The Ballad of Peckham Rye Short Guide

The Ballad of Peckham Rye by Muriel Spark

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Dougal Douglas, or Douglas Dougal, or Dougal-Douglas (as he is variously known to his three employers), is the impetus behind the action of The Ballad of Peckham Rye.

Had Dougal not appeared on the Rye, Humphrey Place would never have thought to leave Dixie at the altar, Mr. Druce would never have seen the need to open Miss Coverdale's neck with a corkscrew, Nelly Mahone would never have lapsed from her native religion, and the absentee rate at both Peckham textile firms would have remained constant. A ballad—especially the border ballads of which Spark, from Edinburgh herself, is so fond—requires a largerthan-life character. Characteristically, Spark makes her hero an odd mix of the supernatural and the mundane: he may have the remnants of horns on his head, but he also cries when he is dumped by his girlfriend.

Like the hero of a Shakespearean tragedy, Dougal has a "fatal flaw," but it is only an aversion to sickness (which, in the end, saves him from marriage). It is hard to pin down just who or what Dougal is in part because everyone seems to see him differently, and he himself offers different descriptions of himself. Mrs. Willis says that Dougal is like a son to her; Mr. Druce and Trevor Lomas think he's an undercover policeman; Nelly thinks he is a devil; Humphrey thinks he is an educated man. Dougal seems to be whatever the other characters want him to be. At the beginning of the novel, for example, in his interview with Mr. Druce, Dougal changes shape and becomes, in turn, "a monkey-puzzle tree," "a professor," "a television interviewer," and finally, "a man of vision with a deformed shoulder"—which is ultimately just what Mr. Druce was looking for. At the same time, Dougal never does anything that he does not want to do. Even for his employers, Dougal performs only tasks that he would have done anyway for his own amusement.

Merle Coverdale, on the other hand, seems trapped by her inability to do what she would like to do. Though she has had it with her affair with the demanding and childish Mr. Druce, she does not break off the relationship. Dougal points out to her that all she needs to do is "get another job ... and refuse to see him any more. It's easy." She denies that she is free to do otherwise, but the real reason she refuses to leave Mr. Druce is that she would have to "come down" from her post of head typist, and she cannot bear the thought of that.

Though she admits that she's had "a rotten life," her fear of being one of the mere working classes keeps her enmeshed in a degrading and, ultimately, fatal relationship.

The working-class family of Dixie Morse— her mother Mavis Crewe, stepfather Arthur Crewe, and brother Leslie—recognize that Miss Coverdale's relationship with Mr. Druce is immoral. In fact, Mavis describes Merle as "a disappointed spinster" who is jealous of Dixie's engagement. Still, Mavis and Merle have much in common. Mavis herself broke off her first marriage because "everything sorta wenna pieces. We were living a lie ... and it was becoming sorta immoral to live together, not loving each other." This

statement is precisely what Merle's judgment of Mr. Druce's marriage amounts to—though in less correct English.

But Dixie's family is really no more moral than Miss Coverdale. Mavis herself, from the high perch of being "the first G.I. bride to have departed from Peckham and returned," looks down on "the factory lot" just as Miss Coverdale looks down on her typists. Moreover, Mavis is raising a minor hoodlum in Leslie and a major snob in Dixie—who comically corrects Mavis's English but does not dare to correct Dougal Douglas when he makes, on purpose, even more egregious errors. Dixie thinks it is immoral to live a lie as Miss Coverdale does but sees nothing wrong with paying hush money to Leslie so that she can sneak off nights with Humphrey Place.

Humphrey Place is introduced to Dougal by their landlady, Miss Belle Frierne, as "clean and go-ahead." This judgment is largely correct, discounting the fact that he leaves his bride-to-be at the altar. Of course, Miss Frierne does not know that he sneaks Dixie up to his room of nights (carrying her up the stairs so she does not make any footsteps) to have sex in his cupboard.

