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DDIDACTIC DEMONS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH  
FICTION

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A particular phenomenon emerging in several post-war British authors is the odd combination of the moral and the macabre. Demonic personalities dominate a fiction charged with strong didactic currents. Searching for the good within the realms of the grotesque, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles make significant moral statements by using a variety of demonic elements.

Iris Murdoch's shadowy world, for instance, includes the following characters: an exotic European with one blue eye and one brown eye who demonstrates a special talent for mesmerizing his "creatures" into various stages of subservience; an anthropologist who swings a Samurai-sword and transforms a polite historian into a kicking madman; and a retired playwright so entranced with his fantasy about the lost love of his youth that when he finds her at the seashore forty years later, he kidnaps her even though she has accumulated not only seashells but also wrinkles, a moustache, and a violent husband (*The Flight From The Enchanter, A Severed Head, and The Sea, The Sea*). Murdoch's obsessed characters often circulate within eerie settings such as Gothic mansions, secret tunnels, labyrinthian cellars, and desolate seascapes. Some of the most uncanny events, however, take place in public libraries, hospital wards, or on city fire escapes as Murdoch reveals her keen sense of the unexpected in the midst of the commonplace. Sensational events laced with lurid trappings can also color her work: Black Masses, dead pigeons, whips, chains, suicide, murder, and mutilation are all to be found in a novel called *The Nice and the Good*.

Strange events and characters are similarly woven into the fiction of Muriel Spark, who has been described as an author with one foot off the ground.<sup>1</sup> "It is all demonology," says one of her characters.<sup>2</sup> In Spark's novels unusual personalities do often flit about like wraiths. *The Hothouse by the East River* is inhabited by a neurotic whose shadow falls in the wrong direction and who sits by the window hour after hour "seeing things." In *The Driver's Seat* a woman screams in disapproval when she learns that the gaudy dress she is about to buy will not show the blood stains she plans to produce during an appointment with her murderer. And in *Not to Disturb* a group of ghoulish servants make elaborate plans with the media to sell the sensational "inside" story of their masters' imminent murder-suicide,

which they have also helped to arrange; meanwhile in the background thunder rolls, lightning cracks, and "him in the attic" lurches about in lusty madness.

Besides Murdoch and Spark, John Fowles has also on occasion marched along in this phantasmagoric parade. Just as kidnapping becomes the central event in several novels by Murdoch, in Fowles's first novel a deviant young man progresses from collecting butterflies to bottling up beautiful young women. In one of the selections from *The Ebony Tower* an elderly scholar receives a nocturnal visit from an unusual burglar whom the scholar soon refers to as "my young demon." In *The Magus* a remote Greek island forms the backdrop for sorcery, sadism, and a pageant of grotesques in an eerie mingling of the worlds of fact and fantasy.

Along with their interest in the demonic, however, Murdoch, Spark, and Fowles also seem to be firmly committed to exploring their characters' ethical dimensions. In a number of her philosophical essays, Iris Murdoch has explained that moral activity depends upon a constant attention to the otherness of people who are not ourselves. The problem results when we impose fantastic forms or concepts upon contingent reality, including other real people. Just as dominant types mold more formless beings into servile dependency, so too do those in need of a controlling power often enslave themselves to an enchanter figure. We thus create our own demons. Murdoch recognizes that art itself can become a type of enchantment, "a temptation to impose form where perhaps it isn't always appropriate."<sup>3</sup> Thus the creation of art becomes a type of moral activity, as the novelist must constantly try to recognize contingency and construct a "house fit for free characters."<sup>4</sup> Murdoch has acknowledged that as an artist she has sometimes been unable to resist the temptations of form.

Muriel Spark, as well as Iris Murdoch, has expressed an interest in moral philosophy. In an essay on her religious beliefs, Spark states that her career as a novelist began only after her conversion to Roman Catholicism. Although she does not want to belabor this sequence, she admits that her religion has provided her with a type of groundwork from which to write. But as Karl Malkoff has said about Spark's fiction, "God is seen through a glass darkly, if...at all."<sup>5</sup> Muriel Spark has explained that fiction to her is "a kind of parable."<sup>6</sup> Although in *The Public Image* she explores a Murdochian situation where the myth of a celebrity becomes more vital than the woman herself, frequently she uses different moral strategies. Not unlike some of T. S. Eliot's poetic maneuvers, one of Spark's novelistic techniques is to create

clear, sharp images of a moral wasteland, where the ethical statement is expressed more by what is missing than by what is present. Death-in-life situations and characters who are often more spectral than human underline the qualities of compassion and integrity by their conspicuous absence.

In *The Aristos*, John Fowles elucidates some of the ethical ideas informing his fictional world. Like Spark, he calls one of his novels a "parable," and like Murdoch, he sees the danger in imposing a rigid form on shapeless reality. He too recognizes the dangers of labelling and categorizing when "everything is unique in its own existing."<sup>7</sup> In *The Collector*, Frederick Clegg fails to perceive this uniqueness when he mumbles that the best photographs of the naked Miranda were those where the camera cut off her head. Instead of an individual being, Miranda has been turned into a replaceable object, whose form happens to be Clegg's obsession. Miranda too for all her pseudo-liberal jargon really fails (in the Murdochian terminology) to "attend to" Clegg as a unique individual who has an existence separate from her conception of him as a bourgeois bumpkin. When he tells her his name is Ferdinand, she immediately substitutes the label "Caliban" and continues to think of him as such for the rest of the novel. Lastly, in *The Magus* Fowles's cryptic old teacher, like Murdoch's anthropologist, employs magical techniques ultimately to disintoxicate the young protagonist from the illusions he himself has created to avoid a direct confrontation with reality. With Fowles too, aesthetic concerns become ethical concerns. Like Murdoch, he has seen the dangers of form. In *The Aristos* he writes, "Form is a death sentence, matter is eternal life" (p. 14). Perhaps even more than Murdoch, Fowles tries to free his characters from older aesthetic conceptions.

