriel Spark as Prototype

To posit that someone belongs to a group of writers (of which they were never considered a part) requires a thorough justification. One such justification can be found in the lecture Muriel Spark delivered in 1970 to the Blashfield Foundation in New York. She titled this lecture, "The Desegregation of Art,"[12] and in it details her feelings about the "victim-oppressor complex" (Cheyette 132). She says that "'the victim-oppressor complex' isn't achieving its end," and, further, "a more effective technique should be cultivated" (qtd. in Cheyette 117). Spark's 'solution' to this would be to dispense with sentiment and emotion in literature and art, and instead lean into "satire and ridicule" (Cheyette 118). Spark divulges more in an interview conducted in 1970, reprinted in *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973); she says that she does "not believe in 'good and evil' so much anymore but in 'absurdity and intelligence'" (Cheyette 119). Spark's commitment to 'fuzziness' surrounding morality and order allows the reader a way in to understand the broader project of the absurd: to destabilize the reading experience and to help one form their own conclusions about a parabolic text such as a work of absurdism.

From here, one can begin building a strong case for Muriel Spark as absurdist. Letting her texts speak for themselves is what this thesis aims to do; however, it's clear that Spark's philosophy — alongside her writing — is aligned with a woman's absurd since her drive towards "satire and ridicule," and "absurdity and intelligence," subtly underscores that these 'rational' notions that are typically associated with the masculine, can be coopted and reappropriated by women to broaden the definition of absurdism in literature to open up a new space for a woman's enunciation of the absurd. The model of the absurd as construed through a woman's eyes, then, is one that is still concerned with revolt against violence but also one that uses nuance to

[12] This lecture was later published as an essay in Spark's collection: *The Golden Fleece*.

decipher that violence is not universally distributed in the same way and culminates in a clearer understanding for the reader of what to expect from the absurd generally as well as a woman's absurd, and an expansion of the scope of the absurd beyond this one branch of identity-based distinction.

Spark is an enigmatic figure. She has been written on extensively, including in biographies by the writers and theorists such as Martin Stannard and Frank Kermode.[13] The public in general, however, still doesn't know much about her. A poet, novelist, essayist, storyteller, Spark worked extremely hard to let her texts be at the fore of her public image, rather than the goings-on of her personal life. Despite this, Spark kept an incredibly detailed and intricate record of her daily life. The National Library of Scotland houses her papers, of which there are hundreds of thousands. In *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark writes that "[s]ince 1949 onwards, I have thrown away practically nothing on paper" (130). It is clear that the relationship between private and public was extremely fraught for Spark and she worked to toe the line of preserving and sharing her documents that give us a window into her quotidian, while creating a comfortable level of distance from public scrutiny in her personal life.

While speculation on Spark's personal philosophy is an exercise in extrapolation, we can assert, unequivocally, that she is funny, imaginative, dryly and deliberately monotone, and poetic when appropriate. All of these are features of her writing. It's easy to tease out what is so alluring about her writing when its qualities are put forth in this way; Spark encourages us to

[13] Spark was immensely and deliberately private about many aspects of her personal life. In her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, she makes a point of recording aspects of her life in a much more intimate way than ever before in order to both defend herself against speculative and fictitious accounts of her life, and also to serve as documentation to supplement her own memory (*CV* 5). This thorough rendering of specific issues and moments in her life is an artifact that gives a voice back to Spark, much in the style of what I'm trying to demonstrate about a woman's absurd.

read below the surface — to engage with her texts in a way that makes us laugh, but also in a way that makes us question, and perhaps more importantly, in a way that makes us sit with deep discomfort. While we can certainly make a case for Spark as absurdist in her philosophy, this thesis focuses on her literary texts. Each of the three texts chosen for this thesis has been carefully considered as exemplary of Spark's style which oscillates somewhat across genres, but which is reliably and remarkably absurd.

Spark as a writer has been thought of as many things. Her narrative style has been called "eccentric" and "aversive" and one critic posits that Spark can be found comfortably "in the company of modernists and mystery alike" (Gardner 40). The coupling of these two seemingly dissonant readerly experiences can exist as much because of her experimental style as because of the form of the writing. Her narrative voice is eerily distinctive: descriptive yet detached; one gets the sense that this monotonous affect in conjunction with the simultaneous mundanity and horror of her plotlines allows the reader to meld the subjectivity associated with modernism with the ominous aspect associated with a mystery. What's more, Spark has great mastery over writing in a way that is at once disjointed and labyrinthine, which has the disconcerting effect of disorienting the reader. Evocative and funny, Spark's writing attempts to parody itself in a way that refuses to educate and embraces entertainment and we get the impression that she doesn't want us to make too much sense of her writing. That's not to say her writing isn't *meaningful*, more that her writing is callous, dark, and dreadfully funny, in a way that leaves us, against our better judgment, on the edge of our seats: wanting more. As I hope to uncover, her writing is meant to evoke feelings surrounding being a *woman* in a senseless world, rather than the oblique "intrinsic meaningless of life" that is so often used without consideration for gender-based difference within definitions of the absurd.

Similar arguments have been made to the one we are trying to demonstrate here about Spark and the absurd, or Spark *as* absurd. One such argument vies for Spark as a writer of the *nouveau roman*. The sticky and difficult to define nature of the absurd is also characteristic of the nouveau roman, which also emerged in 1950s Europe. Routinely called the 'anti-novel', the nouveau roman is defined vaguely and somewhat arbitrarily around the terms of a novel that defies genre- or form-specific aspects of the traditional novel. It uses aesthetic and rhetorical devices that destabilize the reading experience, and, in effect and in theory, a writer of the nouveau roman produces a new style every time. While it, too, destabilizes, the absurd is situated within a very specific philosophy, and while theorists tend not to agree on how to approach the existential questions raised by the absurd, they do largely depend on the premise that the absurd arises from the metaphysical ideal that life is inherently meaningless. This means that while, perhaps, Spark was writing in various styles and appealing to different sensibilities, those who argue for Spark as embedded in the tradition of the nouveau roman are arguing something decidedly different to the argument of this thesis.

I am not the first person to make the argument that Muriel Spark's writing is experimental. Conceiving of her writing as absurdist, however, seems not to have been done, at least in such a conspicuous way. The likes of James Bailey, Allan Beveridge, and Alan Bold have, in recent years, mentioned notions they recognize in Spark's work that are pertinent to the absurd, but have not yet closed the gap on that connection. This thesis aims to contribute to this pool of scholarship in a way that allows us to marvel at Spark, to hold her — and ourselves — accountable to the changing times, and to continue to understand her work as subversive and transgressive in a way that, somewhat counterintuitively, instills hope.

Part II: Exploring a Woman's Absurd

Toying with Reality

To adequately explore what a woman's absurd might look like, it's important to consider the themes that undergird the traditional absurd. One such theme is an unconventional presentation of reality. Absurdism makes use of discrepant logic — verging on nonsense — as a campaign for understanding the senselessness of the human condition[14] in an essentially meaningless existence and the discordance that marries the condition of the human experience with the meaning (or lack thereof) that one can construct from the surrounding world. The discordance here denotes a form of synesthetic experience that is metaphysical rather than cognitive — the two aspects of a person's existence want to work in tandem, but there is a disconnect. The decomposition of logic in absurdist literature, namely, the use of unreal[15] elements, serves the purpose of highlighting the degenerative nature of trying to make sense out of an inherently meaningless existence. Absurdist texts force us to suspend disbelief and, through this suspension of what we think should happen, allows new ways of thinking about the text's ontological implications without the impediment of strict frameworks that are typically imposed on more conventional reading experiences. Through exploring the implications of unreality in a woman's absurd, this section works to uncover how varying degrees of reality are used in Spark's texts to destabilize the reading experience and make room for heavy topics to be discussed.

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[14] The human condition can be loosely understood as all the components that make us human that cannot be explained away by scientific concepts. In lieu of an adequate explanation through science, we can turn to philosophy to better understand the visceral consciousness that pervades human existence (Crowell).

[15] 'Unreal' gives a sense of aspects of a text that are not in accordance with what is known from the subjective, but collectively understood relative reality of human experience. These aspects may be possible but unlikely within the given context, or out of the realm of imagination. I might be found referring to a concept of 'unreality' which I define as devices in a text that are out of sync with the generalized, collective sense of human experience.

In a woman's absurd, the use of unreality is effective in conveying the synesthesia of human experience since it reckons with culturally problematized issues such as sexual violence and mental illness in a way that does not make it easy for a reader to digest. Instead, the issues depicted are made starker by the way they do and do not resemble the collective reality. The suspension of disbelief in this context empowers the woman absurdist writer to depict gruesome aspects of woman's experience, which allows her to develop the women characters with agency because the sense of unreality subverts the usual narrative that women are powerless in these situations. Equally important, the use of unreal elements enables these texts to rail against compulsory performances of feminine virtue[16] by creating contexts in which the need for the ideal woman is assuaged.