Though he is accidentally stabbed in the face by the manly but stupid Trevor Lomas (who was trying to gouge Dougal with a broken pint glass), he is as good-natured about it as he is about being in love with Dixie. Though he spouts union rhetoric at every opportunity, he is otherwise presented by Spark as an attractive character. He almost gets to leave Peckham—but at the end, just like Mavis Crewe, he returns again to marry Dixie and join her in her model bungalow.

Mr. Druce does not leave Mrs. Druce for the same reason that Miss Coverdale does not leave him: she has money. Druce is the focus of much of the irony in the novel.

Though he is in charge of the firm, he rides elevators like a child on Saturdays and pinches and bites Merle Coverdale. He believes incorrectly that Merle and Dougal are having an affair, and perhaps even plotting against him, but he does not fire or even confront Dougal himself. Instead, he gives Dougal a raise and hires Trevor Lomas to spy on them and to intimidate Merle.

When that does not seem to work, his only option is to kill her—an action he has been contemplating for some time, judging from the way he fiddles with sharp objects in her presence. In one final irony, when Mr. Druce stabs Miss Coverdale, he raises "his voice above the roar of the television," which serves as a final ironic comment on class distinctions. This is precisely the way that an earlier domestic squabble between the lower-class Creweses is depicted, with Mavis Crewe turning up the wireless "to a roar" and then shouting above it.

Social Concerns

Muriel Spark's major concern in The Ballad of Peckham Rye—as in many of the rest of her novels and short fiction—is the problem of class and class-consciousness and its effect on morality and the relations between the sexes. Though Spark has claimed not to be a very political writer, this novel nevertheless concentrates on the disastrous effects of class and economics on love and morality. It begins with an account of a jilted bride, Dixie Morse, a workingclass girl who is obsessed with living in a model bungalow after her marriage. The novel ends almost precisely where it begins; what happens in between is a humorous, fanciful, and highly satirical flashback of sorts, explaining, in a roundabout way, what brought about the jilting. In the process, "upper-middle-" and "lower-working" class values alike fall prey to Spark's scathing and witty critique.

A convert to Roman Catholicism, Muriel Spark is nonetheless not a didactic writer.

In fact, reviewers of this novel (and other Spark novels) have complained not that Spark was pushing a particular brand of morality but rather that they could not find a point in her work at all. Her ballad of life in Peckham Rye centers on a young Scotsman, Dougal Douglas, who comes to Peckham to ghostwrite the autobiography of an actress, Miss Cheeseman. In the process, he gets himself hired by two local textile factories, as the "Arts man," to investigate the social and moral character of the rather drab industrial suburb. His investigation involves little more than insinuating himself into the personal and social concerns of a variety of characters, from his "upper-middle"-class employers to his "lower-working"-class landlady, with disastrous results: a nervous breakdown, a number of violent altercations, and finally a murder. The evil impact of his meddling, however, is not a direct result of what he does. Rather, he releases the pent-up aggressions and hostilities latent in Peckham's own hypocrisy—as Dougal puts it himself, he has the power to drive devils out of people. Dougal Douglas is not held up, however, as a model. In fact, he himself claims to be a devil: he even has a hump and the remnants of horns on his head. Nonetheless, he is an equivocal devil, and as a Scot, a ghostwriter, a traveler to Africa, and a professional liar, he is also a fictional double for Spark herself—who can claim all of these identities.

When Douglas is hired to be the "Arts man" at Meadows, Meade, and Grindley— to bring "vision into the lives of the work ers"—the company gets much more than it bargained for. Of course, the manager's real concern is absenteeism, but Douglas immediately begins to encourage the other employees to be absent at least every other Monday. He himself only rarely appears at work, since he is much too busy with his "human research." He acts, figuratively, as the author of a fictional work, orchestrating the lives of the blue-collar workers with so little concern for them that they might as well be mere fictional characters. Indeed, Douglas sees himself in literary terms, as a character in a tragedy with his own "fatal flaw" (that he cannot abide sickness or malady of any kind). The irony is that Douglas and the rest are literally fictional characters. Douglas looks upon the denizens of Peckham just as Spark herself might, with a detached but ultimately unconcerned curiosity. One critic has said that Dougal is "like a

novelist, [seducing] people into wanton or even self-destructive acts" as he meddles in others' personal affairs.