These three novelists teach moral lessons in fiction whose symbolic texture is frequently colored by the demonic. In certain earlier novels by all three authors strange and charismatic individuals such as Honor Klein (*A Severed Head*), Douglas Dougal (*The Ballad of Peckham Rye*), and Maurice Conchis (*The Magus*) are portrayed as Satanic personalities who nevertheless offer moral instruction to particular individuals or groups of people. These didactic demons are usually outsiders whose failure to conform to conventional ethics becomes a prerequisite for their attack on the flimsy moral structures society has erected to keep life civilized. Satanic imagery appropriately surrounds these mentors because they usually force their students to undergo sudden and shocking re-evaluations of their lives which often plunge the dazed pupils into an underworld of the spirit resembling hell. Martin Lynch-Gibbon, the citizens of Peckham Rye, and Nicholas Urfe must

experience a painful descent into their subconscious minds before they can begin to grow into more morally sensitive individuals. All the wine-cellars, underground labyrinths, and basement prisons reinforce this idea of a hellish descent into the hidden regions of the mind. In exploring the fiction of Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles, one therefore finds connections between the fantastic fringes and ethical centers of their novels. The demonic illusions often reflect deficiencies in moral vision. Although a number of these authors' works join the satanic and the moral, three particular novels best exemplify this strange combination.

In no other work by Iris Murdoch does the demonic become more didactic than in *A Severed Head*. Her fifth novel, in fact, traces the education of a protagonist by a forceful teacher whose eerie influence upon her student disturbs him profoundly. But before the terrible lessons begin, the author makes clear the necessity of instruction. Murdoch's decision to allow Martin Lynch-Gibbon to tell his own story seems especially appropriate for a novel which criticizes self-absorption and the consequent failure to "see" the uniqueness of other individuals. On one level the novel delineates Martin's attempt to break out of his own solipsistic point of view. In the opening scene with his mistress Georgie, for instance, Martin admits to himself that he more or less phases her out of existence when he is not with her.<sup>8</sup> When later interests develop, he says, "I could not *see* Georgie anymore" (*SH*, p. 189).

Martin especially likes the "dry way in which [Georgie] accepted our relationship" (*SH*, p. 3). Martin has virtually turned his liaison with Georgie into the type of crystalline aesthetic object which Murdoch attacks in her essay, "Against Dryness." Georgie submits to the rigid form of the relationship carefully prescribed by Martin. Their affair reminds one of a pretty bauble: Georgie has become Martin's secret plaything for whom he likes to buy barbarous necklaces, purple underwear, and black open-work tights. The clandestine nature of the relationship must be preserved. People as well as novels can suffer from a sense of formal closure. Having locked up Georgie in an airtight concept, Martin blinks in contentment over his impression that her apartment with its "warm murmuring fire" seems like "a subterranean place, remote, enclosed, hidden" (*SH*, p. 12).

Since Georgie serves as Martin's toy, the novel appropriately begins during the Christmas season, but this holiday celebrating a famous birth assumes grimly ironic overtones when at the close of the first chapter we learn that Georgie has had an abortion. Although responsible for the pregnancy, Martin has been let off easily by his

secret mistress, who throughout the ordeal remained “calm, laconic, matter-of-fact” (*SH*, p. 13). We are told that, “It had all been quite uncannily painless”—for Martin, that is. Thus the messy contingency of an unwanted child is dealt with as Georgie remains true to the hard crystalline form of the relationship.

Laconic Georgie’s toughness and dryness are complemented by the “dewy radiance” of Martin’s loquacious wife Antonia. If Georgie is somewhat messy, Antonia is meticulously concerned with appearances; while Georgie wears her hair in a “chaotic bun” (*SH*, p. 79), Antonia’s hair is fashioned in a “neat golden ball” (*SH*, p. 56). If Georgie, a twenty-five year old graduate student, in some ways seems like a daughter to the forty-one year old Martin, Antonia, five years older than Martin, could be cast as his mother and has “more than once” been taken as such (*SH*, p. 16). Thus at the opening of the book Martin has achieved a type of formal stasis in his two relationships: “I needed both of them, and having both I possessed the world” (*SH*, p. 21). With sloppy Georgie and fastidious Antonia, Martin Lynch-Gibbon, wine merchant and amateur historian, has seemingly reconciled both his Dionysian and Apollonian impulses.

Both relationships prove to be false, however, because Martin has failed to attend to the real otherness of each woman. He has imposed his own fantastic shapes upon them and has turned them into so many ornaments on a Christmas tree. If Georgie suggests some cheap but curious trinket, Antonia, associated with gold throughout the book, seems like a “rich gilded object” (*SH*, p. 17). Martin’s delicately balanced holiday arrangement is upset when over cocktails one evening Antonia announces that for once she has been doing more than talking to her psychiatrist, Palmer Anderson. They have become lovers and Antonia wants a divorce.

Now roles are reversed and this time Martin becomes somewhat enchanted with both Antonia and Palmer, who as an old friend of the family has established a certain attractiveness for the main character. The book also begins to take on a surrealistic glow as Martin indicates: “the evening of Antonia’s revelation...seemed in retrospect a lurid dream, full of ghoulish configurations and yet somehow mysteriously painless” (*SH*, p. 37). If ghostly figures begin to populate the novel, they are at least friendly ghosts. In fact, Palmer and Antonia desperately want everyone to remain very friendly. His wife and her lover wish to take Martin in, almost adopt him as it were, into their new family. “My child, my dear child,” coos Antonia. Martin’s new “parents” create a pleasant appearance: the aging yet still golden Antonia blends in nicely with fifty-year-old, “beautifully cultivated”

Palmer Anderson, whose “round head,” “soft...silver-grey hair,” and “smooth” young looking face (*SH*, p. 19) all suggest a lifetime of calming people down. Faced with this smiling twosome, Martin does cooperate and accepts his “role of taking it well” (*SH*, p. 34). He conveniently agrees to move out of the family home and into an apartment, although he will always be a welcome guest at Palmer and Antonia’s cheerful residence. He even realizes that the pleasant type of nightmare he is living can be thought of as being rather ordinary: he is simply being “coaxed along to accept an unpleasant truth in a civilized and rational way” (*SH*, p. 31). But although “good manners...assumed the air of a major virtue” (*SH*, p. 20), Martin must learn that gentility does not equal goodness. And this hard lesson must be taught to him by a ghostly personality who seems anything but friendly.