These two crucial features of a woman's absurd aid these texts in addressing issues such as women ostensibly taking control,[17] men facing the consequences of their actions, and expressing uncertainty surrounding what it means to be free or constrained, which is exactly what drove Sartre and Camus' interest in the absurd to begin with. The agency granted to women characters is made possible not because they have control over their fate or their circumstances, but because the text highlights, through its disorienting content and form, that no one else has control either. This mode of mapping agency onto the women characters stimulates the reader to consider how surviving within the absurdity of the woman's condition may be accomplished: through removing any semblance or illusion of control and destabilizing the idea that these characters need to conform to restrictive ideals of feminine virtue, Spark gifts her woman

[16] With "compulsory performance of feminine virtue," I draw from Judith Butler on gender performativity to highlight the ways Spark disrupts our expectations of woman-coded characters' behavior and presentation being in line with what are generally thought of as acceptable and appropriate behavior and presentation for women. This can be seen as interchangeable with "ideal womanhood".

[17] "Control," for my purposes, can be defined as exerting power over oneself or others, or aspects of one's life or that of others.

characters agency and, in turn, this representation of agency permits the women to act uninhibitedly in ways that are in accordance with their desires. To understand how Spark accomplishes constructing her women characters in an absurdist fashion, this section will explore two main themes: lucidity and subversions of sex and death. The discussion of characters' relative lucidity in Spark's texts highlights a confusing correlation between a character's grip on reality and relative agency. Meanwhile, the purposeful subversion of sex and death sets the wheels in motion for understanding how disorienting and discomfiting women's relationships to men can often be. Each of these subsections highlight ways that compulsory performances of feminine virtue can be diminished as a means of equipping women characters with agency over their circumstances and relationships to male characters.

Lucidity

In looking at *The Driver's Seat* and lucidity, this thesis hopes to illuminate how Lise's ostensible mental illness creates a sense of discomfort for the reader and show how her insatiable need for control ultimately stunts her ability to find agency. However, Lise's unorthodox presentation and precarious sense of stability make way for Spark to thwart the "ideal woman" trope, and thus, leaves Lise's relative sense of agency more open to interpretation. *The Driver's Seat* insistently subverts our expectations of reality. This can be seen in Lise's inconsistent and volatile reactions to seemingly inane interactions. Towards the beginning of the novella, her boss tells her (on the subject of some inconsequential work), "It can wait till you get back," before she "begins to laugh hysterically," then, abruptly stopping, "started crying all in a flood, while a flurry at the other desks, the jerky backward movements of her little fat superior, conveyed to her that she had done again what she had not done for five years" (7). Upon first reading, one might think this is a disproportionate or inappropriate reaction. Of course, the premise for this outburst is that she is not intending to come back, but the ominous assertion of what she "had done again"

alerts us to what we think we already know: Lise is apparently prone to mental health crises. The ambiguity of not knowing whether Lise is incredibly lucid and simply emotional given the circumstances, or somewhere on the spectrum of manic and delusional breeds the reader's growing concern and leaves them mal at ease. Her emotional outburst also highlights her lack of control over her emotions, and therefore adds to the feeling that Lise's sense of agency is up for debate since her urge to manipulate her life and death underscores that she can't cope with the inherently chaotic and illegible nature of life.

In coalition with Spark's complication of the "ideal woman" trope, she performs a reclamation of the hysterical woman[18] by portraying Lise, who appears to be in the throes of a mental health crisis, as a complicated figure. With this implication of mental illness in the text, the reader naturally conjures the trope of the hysterical woman. What Spark does by making Lise a strong and decisive woman character, then, is distort the reader's relationship to womanhood as it is typically represented in literature. Spark doesn't shy away from mental illness to shield women from scrutiny, instead she creates a text that toys with varying degrees of realism and unreality with a powerful character who is multifaceted *and* may struggle with mental illness. If we are constructing the absurd through a woman's eyes, Spark fulfills her role of adorning her characters with agency because they are constructed as simultaneously flawed and credible.[19] The successful execution of the woman's absurd in the context of the workplace scene derives from Spark's reclamation of the hysterical woman, as Lise is postured in this story in a way that overrides her need to present as the ideal woman. This is made permissible by the disordered and chaotic nature of her circumstance. When considering Lise's relative sense of agency as it relates

[18] This trope has historically been, and continues to be, used to discount and disenfranchise women, both those who do and do not suffer with mental illness.
[19] They are credible in the sense that we believe *in* them, not necessarily that we believe their accounts of 'truth'.

to her mental illness, one can surmise that she is in a state of disarray and her relationship to agency is fraught. However, although her relationship to agency is fraught, she still is empowered to act upon her compulsion to end her life in response to the meaningless and chaotic nature of existence. Spark, here, is toying with the nuance of what it means to have agency over one's life and actions when there is effectively no controlling the current of an essentially meaningless existence. By Lise's "begin[ning] to laugh hysterically" and then the swift shift to "crying all in a flood," the reader can see how the volatility of her emotions is indicative of the hysterical woman trope; and still, through her persistent decisiveness surrounding the suicide-by-proxy, Spark demonstrates how Lise is an example of how one can reclaim the hysterical woman.

By the end of this same episode, Lise is in a fully escalated state, but her intentions are still clear: she will go on this trip, she will find her murderer, and she will conduct her suicide-by-proxy. What this demonstrates is a clearcut differentiation between Lise's emotional state and her mental clarity. After we hear that her colleagues are "somehow or other [trying] to help her," they tell her "You need a good holiday, Lise. You need your vacation" (Ibid.). She replies, "'I'm going to have it . . . 'I'm going to have the time of my life'" (Ibid.). By the point in the text that the reader realizes the 'time of her life' entails hunting down an eligible bachelor to conduct her suicide-by-proxy, they are transported back to this scene and are enlightened to her intent to conduct this plan from the start. This scene is pertinent to the larger absurdist project of the text because it represents Lise as deranged on the surface and collected and sure of what she needs to do underneath her disorganized and chaotic exterior, thus entitling her to a certain degree of agency through her acceptance of the chaos as a necessary byproduct of her plan's execution. When she says, "I'm going to have the time of my life," the reader understands that, for Lise, dying — or, more accurately, being killed — is the ultimate answer to a meaningless life.

To realize her goal of being killed, Lise works methodically to ensure everything that she perceives to be within her control goes to plan. Yet, the reader gleans that control is a fraught issue for Lise in terms of her emotional world. Emotional reactions such as the outburst in her workplace are not uncharacteristic of Lise, and we see more of the same all throughout the text. In the beginning of the novella, in the instance where she is attempting to buy a dress for her trip, the clerk tells her that the dress she is trying on is stain repellent; Lise screams in return: "'Do you think I spill things on my clothes? . . . Do I look, as if I don't eat properly?' (*The Driver's Seat* 6). Her disproportionate response to the clerk's unassuming, albeit, strange, attempt to sell her the dress can perhaps be interpreted as a strong-willed and unruly reaction that is dominated by Lise's apparent precarious mental health. However, as the narrative uncoils, we see a pattern emerge of Lise making sure to make herself memorable to every person she meets. For example, after she buys a different dress and coat that "clash,"[20] a detail we learn from passers-by, she is delighted that she is impressing herself on those around her. When she is leaving the store and the clerk gossips about her outfit choice, Lise "stops abruptly at the top of the escalator and looks back, then smiles as if she sees and hears what she had expected" (*The Driver's Seat* 8). We can only infer that she is deliberately making various lasting impressions because she wants to be identified when her body is found the next day. These moments in the text can be attributed, in terms of a woman's absurd, in part to Spark's attempt to construct a confounding character who at once lucidly and meticulously plans within the chaos that unfurls in her life and who is unpredictable in her interactions, forcing the reader to contend with whether she can be construed as lucid.

[20] Spark's satirization of femininity through Lise's fashion choice and demeanor is another aspect of what is going on here. In her work of destabilizing notions of the ideal woman, Spark — whether intentionally or not — constructs Lise as a character who turns the trope of ideal womanhood on its head by presenting her as distasteful and unpleasant, and through making her behave in unexpected and alarming ways throughout.