Whether Dougal is Spark's double, a devil, or something else entirely, his interference in Peckham results in an undermining of confidence in its social structure. On the surface, Peckham seems entirely, almost archetypically normal, peopled with the sort of middle-class Britisher one might find in any number of small towns or suburbs in England. There are "classes within classes" in Peckham, however, and Spark's portrayals of members of both the "lowermiddle" and "upper-working" classes are humorous and scathing commentaries on the ridiculous nature of social stratifications.

Dixie Morse, an example of the former, is amusingly preoccupied with furnishing her model bungalow; Merle Coverdale, a representative of the latter, continues an affair with her boss—though he childishly pinches her for fun—because he helps pay for her flat. Peckham is not what its inhabitants think it is: under the surface, its industrial order conceals a strong element of violence and death. Dougal is constantly engaged in uncovering these hidden truths—symbolized by the dead nuns in the tunnel beneath Peckham, and by the pram on the balcony that appears to be about to spill its infant on the pavement but is really just a baby carriage works sign that has been there for years, unnoticed by the other characters.

As he conducts his "human research" and unravels the fictions that hold together the social structure of Peckham, Dougal is simultaneously involved in composing his own false tale of Miss Cheeseman's life as he ghostwrites her autobiography. In doing so, he embodies the dual nature of a novelist like Muriel Spark. While he finds out bits of truth and begins to piece together the history and moral character of industrial Peckham, he also obfuscates and misleads, presenting mutually exclusive interpretations of events that obstruct reality even as he constructs it. Indeed, truth and falsity become so intermingled in Dougal's writing that even Miss Cheeseman becomes confused about her own life and declares the finished autobiography, full of inconsistencies and false information, to be "absolutely sweet" and "perfect." Just so, Spark's brilliant spoof of suburban life figures its truth while also openly declaring its own falsity as fiction. Spark, like Dougal, is not a detached observer of events: she both creates and obstructs her truth at once.

With deadpan irony, The Ballad of Peckham Rye dislocates the reader in much the same way that the Peckhamites are disturbed and troubled by Dougal Douglas.

Truth and social structure are inextricably related in The Ballad of Peckham Rye. As Nelly Mahone discovers, the truth can get you beaten up, or worse. Trevor Lomas and Mr. Druce are convinced that Dougal is having an affair with Merle Coverdale, based largely on their misinterpretation of Dougal's working notes for Miss Cheeseman's autobiography. As Merle tells the innocent truth to Mr. Druce, he becomes so enraged at what he assumes is a lie that he stabs her nine times in the neck with a corkscrew. As Spark's fiction demonstrates, the very idea of social class is built upon fictions that are themselves simultaneously useful—they pay the rent, after all—and stifling. In this novel, only Dougal and Nelly—both of whom speak with "double-tongues," so to speak,

and both of whom are literally outsiders— can see the truth about Peckham. Ending nearly where it begins, with an account of Dixie's jilting, the structure of the novel suggests a cyclical pattern. Dougal Douglas may have momentarily upset the workings of Peckham, but once he leaves things quickly return to normal. As moral satire, The Ballad of Peckham Rye is at once biting, disturbing, and on the mark.

Techniques

Like Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Spark presents her readers with strange and extraordinary events that disarm and, sometimes, exasperate. Though not quite magical realism, her technique in The Ballad of Peckham Rye is similar in that she makes use of the supernatural, the story contains events that are puzzling or inexplicable, and the novel often seems selfconscious about its own status as a fictional object.