Since Antonia doesn’t want Palmer to go out into the bad weather with his cold, Martin kindly agrees to drive to the train station to meet Palmer’s half-sister Honor Klein. Shrouded in fog and smelling of sulphur and brimstone, Liverpool Street Station reminds Martin of an “image of hell” (*SH*, p. 62). In the midst of this smoky inferno, the sinister figure of Honor Klein slowly appears. In contrast to the soft smooth surfaces of Antonia and Palmer, Honor Klein throughout the book is described in images of hardness and sharpness. Her “curving lips [are] combined with a formidable straightness and narrowness of the eyes and mouth.” She flashes Martin a “keen look” when he first speaks to this “haggard” woman (*SH*, p. 64). Later she actually slashes about with a “hideously sharp” Samurai sword (*SH*, p.118). Also in contrast to the golden aura surrounding Antonia and Palmer, Honor is frequently associated with darkness: she has “short black hair” and “narrow dark eyes” (*SH*, p. 64). At one point her features remind Martin of a face in a “Spanish religious painting, something looking out of darkness, barbarous yet highly conscious” (*SH*, p. 134). In still another scene Martin suffers from the “illusion that [Honor’s] entire face...had become black” (*SH*, p. 134). Finally, Palmer and Antonia’s smiles have been replaced by Honor’s “hint of insolence” (*SH*, p. 63), “surly” looks (*SH*, p.134), and “something animal-like and repellent in that glistening stare” (*SH*, p. 64). At the hellish station the didactic demon swiftly sets to work by remarking, “This is an unexpected courtesy, Mr. Lynch-Gibbon” (*SH*, p. 64). Only gradually does Martin realize the scorn behind her remark: it seems rather odd for a man to be running errands for his wife’s lover.

As the novel progresses, Honor’s assault becomes more direct. In Lawrencian tones she tells Martin that he is a violent man who can no longer “cheat the dark gods” (*SH*, p. 76). By gentleness he only

prolongs this “enchantment of untruth” which Palmer and Antonia have woven around him. She insists that eventually he will “have to become a centaur and kick [his] way out” (*SH*, p. 76). The strange professor must turn Martin himself into a demon in order to draw him out of Antonia and Palmer’s “region of fantasy” and return him to the “real world” (*SH*, p. 70). Martin’s education then resembles the journey through the underworld required of the mythic hero before he could reach his true destination. Man must descend into the nightmarish hell of his subconscious mind before he can discover true reality. Honor serves as Martin’s hellish guide.

On New Year’s Eve Martin calls at Palmer’s residence, where a “yellow sulphurous haze” encases the street lamps (*SH*, p. 110). He finds the happy couple out but comes across Honor Klein in the dining room, which seems so “abnormally dark” that Martin wonders if some of the fog has not drifted in. He soon realizes that Honor has passed into an extreme state, although he does not know the cause of her agitation. Certainly looking like a fiendish instructor, Honor sits at the head of the table with a sharp Samurai-sword which she has removed from the dining room wall. An expert with the weapon, she tells Martin that sword play in Japan is considered a spiritual exercise expressing control and power. Although the title of the book reverberates in various ways throughout the entire novel, one particular meaning is reinforced in this scene as Honor then stands up and tosses first Antonia’s and then Palmer’s soiled dinner napkins into the air. Swiftly wielding the mighty weapon, Honor “decapitates” each napkin and then looks down at the “severed” remains (*SH*, p. 117). The dirty napkins represent Antonia’s and Palmer’s crumpled gentility. As Honor Klein slashes through the symbol of their civilized mentality, she creates for Martin a terrifying demonstration of naked power. Soon the novice “experiences an intense desire to take the sword from her,” as church bells signal the approach of the New Year. The scene forcefully depicts the transfer of demonic energy.

Reluctant to use his new power, Martin several evenings later serves wine to Palmer and Antonia in bed together. But Martin’s subsequent journey into the cellar with a heavy wine crate reminds one of a descent into the id, the dark basement where primitive and demonic forces are unleashed. As Martin swears and stumbles about, he is suddenly interrupted by Honor Klein, “looking down at [him] broodingly.” The didactic taunting continues as she labels him “the knight of infinite humiliation” (*SH*, p. 133). This time, however, the lesson hits home as the polite historian suddenly acts as if he is possessed by a demon. He knocks Honor onto the cellar floor, jumps



on her, and belts her across the face three times. Although she struggles "like a maniac" (*SH*, p. 135), her fiendish pupil cannot be overcome. When Martin's temporary madness ends, Honor Klein quietly glides out into the fog again.

Before too long Martin realizes he desperately loves Honor Klein, whose image becomes "vast across [his] way as the horizon itself or the spread wings of Satan" (*SH*, p. 150). His nightmarish compulsion for her makes his two previous relationships resemble so many pleasant daydreams. He is truly possessed. Honor's hellish instruction of Martin continues as she makes Martin feel the full weight of his responsibility for Georgie Hands, who has ceased to exist for Martin while he has been busy elsewhere. In rebellion against being kept "in cold storage" for so long (*SH*, p. 181), Georgie dallies with Martin's brother, cuts off her hair, sends it to Martin, and finally tries to cut off her life by taking an overdose of pills. As Honor and Martin kneel beside the unconscious Georgie, Honor like an avenging fury casts her eyes upon Martin who says: "She was present to me, but only as a torment, as an apparition; and I knew that I was looking at her as I had never looked at any human being but as one might look at a demon ... Then we both looked down at Georgie" (*SH*, p. 211).

As we have seen, Honor Klein is cloaked in symbolism and myth. Yet the demonic metaphors seem necessary to break through the web of genteel fantasy which Antonia, Palmer, and even Martin himself have tangled about themselves throughout the novel. Just before Martin met Honor, for instance, he had complained of Antonia and Palmer's influence in terms of "a strangler's rope.... I was their prisoner and I choked with it. But I too much feared the darkness beyond" (*SH*, p. 62). The Nietzschean Honor Klein provides the searing force needed to cut through the "tender bond" (*SH*, p. 62) of this civilized trap. Ironically she also provides Martin with the "darkness" that allows him to "see." But does Honor herself emerge from her symbolic demonism and enter the real world?