When thinking about the dress scene, the woman's absurd offers an explanation with regards to Lise's incessant need to exercise control. The sense I get from the treatment of Lise's need for control is that she is looking to finally realize agency in this endeavor of committing suicide-by-proxy to redeem a life where she has been stagnant for years. A close reading of the text shows how she orchestrates the whole "whydunnit"[21] from start to finish, apart from Richard raping her before executing the murder just as she had instructed: "'I don't want any sex,' she shouts. 'You can have it afterwards. Tie my feet and kill, that's all . . . All the same, he plunges into her, with the knife poised high" (*The Driver's Seat* 88). It is notable that he had the "knife poised high," and on display, because had that detail not been added, it may have been left too ambiguous whether he had "plunged into her" with the knife instead of raping her, and thus whether Lise's purpose has been realized would be left far too open to speculation. Spark insinuates that her purpose has not been fulfilled. The rape was not part of the plan, and ruins Lise's facade of control, despite the rest of the execution seeming to go perfectly — down to the detail of the murder being printed in newspapers of the four different languages and multiple witnesses coming forth to say they saw her in random contexts the previous day. Lise is meticulously orchestrating every detail of her suicide-by-proxy to gain control of her death, since she has had no control over her life. Through Lise's emotional reactivity and erratic behavior

[21] Spark coins the term "whydunnit" — a play on the type of detective novel, commonly called a "whodunnit" — within *The Driver's Seat* to describe a book that Lise picks up in the airport and describes to the porter at her hotel as a "whydunnit in q-sharp minor" (*The Driver's Seat* 83). This term has been widely acknowledged as a means of talking about *The Driver's Seat* itself (*The New Yorker*). Note that q-sharp minor is not an actual musical note; however, the sharp note directs a musician to sound a pitch half a tone higher ("What Is a Sharp Note?"), and I personally imagine this as Lise indicating to the porter — and inadvertently, to the reader — that there is an urgency, or a franticness associated with this "whydunnit". She then leaves the book with him, saying that she doesn't need it anymore, and giving him what seems like nonsensical advice, before ushering away Richard, a man the reader is seeing for the first time but whom she immediately recognizes and selects as her murderer.

towards strangers, Spark conveys that Lise's clinging to control is not something to aspire towards and is, we learn, unattainable.

This book is constantly teetering between leveled (eerie, even) calm and complete chaos. The line is extremely fine. The delicacy of this balance does much of the heavy lifting in creating the sense of absurd incongruity that pervades the narration. Lise, as a device, is instructive in terms of a woman's absurd. Her fixation on gaining control over her situation does not prevent things from going horribly wrong; *The Driver's Seat* indicates to its readership that for Lise agency is, perhaps, not attained since she could not comprehend that clinging to false notions of control would not liberate her. Importantly, the reader does not often have access to Lise's interiority. This is important because the reader then is prevented from uncovering the 'reality' of Lise's situation: is she insane? Alternatively, she is in a state incomprehensible to the reader because the ontological reality of the text in which she exists is implausible, and therefore, the reader cannot fathom the sense of lucidity verging on transcendence Lise may experience when she is on the cusp of executing her own murder. What sets *The Driver's Seat* apart is its adherence to nothing in particular besides Lise's unpredictability and the eventuality of her own death. Here, we see what is perhaps a descent into madness and otherwise a study in absolute lucidity. Lise is commanding, and attempting to maintain control over her situation, something that she struggles to achieve throughout the text, and ultimately confirms for the reader that the pursuit of control is fruitless. Spark, I think, understands this frustration the reader feels at wanting to comprehend Lise's state of mind to get closer to the 'truth' of the story. And, in fact, she doesn't care. Spark and other absurdists are tasked with aggravating their readers as a means of destabilizing their reading experience through depriving them of any one concrete answer to their questions.

Memento Mori, like *The Driver's Seat*, subverts our expectations of reality and toys with unreality to accomplish stirring readerly questions with regards to characters' sense of agency. One of the most compelling and subversive characters in this text, Charmian, is someone who enjoyed great success as a novelist and who now suffers cognitive decline following a stroke. She is entirely lucid at times, but we see the subverted expectations of reality most at play among other characters such as her husband, Godfrey and his sister, Dame Lettie, in the way they treat her. The subversion occurs because Charmian (in a more 'real' version of events) would be the one expected to inspire discomfort surrounding sanity, logic, and reality, when more often than not, any discomfort the reader feels is far more prescient among other actors in the novel who are personally affronted by Charmian's decline following from her illness. The way she inspires discomfort in other characters, as well as her arguably surprising moments of lucidity, can help the reader see agency as an unstable phenomenon since Charmian is so entangled in other people's treatment of and feeling towards her due to her reliance on them.

When we are first introduced to Charmian, she is putting her thoughts into alphabetical order, "which Godfrey had told her was better than no order at all" (*Memento Mori* 7). This introduction to their spousal dynamic is representative of Godfrey's impatience with Charmian in the years since the onset of her illness; it continues this way throughout the novel. Following a maddening conversation between the two when Godfrey gets heated because Charmian can't tell the difference between the present and events that happened five years prior, Godfrey scolds himself: "'Why can't one be kind to her?' he asked himself as he drove to Lettie's house in Hampstead. 'Why can't one be more gentle?' He himself was eighty-seven, and in charge of all his faculties" (*Memento Mori* 9). This telling internal monologue demonstrates his complex feelings about his wife's condition. He concludes this train of thought by saying, "One has one's difficulties with Charmian" (Ibid.), further solidifying that the two have a historically terse

marriage. In this same scene, Dame Lettie retorts to her brother's condescension towards her with, "And don't talk to me as if I were Charmian" (Ibid.), indicating that Charmian is commonly infantilized and treated with disdain.

When Charmian manages to face her circumstances head-on in some increasingly frequent moments of lucidity, she opts to move into a private nursing home where she feels she will be treated much better. She experiences complete serenity — and, from what I can tell, complete lucidity — in her new space, even stating that she "feels free from Original Sin" (*Memento Mori* 186). That is, her peace is undisturbed until three weeks into her stay when Godfrey comes to visit. In an eerily similar scene to the one described in reference to Lise's emotional outburst in her workplace, the reader can see the hysterical woman trope perpetuated and affirmed through Charmian and Godfrey's relationship. When he comes to visit her for the first time, he is residually gleeful from learning from Jean Taylor (with Alec Warner, an amateur social scientist and friend of the family, as conduit) that Charmian, like himself, had an extended affair in their younger days. The two briefly discuss the matter and then, the conversation is abruptly ended when Godfrey mentions that Alec Warner is "losing control of his faculties" (*Memento Mori* 205). He explains to her that Alec wanted to take his pulse and temperature as reasoning for this, which Charmian happens to know is an occurrence well-within the norm. In response to the irony of Godfrey misunderstanding the situation while accusing others of being mentally incapacitated, "Charmian began to laugh, and could not stop, and eventually had to be put to bed, while Godfrey was taken away and given a soft-boiled egg with thin bread and butter, and sent off home" (Ibid.). Of course, the irony is then underscored by Charmian being perceived as over-excited, with the overtone being that she had worked herself into hysteria, indicated by "could not stop". This ultimately results in Godfrey appearing more credible to other characters, even though Charmian's response, while maybe disproportionate, is in alignment with the text's

rational aspect. Spark utilizes the trope of the hysterical woman in a way that seems to indicate she is hinting at the banality of existing with the absurdity of the woman's condition. In a world where man's experience is privileged over woman's, where his voice counts for more than hers, and where his actions have negative ramifications for her life, it is clear that there is a painful disparity that can only be overcome by one's realization that the desire for control is a fruitless one and should be treated with wariness.

Through Jean Taylor, Spark shows how there is one singular character through whose eyes the reader can see the happenings in the text and the behavior of other characters lucidly, allowing for a redemptive reading of an otherwise bleak text. Taylor, who was once Charmian's "companion-maid"[22] and who now resides in a nursing home (*Memento Mori* 13), is one of the only characters who has an affinity for Charmian and is empathetic towards her. Taylor philosophizes often, especially about the condition of aging, and she provides some of the only moments of lucidity and rationality in this text. When we meet her, she is considering the ways in which people age differently; she reflects:

> Why do some people lose their memories, some their hearing? Why do some talk of their youth and others of their wills? She thought of Dame Lettie Colston who had all her senses intact, and yet played a real will-game, attempting to keep the two nephews in suspense, enemies of each other. And Charmian . . . Poor Charmian, since her stroke. How muddled she was about most things, and yet perfectly sensible when she discussed

[22] In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, Siobhan Somerville writes on "queer companionship" and the idea that 'companion' first refers to a state of being in habituation with someone else, but it can also refer to being on a physical journey with someone (11). The implication of "companion-maid," then, is that Jean Taylor and Charmian have a complex relationship of co-habitation and also hierarchy in both temporal and spatial terms. With this in mind, Taylor's fondness for Charmian is all the more pertinent since it transcends the boundaries of hierarchy, space, and time.

the books she had written. Quite clear on just that one thing, the subject of her books. (*Memento Mori* 14)

Firstly, when the reader sees how Taylor speaks of Dame Lettie, it's clear that her disdain is motivated by different slants on the issues in the text than other characters. While Godfrey is disdainful of people getting older and losing their cognitive function, and while Dame Lettie holds characters in distrust if they don't align themselves with her judgments, Jean Taylor feels contempt for those who do not behave kindly. Given that she is by far the most clear-headed and pensive character in the book, the reader tends to have confidence in her judgments. Her reflection on Charmian's condition, then, gives a more nuanced understanding of the position Charmian is in: this is the first moment the reader learns that Charmian is capable of remembering and experiencing a semblance of reality. This initially permits her automatic agency with the reader since she is cast in the light of potentially being capable. She is multifaceted, which Taylor reinforces, and which Godfrey and Dame Lettie fail to acknowledge or accept. Taylor's role contributes to a more positive spin on a woman's absurd then. The reader learns that, while the relationship between aging and agency is fraught and often debilitating, there is some solace in the recognition that whether Charmian is lucid or not, she is deserving of dignity and, since Taylor is the most reliable character in this text and also is the one who asserts Charmian's dignity, a degree of trust in the ability for one to survive amidst the absurdity of the woman's condition is restored.