Spark is relatively unconcerned in The Ballad of Peckham Rye with presenting a straightforward, "truthful" narrative. Instead, she often deliberately misleads the reader and makes matters more complex than need be. For example, Spark never definitely tells the reader whether Dougal Douglas is a devil or just an odd man. His "horns" may be real, or just cysts; he may have lost them in a fight or had them surgically removed; his "claw" and hump may be natural accoutrements for a demon, or mere deformities. Since we are never sure where Spark's authorial imprimatur lies, she is able to make Dougal even stranger than he might be if we knew, ultimately, whether he were supernatural. The effect of this is a "making strange" of the whole process of understanding the novel.

Spark seems to revel in untruth and partial truth in The Ballad of Peckham Rye. Her delight in such ambiguity may stem in part from her early writing experiences as a propagandist for the British Foreign Office during World War II, of which she has said, We were doing propaganda, inventing lies, which suited me all right. Inventing lies to mix up with truth. Mixing it all up and then putting it out for the German soldiers to swallow, to try and say one thing and then it was not true at all, or half of it was true. . . .And so, of course that job suited me all right. It was inventive.

Spark also misleads the reader by manipulating time in the novel. The Ballad of Peckham Rye begins with an event that happens near its conclusion: the response to Humphrey Place's return to Peckham Rye after his jilting of Dixie Morse. From there it moves briefly to a description of the jilting itself (which occurred "a few weeks" previously), then back again to Humphrey's return. The first chapter ends with an accounting of who heard the story of his return that the reader has just read:

Miss Merle Coverdale, lately head of the typing pool, did not hear of it. Mr. Druce, lately Managing Director, did not hear of it. Neither did Dougal Douglas, the former Arts man, nor his landlady Miss Belle Frierne who had known all Peckham in her youth.

What the reader cannot yet know—and will not discover almost until the end of the novel—is that by that point in narrative time these characters did not hear of Humphrey's return because they were either in jail, in Africa, or dead.

The story makes many other minor digressions and regressions, until at the end Spark quickly undermines all of our assumptions about the novel's conclusion.

We actually begin the novel not with its conclusion, but with its penultimate scene.

The real conclusion, where Dixie and Humphrey do indeed marry, occurs on the very last page of the novel. Indeed, Spark seems to tease the reader in the final chapter with many possible endings for the fable: Some said Humphrey came back and married the girl in the end. Some said, no, he married another girl. Others said, it was like this, Dixie died of a broken heart and he never looked at another girl again.

Some thought he had returned, and she had slammed the door in his face and called him a dirty swine, which he was.

One or two recalled there had been a fight between Humphrey and Trevor Lomas.

But at all events everyone remembered how a man had answered "No" at his wedding.

In the very next paragraph, however, Spark reveals the "fact" of the matter, which she had deliberately withheld. The effect of this is to emphasize her control over the text and to remind us that, after all, these are just fictional characters, and the truth about the events that happen to them, if it exists at all, is entirely contingent upon the whims of the writer. She has herself commented upon her purpose in making this type of mischief with her satiric prose: Satire ... has a more lasting effect than a straight portrayal of what is wrong. I think that a lot of the world's problems should be ridiculed, but ridiculed properly rather than, well, wailed over.... I do believe in satire as a very, very potent art form.

Themes

The main focus of the satire of The Ballad of Peckham Rye is the ridiculous nature of class-consciousness. The novel is filled with characters who think that they are better than the rest in some way. Beauty, for instance, believes that she is better than the other girls of Peckham. She may be—but she also wears too much green eye shadow, her skirt is just a bit too short and tight, and she is so drunk that she can barely stay on her barstool. Mr. Druce, who is so concerned with giving his workers "vision," sees a relationship between Dougal and Merle Coverdale that simply does not exist.