The imagery suggests that she does. Although the demonic references continue to the end of the book implying that her primitive impulses will never nor should ever be completely submerged, the dark imagery is complemented by pervasive light imagery in the final scenes of the novel, suggesting a type of breakthrough. Martin begins the last chapter of the novel with the words, "I turned all the lights on" (*SH*, p. 242). As Honor stands outside in the "semi-darkness," Martin looks back and lets Honor follow him "in towards the light" (*SH*, p. 245). The pattern continues until the last sentence where he returns the "bright light" of her smile. The intense light imagery suggests that the

two people are finally “seeing” each other as real individuals rather than as mythological monsters or sweet darlings in a civilized fantasy. Honor Klein has used her dark power in order to clarify and liberate. She has shocked Martin into recognizing her unique reality.

Having an apprehension of Honor “which is deeper than ordinary knowledge” (*SH*, p. 220), Martin has desperately tried to approach Honor as an equal. Realizing the destructive nature of her obsession with her brother, Honor has also come to Martin, anticipating the chance of freedom through the recognition of his otherness. Besides the intensified light imagery, the spinning pace of the novel suddenly slows down in this final chapter so that every word, every look, every gesture assumes great importance as two people perhaps for the first time in the novel perceive each other clearly. Martin exults: “An intoxicating sense possessed me that at last we were treating on equal terms. I kept my face stern, but there was so much light within, it must have showed a little” (*SH*, p. 247).

The title of the book thus applies to its form as well as to its content. Murdoch demonstrates that she is not tyrannized by form: in the last chapter she severs the satiric mask of the rest of the novel which has come to resemble a game of musical beds as the reader watches Antonia jet off to Rome with her third lover. In this last chapter the mythic clothing of Honor Klein is loosened. The tone becomes more natural, and no more frivolous Antonias jangle about. Instead, two serious people emerge. The demonic Honor Klein has done her didactic work and can now confront Martin as a real woman. The proof of Martin’s growth lies in the ultimately perceptive narration he has just composed.

Muriel Spark’s *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* also provides a precise example of demonic didacticism in that moral instruction is offered by a trickster who may be the devil himself. By making her devilish protagonist a Scot (named Dougal Douglas), Spark no doubt intends to delight any Calvinists in her reading audience. Although a playful spirit in fact ripples over much of this work, an undercurrent of blood and violence frequently erupts, making the overall effect unsettling.

The basic situation recalls the demonic Honor Klein’s crashing entry into the genteel world of Martin Lynch-Gibbon; only now we are dealing with the working classes rather than the more intellectual upper classes. But like Honor Klein, Dougal is an outsider who plunges into the community, stirs up a lot of mischief, and tears away illusions, forcing people to recognize the superficial nature of the flimsy structures they have tacked together to order their lives. But while Honor Klein influences Martin Lynch-Gibbon in an ultimately positive

way, some of the characters in Spark's novel are shattered when they are made to view reality from a more illuminating perspective. In fact, one critic sees Dougal simply as an evil force who wreaks destruction and chaos upon the formerly tranquil community.<sup>9</sup> Other readers point out that Dougal really does no evil himself but merely acts as a catalyst for the evil churning under the respectable surfaces of society.<sup>10</sup> Karl Malkoff has, however, recognized the morally instructive role that the demonic visitor plays: "What Dougal offers is freedom from the confines of artificial moralities; he preaches the respect for oneself that must precede respect for others."<sup>11</sup>

Honor Klein teaches a similar lesson to Martin Lynch-Gibbon, but Spark's book differs from Murdoch's in that the Scot's demonic traits are not just imagined in the mind of a fanciful first person narrator as in the case of Honor and Martin. In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* the sardonic third-person narrator reports that Dougal asks a number of different characters to feel the bumps where his horns have been sawed off by a plastic surgeon. Dougal's hunched shoulders and claw-like right hand provide him with unnatural dexterity. And he tells about dreams where he appears as the Devil. But Dougal also boasts about having powers of exorcism: "the ability to drive devils out of people."<sup>12</sup> Playing with Dougal's diabolic nature throughout the novel, Spark offers just enough information so that we do not quite believe that Dougal is really supposed to be the Devil nor do we quite believe that he isn't. As Malkoff points out, Dougal's identity remains ambiguous (p. 23). His aversion to sickness, for instance, can signify both a limited sense of compassion and a commitment to health and vitality. To add to the ambiguity, Dougal Douglas sometimes refers to himself as Douglas Dougal.

Another important difference between Murdoch's demonic professor and Spark's fey highlander concerns their commitment to others. While Honor Klein becomes intensely involved with two other characters, Dougal Douglas flits through the novel without ever really establishing any serious relationship with another human being. On one hand, his detached manner makes him look even more devilish, for perhaps only the devil would go to such lengths to cause trouble among people he doesn't really care about. On the other hand, it often seems that Dougal wants to jolt the whole town into a new perception of moral values. It is he, for instance, who classifies the four types of morality observable in Peckham (*B*, p. 94). Although here Dougal is trying to trick a prospective employer into thinking of him as an expert sociologist, he nevertheless does shrewdly assess that in the three most common moral

attitudes in Peckham, people are subordinated to other values, whether it be one's own emotional indulgences, class structure, or money.

One of the citizens of Peckham Rye who has subordinated the individual to other concerns, Mr. V. R. Druce presides as managing director of the local textile plant. As Mr. Druce interviews Douglas for a job as a social researcher at the plant, the managing director becomes a mouthpiece for company values. After he is hired, Dougal engages in a much more intimate chat with the managing director, who by now begins to reveal the insecurity behind his official mask. While Druce pontificates about organizational skill and the "moral fibre" needed to "get on in business," his personal life lacks any real meaning, although here too he clings to artificial structures. His marriage is an empty form: he hasn't talked to his wife since the time five years ago when she mimicked him by quacking like a duck. Since then he only writes notes to her. It doesn't take Dougal long to figure out Druce's unethical motive for staying married. Now an inquisitor, he points an accusing finger at the managing director and states "Mrs. Druce has got money" (*B*, p. 75). Putting his head down on his desk, Druce ends the conversation by breaking into tears, while a co-worker observes, "This place is becoming chaos" (*B*, p. 76).