While there is a dire need for the restoration of faith that the woman's condition is not an entirely damning concept, this does not come from the men in *Memento Mori*. Again, through the male characters' insistent need to render their female counterparts feeble and inadequate, Spark demonstrates the role of a woman's absurd in highlighting the way that men attempt to strip women of any semblance of agency, especially women in a vulnerable social position, such

as those who are aging. During one of many visits to Taylor, Alec Warner slips into a thought-pattern that is reminiscent of Godfrey's fixation on loss of cognitive faculty, and one cannot help but wonder why it is only men in this text who imply a tenuous relationship between other characters (primarily women characters) and their relative grip on reality. On this occasion, Taylor asks Alec — who the reader learns was once Taylor's lover — if he is making the telephone calls that are wracking the community. He doesn't respond straight away, and dodges the question but "the thought crossed his mind, among other thoughts, that Jean's brain might be undergoing a softening process" (*Memento Mori* 67). As Alec studies Taylor, trying to discern whether she is present or not, he notices that she is, in fact, extremely lucid: "[he] looked carefully at her eyes and saw the grey ring round the edge of the cornea, the arcus senilis.[23] Nevertheless, it surrounded the main thing, a continuing intelligence amongst the ruins" (ibid.). Alec knows Jean has her faculties, judging by the use of "the main thing" ascribed to the part of her eye that is stand-in for her intelligence. While Alec, we know, is not the purported individual threatening the community, his avoidance is nonetheless troubling because, in conjunction with the fact that "[he] never spoke so to men" (68), it indicates his lack of patience for Taylor's questions, and notes of sexism are hinted at as the premise for his proclivity for discounting women, which he often does.

Memento Mori achieves and affirms a woman's absurd because it toys with the element of realism that would historically deem women who are in cognitive decline hysterical, and thus, endows the likes of Charmian and Taylor with a dubious sense of agency through the way they discomfit other — primarily male — characters who are chiefly concerned with loss of cognitive

[23] Here, Spark is enjoying some word play. The *Arcus Senilis* is the lipid filled tissue that proliferates around the iris, usually as one ages. The Latin translates roughly to "arc of the elderly," but one cannot help pausing over the connotation of the modern meaning of "senile" as Alec attempts to write Jean off as suffering with degenerating cognitive abilities.

faculty. Charmian's character demonstrates how unrealistic it is to be in a state of having control over one's life and body since sometimes she is lucid and others not. Spark portrays Charmian with a certain dignity and provides a more nuanced understanding of her illness and others like it than is typically represented in texts, leading to a more compassionate rendering and thus, a more sympathetic audience who will recognize Charmian as having greater degrees of agency than many of the other characters believe. Similarly, Taylor who is extremely lucid and self-aware is granted some agency through the reader's access to her interior experience despite the likes of Dame Lettie and Alec attempting to discount her position as the one character who provides great insight into the implications of the plot. In portraying Charmian and Taylor with certain degrees of agency through their relative levels of lucidity, and by posturing them in contrast with the likes of Alec and Godfrey, Spark uses an alteration of the hysterical woman trope to demonstrate the simultaneous injustice of the absurdity of the woman's condition and its ability to equip women characters with dignity through their rejection of the way they're treated.

Sex and Death

The texts discussed in this thesis are ridden with anxieties that can primarily be considered as surrounding sex and surrounding death. Often the two blur each other's boundaries and instigate a distortion in the reader's understanding of what one means to the other. Ultimately, these anxieties underpinning the texts that can be distilled into the themes of sex and death are motivated by a desire for control, which has already been established as a thankless and inconsequential endeavor. Through navigating this relationship between sex and death in *The Driver's Seat*, *Memento Mori*, and "The Portobello Road," Spark initiates a discussion centered around how agency is either achieved or obfuscated by characters either fighting to gain control or accepting that this fight is futile, respectively. For a woman's absurd, this highlights the

struggle against sexual and physical violence from male aggressors, and the never-ending move towards attempting to gain control in a world where there is no such thing.

For Spark, being in the driver's seat is synonymous with being in control. To fully understand *The Driver's Seat*'s namesake motif for control, it is useful to draw upon the parts of the text in which Lise takes the literal driver's seat in order to gain the upper hand over the male aggressors in the story. This is the overarching metaphor for Lise's plot, and we see it happen three distinct times on a micro scale throughout. In the first instance, she gets in the driver's seat to run away from Carlo, then an almost identical situation with Bill, then also to drive Richard to the destination she chose for her place of death. The juxtaposition of these oppositional characters, and how Lise treats each situation, is an interesting one. In the scene with Carlo, he had insisted on driving her to her hotel and eventually did what Lise expected and tried to rape her, at which point she steals his car and drives away. Carlo's attempt to interfere with Lise's careful planning would've been the worst thing possible for Lise, and so in a panic, she forcefully regains authority. With Bill, she incorrectly sees him as the one to execute her suicide-by-proxy and drives him to the Pavilion where she expects him to carry out the murder. When he seizes her to the ground after a struggle, claiming "that if he misses his daily orgasm he has to fit in two the next day. 'And it gives me indigestion,' he says, getting her down on the gravel behind the hedge and out of sight, 'two in one day. And it's got to be a girl'" (*The Driver's Seat* 85). Following from this, Lise is panicked as she is with Carlo, and then quickly regains a facade of composure, driving off in his car back to her hotel. With Richard, Lise's demeanor is entirely different: she is composed and purposeful; meanwhile, Richard is terror-stricken and unable to resist as she calmly drives them both to the Pavilion. The settings in which Lise finds herself driving a car are inherently tied to her need for control either through ensuring that sex is not on the cards or through planning and executing her suicide-by-proxy. This indicates that the

absurdity of the woman's condition, as construed through Lise, is problematized by male aggressors' fixation on sex and sensuality, especially when the woman subject has already determined that death is her response to the absurd. Since Lise's search for agency is blighted by her inability to gain distance from her need for control, the desire to be in control only strengthens and ultimately proves tragic.

The reader gains more insight into Lise's relationship to sex and control in her interactions with the male aggressors where they are in anticipation of having sex with her. Her negative associations with sex pertain to her intense need to be in control – a man who wants to have sex with her ostensibly wants to dominate her, something that Lise could not handle. She has a conversation of this tenor when driving with Richard. When she tells him, "You're a sex maniac" (*The Driver's Seat* 85), as a way of intimidating him by astutely recognizing his character, he composes himself after some back and forth, "'You're afraid of sex,' he says, almost joyfully, as if sensing an opportunity to gain control" (Ibid.). This demonstrates succinctly that, just as men gain control through sex, Lise will attempt to gain control through the execution of her suicide-by-proxy. Moreover, this example serves as a stark reminder that pursuing control is ultimately futile in an absurd existence. If we are to channel Camus, we should reasonably infer that instead, we can pursue life with vigor and vividness. He stresses that "living is keeping the absurd alive" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 54), and in this sense, Lise is misrecognizing the absurdist's point when face-to-face with the absurdity of her existence. She believes that the one true way to gain control is to commit suicide, and her plan, of course, is not made successful because of the unknown variables (i.e., the suitor's ability or desire to follow her instructions), which indicates how living with the absurd and relinquishing control voluntarily is the most viable path to fulfillment. The genre-blending that Spark does with the murder-mystery-come-romance-pursuit in *The Driver's* Seat seems to be a purposeful inversion

of how we conceptualize sex and death in terms of pleasant or unpleasant phenomena. While we usually romanticize finding love, Spark intends for Lise's pursuit of death to be romantic, and the sexual themes to be impediments to the realization of that romantic ending, rather than a part of it. In this way, Lise dispenses with compulsory performances of feminine virtue through her refusal to bend to the men's will, and yet, she is still denied a sense of agency because she feels so vehemently that need for control that gets in the way of one's ability to situate themselves within the absurdity of life.