He is himself as ridiculous and sordid as anything in the novel. His own wife recognizes him as a cipher whose words may just as well be "quack, quack"; his response is simply not to speak to her and to amuse himself by riding up and down in elevators and by pinching Merle Coverdale. Miss Coverdale, who sees a gulf between herself and the lowly typists whom she oversees, is involved in a tawdry and demeaning sexual relationship with Mr. Druce, who pays for her flat in return. Though she thinks it immoral for Mr. and Mrs. Druce to continue to live together now that their marriage is a sham, she sees nothing at all immoral about her affair with Mr. Druce. It is a curious myopia, one shared by many of the citizens of Peckham and symbolized by their failure to notice the pram on the ledge.

Even the head of the firm on the other side of the Rye, Mr. Willis, embodies this idea.

Leslie Crewe offers to tell him the truth about Dougal Douglas (or Douglas Dougal, as he is known there), but he refuses to listen, since Leslie does not seem like a reliable source of information. As a result, he puts Dougal on the board of directors of the firm, entirely ignorant of the fact that he is also employed by his firm's chief competitor.

Spark deliberately sets her fourth novel, about the absurdity of class-consciousness, on the "wrong" side of the Thames, among the working classes—the "wrong" sort of people (and not the class with which Spark is usually concerned). Such a move highlights the irony of the situation: many of the readers of the novel, of course, are from the other side of the Thames, so to speak. So when Daisy Morse corrects her family when they speak English incorrectly—and sometimes when they don't—we laugh, thus implicating ourselves in the snobbery toward the "lower" classes. Some have criticized Spark for being somewhat patronizing in this novel. That she would take this attitude is unlikely, however, for a number of reasons. Spark herself was a "girl of slender means" upon her return from Africa—a newly divorced woman with a child and a job who did not always live in the best neighborhoods. In addition, what such critics might be missing—unless they really were not laughing at Dixie and the rest—is that their own laughter underlines the classconsciousness of the characters in the novel. Readers are implicated in the offense, so to speak, when they smile at the foibles of Peckham as though they are above such things.

Related to the social satire is the theme of the possibility of loving relationships in the modern world. None of Muriel Spark's fictional works, The Ballad of Peckham Rye

included, contain examples of successful, loving marriages. Indeed, the relationship of the sexes in her world is generally tinged with conflict, dissatisfaction, and even violence. Spark herself was unhappily married for a time, a period of her life she recounts in her autobiographical Curriculum Vitae.

When she was a young woman, a friend of hers was even murdered by her own husband. As Spark tells the story, A school-friend of mine—she wasn't a close friend—was murdered. She looked very like me... . In the hotel where I was staying, this girl was killed. I heard it. I heard the bangs. That was a terrible experience.

Spark herself was afraid that her own husband, who was mentally unstable, just might do the same to her. Other relationships described in her autobiography also end on a generally sour note. In an interview Spark commented on her treatment of male-female relationships: "I don't deal with men and women and love. I don't see that the relationship between men and women is very good these days." Certainly that general tenor is present in The Ballad of Peckham Rye. The relationship at the center of the novel—the one between Dixie Morse and Humphrey Place—seems sordid and unsatisfactory on many counts. Dixie exists merely to acquire money and possessions, and her family, from the squabbling parents to the unsavory thirteen-year-old brother-cum-blackmailer Leslie, is certainly even less attractive. Humphrey himself cannot say why he wishes to stay with Dixie. Indeed, one of the bright spots of the novel occurs when Humphrey seems to be freed from Dixie and what one critic has called his "life-denying relationship" with her.

This freedom is only temporary, however: the narrator informs us that Humphrey returns to Peckham two months after the jilting to marry Dixie after all. As they drive off into the sunset at the end of the novel, Dixie says, "I feel as if I've been twenty years married instead of two hours." The narrator's account of Humphrey's mind-set in response to this is simultaneously hopeful and resigned: He thought this a pity for a girl of eighteen. But 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.

Other male-female relationships in The Ballad of Peckham Rye are similarly conflicted.