The statement could apply to both Honor Klein's and Dougal Douglas's attacks on the artificial forms which society erects to establish a semblance of order. Chaotic destruction of superficial forms must precede the creation of true order. The citizens of Peckham Rye have adhered to artificial structures so rigidly that life in the community has become very mechanical. Workers at the textile plant, for instance, are usually associated with their menial assignments such as: "Dawn Waghorn, cone-winder...Odette Mill, uptwister ...and Lucille Potter, gummer" (*B*, p. 14). In contrast to the mechanical forms which make the villagers so predictable, Dougal Douglas often jumps about like Pan in odd and unexpected ways.

Besides the managing director, several other materialistic citizens of Peckham Rye emerge. Unlike Mr. Druce, who at first found Dougal charming, Dixie Morse hates Dougal almost immediately. A typist at the textile plant, Dixie is engaged to "refrigerator engineer," Humphrey Place. Although she realizes Humphrey is being influenced by his new neighbor, she herself remains unimpressed by Dougal's almost supernatural aura. Dixie's character never changes. From the first time we see her scrutinizing her bank book to the last days before her wedding when she reminds her fiancé that his company is offering "plenty of overtime," Dixie thinks mainly of saving her pennies. Her

philosophy of life seems to be: "We need all the money we can get" (*B*, P. 140).

Dixie's limited perspective is reinforced by her mannerisms which suggest a trivial, self-absorbed mind. A description of Dixie eating at a restaurant functions nicely as an objective correlative for her meticulously frugal soul: she "touched the corners of her mouth with a paper napkin, and carefully picking up her knife and fork, continued eating, turning her head a little obliquely to receive each small mouthful" (*B*, p. 115). One senses that if Dixie marries Humphrey, she will eat him up in small mouthfuls too. Humphrey is allowed to go out with his fiancée only once a week so he too can save income. On their mountain rendezvous he carries along two rugs, one for Dixie to sit upon and the other to put over her legs while he sprawls on the damp ground and listens to her complain about their finances. At a restaurant where the waitress spills the coffee into Dixie's saucer, he quickly exchanges cups of coffee, pours the spilled liquid into his cup, and downs it without saying a word. Through a number of such episodes, it becomes clear that in their future marriage, Dixie will dominate and Humphrey will serve.

The situation is ripe for intervention. Strategically located just one floor above Humphrey in Miss Frieme's rooming house, Dougal Douglas frequently invites the naive refrigerator repairman up for talks lasting long into the night. The two men provide a study in contrast. While Humphrey talks seriously about trade unions, Dougal lolls on his bed, fiddles with a knob on the brass bedstead, and finally starts to chatter about a mermaid who plays a harp and writes poetry. When Dougal asks Humphrey if he would like to be married to such a mermaid, he doesn't add "rather than Dixie," but Humphrey seems to understand his meaning. After Humphrey admits that such a marriage would be "fascinating," the demonic qualities of his new friend intensify: "Dougal gazed at Humphrey like a succubus whose mouth is its eyes" (*B*, p. 31). Humphrey's vulnerability makes him easy work for Dougal, whose influence is seen almost immediately. As the Dionysian conductor of human research pours wine down Humphrey's throat and even entertains him with a sprightly dance or two, Humphrey begins to slip off his rigid Apollonian demeanor: "Humphrey laughed deeply with his head thrown back...so Dougal could see the whole inside of his mouth" (*B*, p. 55). As a result of his talks with Dougal, Humphrey becomes increasingly critical of Dixie, accusing her of losing her sexuality because of her preoccupation with money. When she harps that the couple will not be able to afford a new spin-dryer,

Humphrey boldly proclaims, "Oh to hell with your spin-dryer" (*B*, p. 62).

As Dougal continues to stir up the placid waters of Humphrey's soul, he even asks the refrigerator repairman to feel the two bumps on his head. But refusing to recognize the demonic nature of his new friend, Humphrey suggests that the bumps are simply "a couple of cysts" (*B*, p. 86), rather than sawed-off horns. Dougal performs his most devilish piece of mischief, however, on the night that he mocks a traditional wedding ceremony by pretending to be a groom who, when asked the crucial question, says "no." Although Humphrey laughs off Dougal's derisive performance, the seed is planted. Shortly thereafter during his own wedding, when the minister asks if he will take Dixie as his wife, this polite young man distinctly states: "No, to be quite frank, I won't" (*B*, p. 158). He then leaves town, again imitating his friend Dougal, who has become very unpopular among the citizens of Peckham Rye.

Although the last chapter remains inconclusive as Spark provides several endings, many townspeople say that Humphrey returned and finally married Dixie with a crowd of uninvited guests waiting around the church to see if he would say no again. Even though his influence may have been temporary, Dougal Douglas did then make a conventional young man perform an act of daring individuality which could have liberated him from a long, oppressive relationship. And probably as a result of Dougal's influence, this usually unimaginative young man at least glimpses at a more idealistic world as he experiences the most visionary moment of the novel. The book's last words reflect Humphrey's point of view: "It was a sunny day for November, and, as he drove swiftly past the Rye, he saw the children playing there and the women coming home from work with their shopping bags, the Rye for an instant looking like a cloud of green and gold, the people seeming to ride upon it, as you might say there was another world than this" (*B*, p. 160). The other world represents a higher spiritual plane which strangely enough may have been revealed to Humphrey by the devil himself.

In *The Situation of the Novel* Bernard Bergonzi has recognized that along with Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark, John Fowles has produced fiction "at a considerable distance from the well-made realistic novel as conventionally understood."<sup>13</sup> One might compare, for instance, Spark's playful manipulation of form in *The Ballad of Peckman Rye* to Fowles's experimental techniques in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, where Fowles questions the arbitrary power of the author not by imposing one obviously artificial pattern but rather by refusing to

lay down any rigid structure at all and instead providing multiple endings which more directly involve the reader in the art of fiction. This technique reinforces the central theme of freedom as Sarah Woodruff becomes a didactic demon who haunts the Victorian mind of Charles Smithson as she teaches him to look at the world with a more modern, existential awareness.