Another method that Spark uses to place sex and death in conversation is depicting death itself as erotic or sensual. *Memento Mori,* in a less obtuse way than *The Driver's Seat*, approaches death in relation to eroticism. Through depicting most of the characters as living in fear of death and in fear of the calls they've been receiving, Spark recognizes a sensuality related to death that allows the reader to understand how agency, control, and fear are related. As Spark demonstrates through characters such as Charmian and Jean Taylor — who are already established as having relatively more agency than other characters in the text — one's relationship to death is either obstructive to or aids in one's process of accepting the absurdity of life. While Charmian speaks of the telephone caller in a jovial way, stating that it is a "very civil young man" on numerous occasions (*Memento Mori* 144, 149, 187), Taylor discusses the voice in an extremely neutral way, and in fact asserts that the caller is "Death himself" (178). In a conversation with Dame Lettie, she states: "the author of the anonymous telephone calls is Death himself, as you might say. I don't see, Dame Lettie, what you can do about it. If you don't remember Death, Death reminds you to do so. And if you can't cope with the facts the next best thing is to go away for a holiday" (Ibid.). Lettie is the abject personification of how fear not only obstructs agency, but also how it is to one's own detriment, and by placing Lettie and Taylor in conversation like this, Spark shows how starkly the realistic perspective of Taylor is an

improvement on the paranoid, controlling, and fearful perspective of Lettie. The relationship between control and fear, then, is that a need for control is motivated by fear of the unknown and an absurd existence, meanwhile fear and control prevent one from realizing any sense of agency because of the steadfast refusal to let go of the need for clearcut meaning is necessarily restrictive of one's ability to inhabit a space of reason and understand that Death is merely reminding the recipient that they "must die," which is an inevitable fact. The characters' personal insecurities get in the way of their ability to fashion their own meaning out of the calls and this ruptures their ability to see how death and a sensual, erotic experience can go hand-in-hand.

To tackle the issue of death as erotic in *Memento Mori*, I must first talk about the telephone. Twentieth century French thinker, Jacques Derrida was intent, as displayed in *H.C. for Life*, on the telephone as not just an intermediary, but as "thought itself" (Derrida 100). In her article, "Derrida on the Line," Sarah Jackson explores Derrida's position that the telephone is "thought itself": she says, "There's something about the phone that speaks to us in complex ways about presence and absence; its insistent ringing and its clamouring silence disrupt our metaphysical assumptions about proximity and distance, being and not-being" (143). Putting this in the context of *Memento Mori* and into the context of a woman's absurd is helpful for thinking about death — or reminders of death — as a means of embracing life. Use of the telephone, as presented by Derrida, is intimate and is as much an interaction with oneself as it is with the person on the end of the receiver. Apostolou, in their text *Seduction and Death in Muriel Spark's Fiction*, calls the relationship between caller and the characters an "embrace" that they are "seduced" into by the reminder of death itself (196).

The incessant voice at the end of the telephone in this novel, who teases, "remember you must die," is in some ways the principal character in this text, manifesting the characters' needs for control and desires to achieve agency amidst mysterious and ominous reminders from

unrecognizable disembodied voices. It is the absurd manifestation of the fears, hence the voice being specific and distinct to each character: the caller, who we can presume to refer to as Death, as suggested by Jean Taylor and in the narration at the end of the novel, reaches each character through their individualized deep-seated fears co-mingling with their deepest desires to convey the inevitable and immitigable. Death, or the caller, demands of each of the protagonists to recognize the importance of remembering to live, which can only be understood through the recognition that one must die. This is inherently sensualized because of the intimate nature of the call and the lack of plausibility — no one can be sure that anyone else is receiving the calls apart from them — and, ultimately, the intimate relationship they enter with Death is indicative of their deepest fears and deepest desires.

When Godfrey first receives a call from death, he immediately seeks comfort in Mrs. Pettigrew, who has become a beacon for him in whom to confide and from whom to derive sexual pleasure. The contrast between his horror and confusion at receiving the phone call and his detailed expression of Mrs. Pettigrew's appearance that unequivocally denotes his arousal is stunning. When the caller tells him, "Remember you must die," Godfrey protests, stating that Dame Lettie isn't here, and when assured the call is for him, the narrative moves into a description of his aging physical appearance as a means of making him seem enfeebled (*Memento Mori* 121). Then, when he looks to Mrs. Pettigrew for reassurance, he studies her closely in what must be the span of only a moment. His description of her indicates a complex relationship between his sexual attraction to her and his perception of her as aged:

> She came back, spritely in her black dress and the new white-streaked lock of hair among the very black, sweeping from her brow. Her hair had been cut shorter. She had painted her nails pink and wore two large rings which gave an appearance of opulent ancient

majesty to the long wrinkled hand which held Godfrey's glass of brandy and soda. (*Memento Mori* 122)

While this description is matter-of-fact, the acuteness with which he observes her is unsettling. By juxtaposing this relationship with Mrs. Pettigrew — a relationship which the reader is already mildly perturbed by, owed to how his fixation on watching her mirrors his fixation with young Olive Mannering — with his proximity to death, Spark creates a subversive experience of the morbid sensuality in *Memento Mori* that is a quintessence of her writing.

Absurdity of the woman's condition is in juxtaposition with that of the man, but it is necessarily a diametric opposition. The corpus of the male-centered absurdist tradition is, in many ways, indistinguishable from the corpus of the subjugation of woman. This is true both because of the glorification of women's suffering in literature more generally, and also because of the overwhelming threat of male violence in women's experience. In the woman's absurd — in Sparkian absurd — there is an overbearing presence of the male aggressor. In "The Portobello Road," for example, in a similar way to *The Driver's Seat*, the female protagonist gains agency through leveraging control over this menacing presence. For Needle, this occurs posthumously, and is conducted by Needle as narrator. In the beginning of the story, she reverses the role of intimidation, reflecting the menace back onto George with her addressing him in her spirit form. The main progression of the story is told in reverse; that is, Needle tells of this confrontation that occurs in a temporal space following the rest of the story, but which is told in the opening of the story. In any case, it is here we are introduced to George as a menacing presence: "I saw then who was with her. I had been half-conscious of the huge man following several paces behind her, and now I noticed him" (*All the Stories* 10). His looming body as the manifestation of the threat of male violence demonstrates a symbol of masculinity that pervades the woman's condition.

The graphic and often erotic nature with which Spark describes death contributes to the understanding that she is writing towards a woman's absurd. One might get the impression in "The Portobello Road," that Needle's death comes at once to soon and perfectly on time. In other words, contrary to the other two texts, death is used in this book as a form of achieving agency for the protagonist since Needle is in the unique position as post-humous narrator. This subverts our understanding of death as completely unknown, coupled with her seeming leveled contentedness with the mundanity of her afterlife, "The Portobello Road" contradicts death as a fearful thing and depicts living with death incredibly ordinary. Needle seems to have only managed a reclamation of self in death. She appears happier, more sure of herself in death. The clarity she has gained inspires her to talk to George and this moment changes the narrative, rendering George fearful while Needle remains indifferent. This countervails the flimsiness of her character in life, which is trite and underdeveloped.

To understand the dynamic here more fully, let's first look to the violent nature of her death: "He looked as if he would murder me and he did. He stuffed hay into my mouth until it could hold no more, kneeling on my body to keep it still, holding both my wrists tight in his huge left hand. I saw the red full lines of his mouth and the white slit of his teeth last thing on earth" (*All the Stories* 30). Not only does this shed light on why the discordant feeling we had in the beginning of this text, it serves to accentuate, again, this toying with sensuality and death that Spark offers again and again. The "red full lines of his mouth," and the "white slit of his teeth" almost goads the reader into considering George as malicious in a sexual manner.

This, contrasted with how George receives post-humous Needle five years later, demonstrates how Needle came into herself only after her death. While she could be described as an assertive character when she was alive, she notes repeatedly that she didn't feel as "lucky" as other people considered her. The nomadic tendencies she held add to the pervasive chaos that

this story lends itself to, and ultimately left her feeling unfulfilled. In the limbo of afterlife, Needle is more content: “There is a pleasurable spread of objects on the counters which I now perceive and exploit with a certain detachment, since it suits with my condition of life . . . I always liked them but far more now that I have no need of any” (*All the Stories* 11). Posthumously, it seems that she does the same as she always has, but this “certain detachment” allows her greater pleasure — she has less of a need for certainty. That’s why her first posthumous interaction with George is such an ingenious role reversal.

Another component in the leveraging of control enacted by Needle is the patheticization of George. This occurs throughout the story, which adds both to the shock factor of the ending (causing a second reading that allows us to see the warning signs). Needle goes on, “It was her husband. The beard was unfamiliar, but I recognised beneath it his enormous mouth, the bright sensuous lips, the large brown eyes forever brimming with pathos” (10). Her description of him, of his “enormous mouth,” “bright sensuous lips, “and the large brown eyes forever brimming with pathos,” gives us permission to render him as an archetype with which women are acutely familiar. The victimhood of a guilty man masquerading as innocent is a common theme in this type of character study. The toying with sexuality and malice is something Spark does often, and it lends itself to a microcosmic depiction of the societal state of violence against women where the male aggressor is typified as the victim and the woman who accuses is vilified.