Trevor Lomas is continually on the lookout for men for whom Beauty might reject him—and there are a number, Dougal Douglas included. Dixie Morse is the product of a failed marriage, and her mother and stepfather are also generally at odds. Mr. Druce and his wife have not spoken to each other since she said, "Quack, quack" to him at lunch. Instead, he carries on a rather sordid affair with Merle Coverdale, which ends in her brutal murder. In an essay entitled "On Love," Spark describes the only form of love that she finds attractive: the copulation of animals. She ends the essay by saying: The aspects of love that one could discuss are endless. But certainly, as the old songs say, love is the sweetest thing, and it makes the world go round.

This pronouncement is meant to be taken ironically, of course, especially if the Ballad counts as one of the old songs.

Finally, as Dougal Douglas himself points out, the workers of Peckham are obsessed with immorality, and they use the word immoral in a number of surprising ways.

Daisy believes that Merle Coverdale is immoral for carrying on with Mr. Druce. She sees nothing at all wrong with being carried up the stairs at Humphrey's flat to have sex with him in his cupboard. Merle believes that Mr. Druce and his wife are immoral for living in a loveless marriage, though she sees nothing wrong with allowing Mr. Druce to pay for her flat in exchange for sex.

Dougal is the perfect person (or demon) to investigate this strange dichotomy. He is perfectly dualistic himself: an "angel-devil" whose very name is opposite on the other side of the Rye, Dougal is a fraud and a real artist, a failure with his own girlfriend but a charmer in Peckham, a horned devil and a good friend who often gives sound advice. After all, he does tell Merle Coverdale what she already knows but is afraid to acknowledge: that her affair with Mr. Druce should come to an end. He gives Humphrey and his landlady good advice about their personal lives as well. He tells Humphrey that he could have any girl, and that he himself wouldn't marry Dixie at any price; in fact, he gives Humphrey the idea to leave Dixie at the altar the first time around. He also tells his landlady that she should have acknowledged her brother, but then comforts her after her brother dies by pretending to be a corpse. Dougal may be "one of the wicked spirits that wander through the world for the ruin of souls," but he is also a ray of light into the otherwise bleak and stifling atmosphere of Peckham Rye. All of the really immoral actions in the novel, after all, are done by the Peckhamites, not by the immigrant from Scotland. (And as he tells Nelly, his "course in life has much support from the Scriptures.") He livens up the dance club with the Highland Fling and frees the workers — at least once every other Monday—from jobs that he sees must bore them. It is his influence that gives Humphrey his final, otherworldly vision of Peckham suggesting that things might be better. Finally, the summary of the rest of this de-horned devil's life is strikingly like Spark's own. Dougal Douglas, we hear, went away off to Africa with the intention of selling tape-recorders to all the witch doctors. .. . He returned from Africa and became a novice in a Franciscan monastery.

Before he was asked to leave, the Prior had endured a nervous breakdown.... Thereafter, for economy's sake, he gathered together the scrap ends of his profligate experience—for he was a frugal man at heart—and turned them into a lot of cockeyed books, and went far in the world. He never married.

Like Dougal, Spark went off to Africa (though not to sell tape recorders), did a bit of ghostwriting at the beginning of her career, and ended by using many of the events of her life as fuel for her own novels.

Perhaps it is one final ironic comment on conventional morality that this Roman Catholic novelist's male doppelgaenger is a meddlesome, but finally ambiguous, devil whose

final claim to fame is that he was smart (or lucky) enough never to marry—a bit of wishful projection on Spark's part perhaps.

Key Questions

Spark's The Ballad of Peckham Rye looks at the problem of class and class-consciousness and its effect on morality and the relations between the sexes.

1. How does the tunnel beneath Peckham Rye, containing the bones of dead nuns, function as a symbol in the novel?

2. Why does Dougal Douglas finally leave Peckham Rye? Why doesn't he stay once he secures his final raises at both firms?

3. Humphrey Place's jilting of Dixie Morse seems a very Dougal-esque thing to do: Humphrey even uses Dougal's own words when he does it. Why does he jilt her? And why does he return?