But one of Fowles's earlier novels serves as a clearer example of demonic didacticism as a result of its more bizarre subject matter and its decidedly moral foundation. Although superficially different, Fowles's *The Magus* and Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head*, when examined more closely, show some interesting similarities. Both are novels of education in which the protagonist proves to be in dire need of instruction. In each work important lessons are taught by powerful, mysterious figures who often seem demonic in the hellish influence they exert on their pupils. In both cases the learning process of the protagonist often resembles a type of psychological descent into hell. At Pelham Crescent Martin Lynch-Gibbon goes down into the wine cellar of his subconscious mind, while on the Greek island of *The Magus* Nicholas Urfe explores the underground of his psyche.

Another important parallel lies in the first-person point of view which in each book reflects the self-absorption of the protagonist. Just as Martin Lynch-Gibbon's solipsistic tendencies are established early in Murdoch's novel, Nicholas Urfe's fundamental egotism is suggested at the outset with the first person pronoun being used ten times in the novel's opening three sentences all of which also begin with "I."<sup>14</sup> Although both men have studied at Oxford, they each need more education in the area of human relationships. Women especially have been victimized by their insensitive egos.

Just as Martin Lynch-Gibbon locks up women in tidy compartments labeled "mistress" and "wife," so too does the younger Nicholas Urfe seem categorical when he veers away from a particular type of female intellectual who "was as familiar as a species of bird" (*M*, p. 26). Nicholas also arrives at a party late so that "the ugly girls... would have been disposed of." In order to net his preferred species of bird, he employs a technique which, according to his statistics, must have been somewhat successful, for he brags, "By the time I left Oxford I was a dozen girls away from virginity" (*M*, p. 21). Nicholas's trick involved being cynical and unpredictable, but then, "like a conjurer with his white rabbit," he would pull out his solitary heart—his loneliness, which proved to be a "deadly weapon with women" (*M*, p. 21). Making his encounters with the opposite sex even more magical and illusory, Nicholas would always quickly disappear, for he became

“almost as neat at ending liaisons as at starting them” (*M*, p. 21). As a college student, Nicholas arranged most of his affairs during the term breaks so that he could easily terminate them by “having to go back to school,” at which time he wore the “Chesterfieldian mask” instead of the lonely one. The imagery of a conjurer and his masks anticipates the title character, who in the course of the novel will turn the tables and use some of the same deceptive techniques on Nicholas himself—a reversal which can support an allegorical interpretation of the novel. In one sense the magus or sorcerer who will function as Nicholas’s didactic demon can be seen as part of Nicholas’s own mind: in many ways the magus, whose name is Conchis, can represent the protagonist’s own moral consciousness. Just as Nicholas deceived young women, Martin Lynch-Gibbon also enchanted Georgie Hands with various illusions (such as a promised trip to New York) before Honor Klein enchanted him and ultimately taught him to preserve his own honor. In spite of the strange personalities whom they designate, the names of both Honor and Conchis thus assume decidedly moral overtones.

One difference is that in Fowles’s novel the satanic instructor turns out to be an older man while in Murdoch’s work a formidable yet captivating older woman takes command. Fowles did at one point consider making the magus character female, but the older man who so powerfully influences Nicholas has at his disposal several distinctly female assistants. Another difference between the two books lies in the fact that more time seems to have elapsed between Nicholas’s telling the tale and its actual occurrence. His tone often tends to be more detached and analytical than Martin’s: Nicholas explains, for instance, that his technique with women during his Oxford period “was calculating, but it was caused less by a true coldness than by my narcissistic belief in the importance of the life-style. I mistook the feeling of relief that dropping a girl always brought for a love of freedom” (*M*, p. 21).

Nicholas’s attitude alters slightly when he meets an Australian girl named Alison Kelly at a party right below his own apartment in Russell Square. After Alison moves in with him, an intense relationship develops, and interestingly the image of the enclosed room surrounding both Georgie Hands from *A Severed Head* and Miranda Grey from *The Collector* is also found in this novel. Because the sister of Alison’s old boyfriend lives immediately below Nicholas, for a time Alison hardly ever leaves Nicholas’s apartment. The protagonist explains:



I went and bought food, and we talked and slept and made love and danced and cooked meals at all hours, *sous les toits*, as remote from ordinary time as we were from the dull London world outside the windows. (*M*, p. 31)

Just as Martin Lynch-Gibbon and Frederick Clegg had closeted girls in secret rooms, so too does Nicholas Urfe collect Alison in a room as well as in an “affaire [which] was like no other [he] had been through” (*M*, p. 35).

Loving Nicholas far more than he cares for her, Alison wants their relationship to become more than just an “affaire.” Yet within five weeks Nicholas seems happy that a new teaching job in a distant land—rather than a new term at Oxford—will provide an easy escape from what has become a stifling situation. While Alison provokes several bitter arguments and even contemplates suicide, Nicholas feels relief that “all this” will soon be over. Like Martin Lynch-Gibbon in the early section of *A Severed Head*, Nicholas Urfe in the first part of *The Magus* has demonstrated a callous indifference to the women he has emotionally imprisoned. Thus both Murdoch and Fowles have set the stage for the entrance of the mysterious figures who will jolt these first-person narrators out of their limited point of view and into a new moral perspective.

But while Martin Lynch-Gibbon had to travel only as far as the sulphurous fog at Liverpool Street Station to meet his Satanic mentor, Nicholas Urfe must sail to a remote Greek island before he can begin his nightmarish tour of a psychological hell, carefully designed for him by a wealthy physician who owns a villa called Bourani on the southern end of the island. In London Nicholas had whimsically answered a curious newspaper ad offering a position as an English instructor at the Lord Byron School for Boys on the small Greek island of Phraxos. While job hunting, he had expressed a Romantic desire to travel: “I needed a new land, a new race, a new language; and, although I couldn’t have put it into words then, I needed a new mystery” (*M*, p. 19). He felt that Greece would supply him with this mystery, as indeed it does, but in ways which he never imagined.