When the reader learns that, after murdering Needle, “George climbed down, took up his bottle of milk and went his way” (Ibid.). This is as disturbing as it is alluring: Needle ponders the contrast between this moment and the one five years later on the Portobello Road: “I suppose that was why he looked so unwell when I stood, nearly five years later, by the barrow in the Portobello Road and said in easy tones, ‘Hallo, George!’” (Ibid.). Her ‘easy tones’ denote a paradigm shift in the novel wherein George becomes Needle’s victim, but unlike George, Needle

is absolved of her misgiving in death and George's pathos is almost pitiable as we consider the redemptive power of suffering. There is a discrepancy between the gore of Needle's murder and her peaceful contentedness in death. Through contrasting suffering at the end of life with Needle's seeming lack of visceral emotion in death, Spark highlights how being relinquished from life may be a relief and this could be a legitimate means of revolt against a woman's absurd existence that is a result of systemic male violence against women that disempowers and subjugates. This subversion of the typical narrative, then, gives agency and permits the woman character to rise above the oppressive forces imposed by male-centric systems.

Coping with Grave Things

How one chooses to treat and respond to the absurd is, in general, contentious. This is as true for those who don't particularly think of the absurdity of human existence as it is for the likes of Sartre and Camus. Through acceptance of one's subject position within an absurd existence, one can begin to make amends with this incongruous existence and get comfortable in the discomfort of knowing that life is, at its core, meaningless. To do this, one must find ways to either simply be okay settling into the meaninglessness and going through with life anyway or to see the light in life when it might not be immediately apparent. When death underpins the whole anxiety relating to an absurd existence, one has the choice of accepting, even reveling in this reality, or of becoming unable to reconcile one's intrinsic sense of self with the world, and ultimately, struggling to move through life at all. The former is the remedy to the latter. When one can 'play the game' of life, as if it is inconsequential whether one 'wins' or 'loses,' one becomes more capable of seeing through the veil of suffering to reveal a more vibrant lived experience. This, too, is true for coping through humor: if one takes the absurdity of the human condition too seriously, the endpoint is likely suicide or murder; the other option is to make light of it and move forward in that way. In the beginning of this discussion of Muriel Spark and the absurd, I ask the question *what role does absurdist literature fulfill?* I argue that it's antithetical to the larger project of the absurd to try to find a definitive answer to this question. Still, it's helpful to think about this question as we broach issues that make meaning-making in an existence that is inherently meaningless hard to reconcile, forcing us to ask again and again, *well, what is it all for?*

In a woman's absurd, this question takes on a new shape and becomes arguably more crucial for the prosperity of the individuals and communities its implications affect. In a woman's absurd existence, the danger to one's life, or at the very least their intrinsic quality of

life, is more pressing due to the never-ending violence imparted by the cultural hegemony of the white cisheteropatriarchy. Every single woman I have spoken to on the subject in the past has been forthcoming that they have had at least one — but often multiple — violent, predatory, or otherwise negative interactions with men. This is not a joke; it is a systemic problem and needs be addressed. However, when women can reclaim their absurd existence and make light of it (through the likes of support from and supporting other women and empowering themselves and others to speak up and speak back) the vibrancy of life may return. And it's integral to woman's existence that that vibrancy *does* return.

When the reader examines what it means to read a text about the futility of existing as a woman in this world where one must imbue a concept, practice, or material object with their own sense of subjective meaning, they find that a woman's absurd is necessarily concerned with a radical acceptance of one's powerlessness when faced with an essentially meaningless existence that is compounded by subjugation and subordination. The alternative to this is incredibly doleful. The individual becomes despondent, and eventually incompatible with life. When asking, *what is it all for?* the interpreter of a woman's absurdist text bears in mind the extent to which a woman has a lot more to lose from being unable to make meaning than their male counterparts. The push and pull of pain and joy that is a given in an existence wherein the meaninglessness is a motivating factor for women to emancipate themselves from the meaninglessness inherent in existing in a world which is hostile to their existence. The body of woman's absurdist literature becomes an exercise in hope and empowerment through acceptance of one's subject position. The traditions of the literary and philosophical absurd is entrenched in a far larger enterprise of keeping women subjugated through erasure, misrepresentation, or maltreatment. This particular tradition lends itself to a woman's reclamation, especially owing to

its use of play and humor, which are necessarily exercised by women who hope to sustain themselves within the absurdity of the woman's condition.

Playing the Game

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of absurdist literature to readers is its insistence on the problem of making meaning and finding purpose in an essentially meaningless existence. Some argue that the absurd is vying for flipping this narrative on its head and approaching life — if it is, in fact, meaningless — with an attitude akin to playing life like a game, with no particular need to 'play' but nonetheless, fulfilling one's desires and still living purposefully and happily. In other words, if it's meaningless in the end, one might as well play the game and see where it takes them. Many argue that the absurd highlights, makes light of, and aids in processing this meaningless existence.

In *Memento Mori*, Jean Taylor, as explicated in other areas of this thesis, provides an anchor in a text where there aren't many stable places to land. She 'plays the game', so to speak. The reader can see this with regards to her suffering associated with indignities of getting older, and in the pain she experiences due to her degenerative physical condition. Upon first arriving in the nursing home, right around the time her physical symptoms are proliferating, Taylor is miserable and struggles to make amends with her situation:

> A year ago, when Miss Taylor had been admitted to the ward, she had suffered misery when addressed as Granny Taylor, and she thought she would rather die in a ditch than be kept alive under such conditions. But she was a woman practised in restraint; she never displayed her resentment. The lacerating familiarity of the nurses' treatment merged in with her arthritis, and she bore them both as long as she could without complaint. (*Memento Mori* 14-15)

It's clear that this could've pushed Taylor towards a path that would not entitle her to as much agency and dignity as she has at present, but she was enabled to bear the suffering since she was "practised in restraint" (Ibid.). Then, after spending about a year there, she "resolved to make her suffering a voluntary affair" (15) and "gained from this state of mind a decided and visible dignity, at the same time as she lost her stoical resistance to pain. She complained more, called often for the bed pan, and did not hesitate, on one occasion when the nurse was dilatory, to wet the bed as the other grannies did so frequently" (Ibid.). This can be seen as a resignation to one's unfortunate circumstances, and in part, it is. Also, though, it is an incredible feat of strength that allows Taylor to be inscribed with agency and play life like a game.

For those who cannot fashion their own meaning out of life, the only viable option is 'not playing,' perhaps leading into a premature death.[24] Mortality and the futility of life in absurdist literature are often conveyed through suicide specifically. We can consider *The Driver's Seat* as an example. Lise commits a suicide-by-proxy as a means of regaining control of her chaotic existence. The eventuality of this novella is Lise's death; the means, method, and site of which are all her own choosing. Not by her own hand, but ostensibly with her in the proverbial driver's seat. Of course, the rape in the end does raise the question of her relative autonomy over the situation and why, after planning meticulously, her desperate need for control was not realized. Was she in the driver's seat? Was her elaborate planning of her own murder an attempt to maintain control in a world over which her power was fraught at best and, in all likelihood, inconsequential? Or, perhaps, was it a byproduct of Lise's ostensible mental illness that is hinted at so heavily throughout the book? It's important to bear in mind that we never receive direct insight into Lise's consciousness and so it's impossible to say whether she is delusional or

[24] "Premature" in the sense that, through losing the *will* to live, they in some fashion are already dead before they actually meet their end. Elderly characters, too, can die prematurely.

whether she is simply perceived to be. If she is, then this would be a perfect analogy between the diseased mind and the disease of the human condition. If she is not, then her perceived delusion would corroborate the idea that Lise is profoundly misunderstood, and this of course also lends itself to an absurdist interpretation since the self-actualization that would have allowed Lise to transcend the mundane and also accept her subject position is made unattainable. This reality is imbricated with her inability to reconcile the chaotic meaninglessness of her existence, and thus, lends itself to her suicide.

In a similar way to the discussion of *Memento Mori* and the telephone as "thought itself," Lise, too, receives an intriguing phone call. In an abrupt and barely-there transition, we learn she is on the phone with an unnamed caller, who simply says: "'Well, enjoy yourself Lise,' says the voice on the telephone. 'Send me a card.'" (*The Driver's Seat* 9). The emphasis on the caller simply being a "voice" tells me that Lise and her response is to be foregrounded over the caller.[25] What is especially interesting about this moment on the phone, is Lise's reaction:

> "Oh, of course," Lise says, and when she has hung up she laughs heartily. She does not stop. She goes to the wash-basin and fills a glass of water, which she drinks, gurgling, then another, and still nearly choking she drinks another. She has stopped laughing, and now breathing heavily says to the mute telephone, "Of course. Oh, of course". (Ibid.)