4. Connect all of the pronouncements that Nelly Mahone makes concerning Dougal Douglas. Are they consistent?

5.How is The Ballad ofPeckham Rye like a standard mystery story? In what respects does it differ?

6. Which of the female characters in The Ballad of Peckham Rye is most likable? Why?

7. How does the murder of Miss Coverdale fit into Spark's overall satiric purpose?

Literary Precedents

Spark herself claims not to have any direct literary influences. "I influence myself," she claims. Though her unique combination of wit, satire, and the supernatural demonstrates this judgment to be largely true, she does acknowledge some influences on her prose: I think I would belong, in the writing of prose, to a literary tradition which is connected with the belletrists like Max Beerbohm, a humourist. On the level of thought, Pritchett and that sort of fantasy... . Also, you wouldn't think so, but I owe a lot to Proust. I read Proust over and over again.

Indeed, the writings of Beerbohm—an associate of Oscar Wilde, whose The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898) may have influenced Spark's title here—exhibit some of the same elegance and ironic wit of Spark's The Ballad of Peckham Rye. Beerbohm's caricatures and an early collection of short fiction, Seven Men (1919), are particularly incisive. Spark's other acknowledged British compatriot is V. S. Pritchett. In his The Spanish Virgin (1930) and You Make Your Own Life (1938) he is especially shrewd at showing the quirks of human nature through satire and clever fantasy.

For wit and satire, Spark's The Ballad of Peckham Rye can also be favorably compared to the fiction of Evelyn Waugh. His Black Mischief (1932), Scoop (1938), and The Loved One (1948) are full of bizarre comedy and clever social satire. For the mystery/ detective story quality of The Ballad of Peckham Rye, Spark may also be somewhat indebted to another of her favorite writers, Edgar Allan Poe.

With her preference for clever dialogue over detailed physical descriptions, Spark solidly fits into the tradition of the British intellectual novelist. The Ballad of Peckham Rye compares favorably to Henry James's The Turn of the Screw (1898)—which also adeptly brings the supernatural element into an otherwise mundane reality. Doris Lessing (with whom Spark shares an African connection) is another British novelist who discusses serious social issues using elements of fantasy and the supernatural; her The Fifth Child (1988) is especially relevant. But Spark, by her own admission, is less "political" than Lessing—and wittier as well. There is also nothing in The Ballad of Peckham Rye that could be called feminist.

Since Spark's first book was a critical study of Mary Shelley, another obvious literary precedent is Frankenstein (1818), especially for its main character's connection to Dougal Douglas. Still, in her particular combination of wit, the supernatural, and satire, Spark has, in the words of one recent critic, "succeeded triumphantly in evading classification."

Related Titles

Spark's first novel, The Comforters (1957), has significant connections to The Ballad of Peckham Rye. It too is concerned with how a character can control or influence others. Its main character, a novelist, finds herself hearing voices and tries to write her novel despite the interference of a ghost who types portions of it for her. In a sense, Spark has taken this typing ghost and made it physical in the character of Dougal Douglas. The Comforters also plays with time and with its own status as a made fictional object: the first chapter of the novel being written in The Comforters is The Comforters itself. The Comforters also shares with The Ballad of Peckham Rye a focus on a small set of characters and a concern with social satire. Spark's more famous novel The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961), while also infused with absurd and unpredictable turns of plot, is more realistic than The Ballad of Peckham Rye.

A slender novel, The Ballad of Peckham Rye—especially the murder of Merle Coverdale—also has much in common with Spark's short fiction. Spark's own favorite short story, "The Portobello Road" (in The Go-Away Bird [1958]), depicts a woman murdered by her former lover in a bizarre and brutal manner. Two of the short stories in her second collection, Voices at Play (1961), also concern themselves with murders of women incited by sexual relationships gone bad. At the same time, like The Ballad of Peckham Rye, they also contain Spark's characteristic ironic wit.

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