The French epigraph introducing the second part of the book describes a scene from DeSade in which a victim is being tortured on a table bordered by religious paintings and candles. Suggesting a black mass, the image sets an ominous tone for the long middle section of the three-part novel. Although not as pervasive as the sulphurous fog creating the hellish landscape for Honor Klein’s entrance into Murdoch’s novel, the “pale smoke” curling up from a rooftop serves as

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the first indication that the secluded villa at the southern end of the island is no longer deserted. Combing the shore line after he sees the smoke, Nicholas discovers a beach towel and some poetry books opened to various passages underlined in red. One passage includes T. S. Eliot's lines from "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploration  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

As well as alluding to the novel's three-part structure with the setting changing from London to Greece and back to London again, the passage points to the book's didactic theme and the new knowledge that Nicholas must attain before traveling back to England to rediscover Alison.

But another passage by Pound indicates that the journey Nicholas must make before he acquires his new knowledge will involve a descent to the underworld:

This sound came in the dark  
First must thou go the road to hell  
And to the bower of Ceres' daughter Proserpine,  
Through overhanging dark, to see Tiresias,  
Eyeless that was, a shade, that is in hell  
So full of knowing that the beefy men know less than he,

Ere thou come to thy road's end.  
    Knowledge the shade of a shade,  
Yet must thou sail after knowledge  
Knowing less than drugged beasts (*Canto XVIII*)

This passage not only reinforces the comparison between Nicholas and Odysseus but also appropriately focuses on one of the central themes of *The Cantos*—the descent into Hades from Homer. Indeed, it soon becomes clear that Nicholas Urfe, like Martin Lynch-Gibbon, must plunge to the deepest regions of his soul before he can bloom into a more sensitive moral being. While Murdoch's protagonist is led to the lower depths by Honor Klein, Nicholas Urfe is conducted on a tour through hell by the wealthy owner of the remote villa, the exotic Maurice Conchis.

Malcolm Bradbury has compared Conchis to "the Psychopomp figures of Iris Murdoch's early novels—Hugo Belfounder, Mischa Fox,

Honor Klein—with their ambiguous philosophical or anthropological charisma...[who represent] forces beyond and outside the familiar orders of society and its states of mind, possessors of ambiguous myths that yet contain both truth and falsehood.” Bradbury maintains that Conchis’s supra-rational knowledge “has the prophetic pull of Honor Klein’s dark wisdom in *A Severed Head*, and the same sense that it is a knowledge beyond the novel’s capacity to register....[As] with *A Severed Head*, the rationalistic underpinning of day-to-day life, with its casual sexual relationships and its vague code of personal relations, is left behind.”<sup>15</sup>

One might extend Bradbury’s analysis to certain polarities in the novels of Muriel Spark, such as the tension between the normally complacent village of Peckham Rye and Douglas Dougal. All three authors use demonic imagery to emphasize the dark powers of their exotic, charismatic figures. In tracing a line from Honor Klein to Douglas Dougal to Maurice Conchis, one does begin to notice a gathering of devils in contemporary British fiction. Their creators no doubt feel that powerful, compelling forces are needed to blast contemporary man out of his moral lethargy.

When Nicholas finally meets Conchis, for instance, his first impression resembles that of Martin Lynch-Gibbon confronting the formidable Honor Klein:

The most striking thing about him was the intensity of his eyes; very dark brown, staring with simian penetration emphasized by the remarkably clear whites; eyes that seemed not quite human....There was something mask-like, emotion-purged, about his face. Deep furrows ran from beside his nose to the corners of his mouth; they suggested experience, command, impatience with fools. He was slightly mad....He kept his ape-like eyes on me. The silence and the stare were alarming...as if he was trying to hypnotize a bird. (*M*, pp. 78-80)

Several images in this passage continue to ripple throughout the novel. The element of disguise prevails. After one of the many strange occurrences on the island, Nicholas looks to Conchis for an answer only to confront the “blank mask of his face” (*M*, p. 185). Similarly a number of Conchis’s associates wear both literal and figurative masks (*M*, pp. 196, 204, 205). The hypnosis imagery also continues. Enigmatic and mysterious, Conchis does actually hypnotize Nicholas after dinner one evening but countless other times captivates Nicholas with his “naturally mesmeric eyes” (*M*, p. 237).

Although Nicholas's curiosity is aroused by Conchis's appearance, the protagonist finds his host's actions even more inscrutable. Besides making cryptic comments, Conchis produces for Nicholas a series of psycho-dramas or bizarre tableaux, which he collectively refers to as "The Masque." Various figures in the masque soon walk offstage and into Nicholas's life so that the young man finds it increasingly difficult to distinguish between illusion and reality. In time he suspects, however, that Conchis is manipulating him for some unknown reason by using these talented performers who never really remove their masks either on or off the stage. In fact, the whole concept of stage and audience disappears as the protagonist becomes more involved in the series of dramas. But the deception becomes so pervasive that Nicholas learns to distrust Conchis and frequently refers to him as that same Arch-trickster who taunted the citizens of Peckham Rye. Whenever Nicholas feels that Conchis has shut down his strange theater, he is made to realize that the apparent end proves to be only an intermission: "The masque had moved outside the domaine, and the old devil had not given in one bit" (*M*, p. 373).

The Satanic references become even more appropriate when in one strange episode Nicholas finds himself imprisoned in an underground chamber and facing the devil himself:

The head was that of a pure black goat: a real goat's head, worn as a kind of cap, so that it stood high off the shoulders of the person beneath, whose real face must have lain behind the shaggy beard. Huge backswept horns, left their natural colour; amber glass eyes; the only ornament, a fat blood-red candle that had been fixed between the horns and lit....I realized that he was lampooning the traditional Christ-figure; the staff was the pastoral crook, the black beard Christ's brown one, the blood-red candle some sort of blasphemous parody of the halo....The goat figure, his satanic majesty, came forward with an archdiabolical dignity and I braced myself for the next development: a black Mass seemed likely. (*M*, p. 502)

After being tied to a whipping post and psychologically tormented, Nicholas considers himself to be "chained in hell" (*M*, p. 530).