The unsettling laughter that she struggles to control is quickly replaced by the almost somber interaction she has with the "mute telephone". The interaction de-emphasizes the role of the "voice" who she spoke with moments before and underscores the importance of the phone as a platform for understanding the complexity that it presents; as Jackson puts it so adroitly, the

[25] It is interesting to note that she doesn't appear to have close contact with any friends or family members outside of the context of this telephone call, so in a different interrogation of this text, I'm sure it would be important to consider the role of the caller.

telephone is reminiscent of a liminality that can only come from the relationship between *there* and *not there*, *closeness* and *distance*, and "*being*" and *"not being*" that the telephone enables (143). Liminality permits the reader to suspend disbelief and latch onto this spatial and metaphysical tension between, essentially, existence and non-existence, which is especially intriguing given the circumstance of Lise's trip. She will "enjoy" herself, in a sense (or at least, so it seems), and she won't be sending the caller a card, but the friction that the telephone represents, then, is a conduit for understanding Lise's trip as a liminal intermediary between life and death. The somber "oh, of course," that Lise delivers to the silent phone, in a way is a sad concession to the reality of her condition: she cannot exist within the confines of the absurd (woman's) condition.

Playing, Playfulness, and Humor

The absurd in literature, just as in theatre, is a form that necessitates and — luckily — enables humor. The various shapes that absurdism can take are each able to lend themselves to humor because, regardless of the genre, they arise from the same tradition, which is predicated on the essential meaninglessness of life, a notion that is simply too heavy to convey without ridiculous gesticulation and is equally too much to consume unless we embrace the levity therein. Arnold Hinchliffe writes, in his eminent text published in 1969, a more precise explanation for why we're able to laugh at the misfortune that absurdist texts entrust to us, knowing that we can handle it with equal levels of gravity. He says, "We find it very difficult to identify with characters in Absurd drama (thus can laugh at them): but where Brecht hoped to 'activate the audience's critical, intellectual attitude', Absurd drama speaks 'to a deeper level of the audience's mind'" (Hinchliffe 12). Through humor in the absurd, we are able to process the level of 'darkness' associated with death and dying while also acknowledging that we know nothing about what awaits us at the other side, resulting in the cocktail of emotions — a sort of

combinatorial explosion — that allows us to welcome in whatever destabilizing forces absurdist perspectives have to offer.

Humor in a woman's absurd, however, takes on something far more complex and sophisticated than the male-centric equivalent. Most men find men and men's humor funny, and in my experience, they do not typically find women funny (or consequential at all) unless they are attracted to them, and when men laugh with women, their voices are often laced with artifice. Humor is a cultural institution, and like any institution, it is governed by hegemonic order and social and cultural capital, over which, cisgendered men have the monopoly. Woman's humor, as I see it, is a liberatory mechanism, one that is permitted by — and makes permissible — the disentanglement from men and their use of humor as just another tool of oppression. Once a woman can find humor that suits her and not that humor — that is usually executed at a subordinate class's expense — which she has previously been forced to awkwardly and gingerly navigate with attentiveness to the male ego, she can begin to see her own intrinsic worth, enjoy her own sense of self, supplemented nicely by her new-found appreciation for her own sense of humor. The role of humor in the Spark texts that this thesis takes on is dual: the first purpose is to liberate women characters from oppressive misogynistic structures, granting them agency over their own stories; the second is the more simplistic and pragmatic function of making the absurdity of the woman's condition much easier to take in. This discussion of Muriel Spark and the absurd demonstrates how Spark achieves this through mapping the throughline between subversion of reality promoting agency, the task of meaning-making in a meaningless existence, and liberating oneself and others from male-centric humor through writing and reading one's self into existence.[26]

[26] For a definition of self-actualization, see Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs". A couple of good contemporary texts to read for self-actualization through representation in literature is Yvonne Troll's *Writing Oneself into Existence: The Yellow Wallpaper and the Question of Female Self-*

Lise, Needle, and the whole cast of *Memento Mori* are redeemed by their humor; and Spark, too is redeemed by hers. One might wonder how someone can be writing something so dark, while giving rise to emotional confusion that leads to laughter — even if it is sometimes uncomfortable laughter — we can't help wondering, is she — are *we* — doing a bad thing by engaging with these warped stories? The answer, as always, is complicated, but I don't think so much so that we can't begin to consider it. Spark allows us to become one with the story, but deliberately leaves our protagonists at a distance, allowing us to furrow our brows in amusement or bemusement relative to what we are reading. She doesn't make room for questioning the story's reality, and thus forces us to integrate it into a new mental model that makes room for vast and scary concepts. Despite these texts being gruesome and often downright graphic, they serve a purpose of enlightening (and, of course, entertaining) the audience.

The opening of "The Portobello Road" provides some levity in a sense, while also setting the ominous and discordant tone that this text exudes: "One day in my young youth at high summer, lolling with my lovely companions upon a haystack, I found a needle" (*All the Stories* 8). The metaphor — if one can call it that — of the Needle in the haystack is unsubstantial and makes little impact on the story other than to juxtapose this lighthearted moment with the extremely vivid and awful way that Needle is killed at the end. Regardless, it is a quirky and unique means of storytelling, and because it does allude to the gruesome ending, it functions as a feature of absurdism with the link between the nonsensical plot point and the dark outcome. These two aspects are married by the humor that is contained in the analogy. The analogy, too, is congruent with the circularity that is so characteristic of absurdist texts: with Needle contained in the haystack at the end, not found for quite some time, the story circles back to the way that

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Definition, and "Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* Writing Oneself into Being" by Matias Corbett Garcez, which appears in ECHOES*: Reflections on Language and Literature* journal's 2014 edition.

Needle found the needle those years before, and that needle was probably in the haystack for a long time (given the rare odds of finding one that gives the saying its credence). Through this turn, we see Needle return to her youth in the days before life got complicated. It's interesting to think about the way this cycle models the narrative form. The story begins and ends with the same moment, with references to that moment captured in a photograph of when they were young and carefree, sitting on a haystack — notably with George behind the camera and not in the frame. In this light, the joke becomes melancholy, or maybe nostalgic. The joke models the narrative arc in the same way the Portobello Road does: it begins as something pleasant, funny even — before we knew Needle had been killed — and ends in a way that is still cast in a fond light, but it has evolved alongside Needle as the story progressed. What can we make of the dark humor here, then? At the elemental level, this short story uses complex narrative techniques with an extended metaphor that hangs heavily over the whole narrative, a metaphor that is mildly funny on the surface, and richly dark and complex when it is stripped back further. This metaphor, or joke, is the gel that holds this story together and makes it so unique. A sense of humor, even a quiet and subtly amusing one that is shrouded in a morbid exterior, is what makes Needle memorable. Her humor is deeply and intricately reactive to her murder — before which her character seemed to have very little depth[27] — and often the execution of it is chilling. But she does evoke genuine laughter at times.

The feeling builds as the prose continues: "Already and privately for some years I had been guessing that I was set apart from the common run, but this of the needle attested the fact to my whole public: George, Kathleen and Skinny. I sucked my thumb, for when I had thrust my

[27] I think this is deliberate. First of all, our vantage point is from Needle in limbo, which she seems to enjoy far more than the life she had lived. Then, there may be the issue of distance from past self, fading or failing memories, or a generalized disinterest in the person she used to be, to name a few arguments in defense of living Needle.

idle hand deep into the hay, the thumb was where the needle had stuck" (Ibid.). The somewhat sober statement from Needle that she had been feeling "set apart from the common run" arouses a sense of graveness that the reader cannot quite pinpoint, and then coupled with the silly story about the needle in the haystack leaves us feeling dizzied; the two notions side-by-side create a discord that we still can't put our finger on. Carrying this emotional disorientation with us, it is only amplified when the scene goes on: "When everyone had recovered George said, 'She put in her thumb and pulled out a plum.' Then away we were into our merciless hacking-hecking laughter again.'" (Ibid.). Given that this is a genuinely funny scene, albeit one we're slightly unsettled by, we largely overlook the discomfort that underpins the beginning of this story, which is set primarily by Spark's tone. The text's tone evinces an underlying discord that permits the reader to realize that this is not a happy story, while also depicting humor in the dry way she does.

Part III: Towards a Woman's Absurd

Conclusion

It has been postulated by a handful of scholars that, should we bring the absurd into the critical contemporary, a "*female* absurd" ought to be considered (Bennett 101). Celeste Derksen wrote of a "feminist absurd" wherein, in the same fashion as myself, she interrogates the "male exclusivity" of absurdism, both as philosophy and in literature (209). The precedent of male exclusivity is set, not through pondering, necessarily, inherently male problems, but instead through the unwavering commitment of male absurdists to presenting ostensibly universal issues. In these instances, maleness is always taken as a default and a given, and so, the content and context for the writing becomes inherently male-centric. One could argue that absurdism is a product of its time, but I find that incredibly reductive. Also in the way that I am attempting to fashion a woman's absurd, Derksen argues (of Margaret Hollingsworth) that her "drama draws from, and is illuminated by, consideration of absurdist technique, philosophy, and subject positions" and delineates how Hollingsworth highlights gender concerns to "[point] to the exclusion — or incomprehension — of gender as a controlling framework of meaning in the established tradition" (209). Women authors whose writing is in alignment with absurdism and who take gendered nuances into consideration should rightfully take up place within the vein of literature and be appreciated in the same ways as their male counterparts.