Thus one need not search far to find demonic imagery—all of which reinforces the point that the protagonist not only is spending an unusual year on a Greek island but also is embarking upon a journey through Hades. As he himself says, "Always with Conchis one went down, and it seemed one could go no farther; but at the end another way

went even lower" (*M*, p. 515). Like Honor Klein, the demonic Maurice Conchis also proves to be didactic. For the strange masque is designed to show Nicholas that the real devil is lodged within his own soul—especially in his callous treatment of young women like Alison. Many of the tableaux performed on that Greek island reflect Nicholas's own selfish nature. Only gradually does this first-person narrator begin to understand Conchis's cryptic remark: "Greece is like a mirror. It makes you suffer. Then you learn" (*M*, p. 99).

One might hesitate to use such sweeping terms as "the new morality" or perhaps "a rediscovered morality" to describe the didactic impulses of a number of post-war writers. Yet, unlike the formalist preoccupations of modernism, an increasingly orthodox concern for one's fellow man emerges. Murdoch, Spark, and Fowles intend to rout the demons—even though they use methods which themselves often seem diabolic. As Muriel Spark's curious trickster proclaims: "I have the powers of exorcism...the ability to drive devils out of people." Reflecting upon Dougal Douglas's frequent reports that the bumps on his head were caused by the removal of horns by plastic surgery, his friend states, "I thought you were a devil yourself." The Scotsman—both demonic and didactic—replies, "The two states are not incompatible" (*B*, p. 115).

It might be helpful here to consider the larger picture. With the exception of *A Maggot* (depicting both the founder of a religious sect and the Devil), Gothic shadows fall most often throughout the earlier work of John Fowles. But his fiction continues to be highly innovative. Although many of Iris Murdoch's ideas remain constant, her style has changed noticeably. Her later works, longer and more leisurely, emulate the expansive nineteenth-century novels that she has always considered superior to typically crystalline modern works of fiction. After comparing her 1986 novel, *The Good Apprentice*, to several of her earlier books, one must agree with Elizabeth Dipple that in the "protracted subtleties" of her recent technique a new Iris has bloomed.<sup>16</sup> But both Murdoch and Spark have kept close to their original themes late in their careers. In *The Philosopher's Pupil*, Iris Murdoch's 1983 novel, the philosopher maintains, "The holy must try to know the demonic" (p. 196). In Muriel Spark's 1981 novel, *Loitering with Intent*, the heroine confesses, "I was aware of a *daemon* inside me that rejoiced in seeing people as they were" (p. 10). Both novels explore mysterious and even supernatural realms of experience.

Besides looming in the novels of these three modern British authors, didactic demons have appeared in earlier times. Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus certainly learns an important lesson from

Mephistopheles. John Milton's Satan teaches profound truths even though he loses Paradise. In their sensational design, the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe make strong moral comments by focusing on the plight of the victims enthralled by Satanic villains. In the first half of the twentieth century, pedagogical devils appear in Shaw's *Man and Superman* and C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*. Philosophical and playful, these two works fail to explore the psychological complexity of demonic obsession rendered so vividly by the three contemporary novelists.

Other post-war British authors who have combined the demonic and the didactic include Mervyn Peake to a limited degree in *Mr. Pye* and the *Gormenghast* series, Anthony Burgess in *The Eye of Saint Venus*, and William Golding in *Lord of the Flies*, whose title provides the meaning of the Hebrew word "Beelzebub." These authors use demonic elements to react to a permissive postwar society. As Anthony Burgess writes, "Nobody sins anymore...the whole land's...a drawing-room in pink cretonne." Many recent writers therefore create hellish imagery to jolt readers into an awareness of real evil—symbolized in Golding's novel by that satanic pig's head delivering its dark sermon to the mystical Simon. These contemporary novels refute the character from *The Good Apprentice* who says: "Modern science has abolished the difference between good and evil."<sup>17</sup> With their didactic purpose and diabolic texture, Murdoch, Spark, Fowles, Burgess, and Golding teach us to recognize the demons lurking within our own hearts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sir Charles Snow quoted by Derek Stanford, *Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study*, (Fontwell, England, 1963), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Muriel Spark, *The Bachelors* (London, 1961), p. 240.

<sup>3</sup>Iris Murdoch in "An Interview with Iris Murdoch," by Michael O. Bellamy, *Con L*, 18 (1977), 135.

<sup>4</sup>Iris Murdoch in "The House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists," by Frank Kermode, *PR*, 30 (1963), 62-65.

<sup>5</sup>"Demonology and Dualism: The Supernatural in Isaac Singer and Muriel Spark," *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irvin Malin (New York, 1969), p. 149.

<sup>6</sup>"My Conversion," *TC*, 170 (1961), 62.

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<sup>7</sup>John Fowles, *The Aristos* (Boston, 1970), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head* (New York, 1961), p. 11. Other page notations in the text from *A Severed Head* (abbreviated *SH*) will refer to this edition.

<sup>9</sup>Samuel Hynes, "The Prime of Muriel Spark," *Commonweal*, 23 February 1962, p. 563.

<sup>10</sup>Carol Murphy, "A Spark of the Supernatural," *Approach*, 60 (1966), 27.

<sup>11</sup>Karl Malkoff, *Muriel Spark* (New York, 1968), p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>Muriel Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (Philadelphia, 1960), pp. 114-115. Other page notations in the text from *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (abbreviated *B*) will refer to this edition.

<sup>13</sup>Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (Pittsburgh, 1970), p. 75.

<sup>14</sup>John Fowles, *The Magus: A Revised Version* (Boston, 1978), p. 15. Other page notations in the text from *The Magus* (abbreviated *M*) will refer to this edition.

<sup>15</sup>Malcolm Bradbury, "The Novelist as Impresario: John Fowles and His Magus," in *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (New York, 1973), pp. 264, 269.

<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* (Chicago 1982), pp. 306-48. Published before *The Good Apprentice* was written, Dipple's comprehensive yet penetrating study nevertheless focuses in its last chapter on the "languorous extensions" of other later works such as *The Sea*, *The Sea* and *Nuns and Soldiers*.

<sup>17</sup>Anthony Burgess, *The Eve of Saint Venus* (New York, 1970), pp. 48, 98; Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* (New York, 1983), p. 196.