There is no issue with whether women writers are discussing inherently different problems than men. In fact, it is obvious that these authors and thinkers are occupied with the same problems and present them in their literature in similar ways. When considering absurdists' take on death and dying in general, for example, it quickly becomes clear that Spark's take on death is extremely similar to those of other absurdist writers. In the introduction to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, David Cronenberg refers frequently to aging and death as a convicting presence

in the modern classic. In one instance, he writes: "Is Gregor's transformation a death sentence or, in some way, a fatal diagnosis? Why does the beetle Gregor not survive? Is it his human brain, depressed and sad and melancholy, that betrays the insect's basic sturdiness?" (Kafka 11). He then goes on to talk about his own experience of aging and facing one's mortality, explaining that in some ways it happened overnight, although of course he had birthdays every year. He compares his experience to that of Gregor, citing that "The source of the transformation is the same . . . we both have awakened to a forced awareness of what we really are, and that awareness is profound and irreversible; in each case, the delusion soon proves to be a new, mandatory reality, and life does not continue as it did" (11). Following this "threshold moment,"[28] wherein the subject is disillusioned by a major transition, death is invoked both as a metaphor and as a signifier for phenomena that we can't make sense of: those happenings which underscore how difficult it is to make meaning in a frighteningly at-odds world. There is a clear fixation with death that can be found in every absurd text I can think of, and it is ultimately tied to a reconciliation of one's existence in tandem with the struggle of living a life without meaning or intrinsic purpose.

As far as the texts explored in this thesis are concerned, the characters' relationships to death and dying can be conceptualized in much the same way as Gregor or Cronenberg — be it Lise, Needle, or, well, everyone in *Memento Mori* — in an absurd existence, suffering and desire are always at the fore and always competing for the subject's attention. One's attitude to death is not the issue: the issue is, instead one's attitude to living a meaningless existence. A person without purpose or ability to make meaning is the same thing as a person without direction, but

[28] Al DeCiccio, Director of the Mary G. Walsh Writing Center at Salem State University has developed this theory to depict the sensation that comes from a realization or revelation that is an instantaneous driving force of an irrevocable change in one's interior experience.

not the same as a person without drive: meaninglessness, aimlessness, purposelessness, etc. do not have to denote stagnation. In lieu of a clear guiding principle (such as organized religion), one must learn to find joy and hope in their surroundings rather than a lofty sense of greater purpose.

Establishing the woman's absurd is a project of compassion, connection, and self-assertion. The woman's absurd, through representation of women's issues and through women writers bringing these texts into existence allows a solidarity and collective strength. The male-centric absurd is problematic because it focuses heavily on the nihilistic elements and does not strive to allow anyone to heal through this literature. This absurdist tradition simultaneously fails to acknowledge personhood by universalizing issues and generalizing their characters, and refuses to lean into the collectivity for solace, and instead stakes the claim that existence is a solitary experience devoid of healing or overcoming the absurdity of the human condition. Camus articulates this well in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, though I'm not sure he draws any conclusions. He says: "I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion" (51). While his longing and suffering are jarring and self-evident, his drive to continue in the face of this adversity is challenged. He writes on prevailing against the absurdity of the human condition through resistance, and I draw a lot of my theory from him, but his manifesto lacks momentum, primarily because it is so exclusionary and refuses to see the pain that even absurdist literature as an institution inflicts on those who are left out of the conversation. The woman's absurd, in some sense, is an inversion of the traditional, male-centric absurd since it argues for solidarity and collective strength in light of unsettling inquietude and acute interior suffering that is derivative

of the absurdist's plight, rather than foregrounding the individualistic and institutionalized project of alienation that has been the male-centric, universalized absurd.

We are looking at Muriel Spark as a prototype for considering what a woman's absurd might look like. In imagining women characters with complex relationships to agency, Spark allows the reader to interpret a woman's absurd that makes sense of the world in terms of meaninglessness and living anyway. She is not, by any means, the definitive author for understanding a woman's absurd, but she does provide a viable way into some of these issues. It's important to note that this thesis does not claim Spark as a feminist. There is no evidence to suggest Spark existed in feminist spaces and the impression I get is that she found herself as liberated and of having agency without the need for a movement. Her texts deal with women's issues and may be interpreted as feminist by others, but as it stands, I do not feel comfortable ascribing the feminist label to Spark. That is not to say a feminist absurd should not exist. In fact, Celeste Derksen, as we've seen, sets a strong precedent for this in her 2002 paper of the same name. Should this subject be tackled again — especially given the increasing relevance of absurdist literature to this juncture in history — it must be through the lens of intersectional feminism.[29]

[29] What this might look like entails texts taking poststructuralist theories as their baseline and using the likes of crip theory, critical race theory, and Marxist philosophy to critique and dissect the existing canon and reformulate the literary absurd into something that is pertinent to 21st Century readers.

Further Considerations

While this is an inconclusive and uncomprehensive study in Muriel Spark and an inquiry into the existence of a woman's absurd, it should be said that these claims are worth pursuing. The absurd in literature is incredibly potent at this stage in history when we are nearing the end of a global pandemic and, at the same time, seem to be entering into a new war period. What's more, with greater attentiveness to women's issues and women's voices in recent years, it's important to understand the ever-burgeoning relevance of not only the absurdity of existence, but also the absurdity of existing in a body that is put to war every single day (namely, bodies of those who are not the default in a largely white and cisheteronormative domain), all within a world that is crumbling. There seems to be a trend of resurgence in absurdist literature, or I should say, a neo-absurdist literature. I think of contemporary texts such as *Cloud Cuckoo Land* by Anthony Doerr and *The Starless Sea* by Erin Morgenstern; these, too, are genre-blending — the exist somewhere between epic fairytale and absurd commentary, and certainly fall into the category of the absurd per the parameters this thesis has established.

I want to address absurdist literature's role in all of this, as I alluded to in the beginning. Literature serves a purpose more than merely entertaining, although it certainly does that too. It fulfills a unique position in our world of opening us up to other worlds — to other people. We get insight into the minds of others while also being able to interact with their thoughts (as far as they are articulated on paper, anyway) and reformulating our worldview having gained something from each reading experience, the good and the bad. Absurdist literature, then, is in my view the grandest attempt at challenging the preexisting notions of the human condition that has ever been made. It is about, as Ian Rankin said of Spark in his essay of the same name, "Surface and Structure". The structure of the absurdist mode is complex and layered. The genius

is in the surface-level — it usually doesn't involve an intricate plot. It navigates an uncomplicated basic plot with deviations and unexpected outcomes or endings that shock, surprise, or otherwise evoke strong emotion.

Spark does this well. While *The Driver's Seat* may represent an anomaly here in terms of complicated plot, *Memento Mori*'s basic premise is clear and fairly mundane, with an ending that makes for an unsettling reread. Similarly, "The Portobello Road" simply follows a group of friends as they grow up and apart, it isn't until one reads the ending that the tone of the text reads in a very different light. This can be said for *The Driver's Seat*, too. Although its plot is more involved, we aren't quite sure throughout what is happening, or necessarily what the outcome will be, and when the ending comes — even if we are somewhat expecting it — we are disturbed all the same. Spark has an excellent way of writing to unsettle, to destabilize, and to force us to question. This is at the crux of what the absurd does; literature of the absurd is working to construct a world which looks not entirely untoward on the surface, but that becomes sinister when one looks for too long. We can say that this mirrors the world in which we live, to an extent. Perhaps this is why the absurd is so unsettling, it holds up a looking glass to us and says, 'this is you. us. our world. what we have done'.

If we are to adhere to the consensus that Soren Kierkengaard's *Fear and Trembling* or Descartes, even, is responsible for the onset of the absurd, one might reasonably want to infer religion as a solution. If we think of religion more broadly, in the way Merriam-Webster calls it "a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith," then we can begin to see a solution that entails seeing our world through new eyes, as literature intends. One where we are ardent and faithful to the cause of creating a better world, and believing in a better world, as Camus might suggest.

There are many questions to be raised at the eventualities this thesis brings us to. However, the one I am most concerned about is that of race and the absurd, a racialized absurd, a marginalized absurd. It is clear that the absurd is not the same for every *body*, and indeed, it shouldn't be — for how can a white man understand the world through the same lens as a Black or Indigenous woman? How can a straight white woman see through the eyes of a queer and disenfranchised Black person? It doesn't work. If this had been a book, rest assured that the question of race would fill the second half. Scholarship, I suspect, will proliferate around questions of the absurd as time passes, as the coming era more and more takes the shape of those past, and it is my sincere hope and genuine belief that the absurd is beginning to present itself in a new light. One of railing against the preexisting conditions that have been set for us, of fulfilling one's desires, and of holding the "essential meaningless of life" up to a magnifying glass, and wondering: *is this all there really is?* and *can we make more of life?* I think we can.

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