

**Like a Schiaparelli Dress
A Muriel Spark Tribute**

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From the opening of *The Girls of Slender Means* a sense of irony and paradox are apparent. At the end of the Second World War all the nice people in England may very well have been poor, but as it happens, some of these girls aren't very nice at all.

Not that this is obvious. The ruinous price of victory is everywhere, but there is no point in being depressed. The atmosphere is light. There is an air of frivolity and gaiety. Exposed staircases make unusual demands on the mind's eye and though the May of Teck Club had its windows shattered three times since 1940, it was never directly hit.

Nothing warns of a devastating denouement. As she lays a whole society before us, a society that is essentially pre-war and destroyed by the unexploded bomb no one believes is in the garden, the girls who longed for face cream and money, who took turns to wear the Schiaparelli dress one of the girls inherited from an aunt, in turn become more human and separate and in the end there is nothing unusual about naked

women smearing themselves with margarine and crawling through a bathroom window to safety. The essence lies in a brilliant use of detail. That one, good dress every nice woman needed for special occasions says more about the society than Hansard or newspaper reports.

Location is used to beguile and subdue. The other wordliness of the club with its arcane rules and concerns contrasts and in many ways masks the fact that the inhabitants face an uncertain future, suggesting the slenderness of their means is more than financial. They are perfect portraits of youth with their sudden enthusiasms, half-baked ideas, unquenchable determination and absolute belief in their own resources.

They believe death is far away, that the killing times are over. And this deadly serious rites of passage is masked by a lightness of touch that encourages the reader to disregard the careful clues and warnings, especially those disguised in Joanna Childe's elocutionary exercises, the snippets of poetry which interrupt and inform the narrative. Characters like Joanna's father, or replications like Jane Wright's begging letters, especially Shaw's brilliant answer, belong to the funnier, gentler book we believe this to be and it is testament to Muriel Spark's

skill that, like a Schiaparelli dress, she can glamourise and disguise her intentions.

At the heart of every Spark novel is character, women one feels who are often drawn from Spark's own life and experience. Even when she veers into the supernatural she is present in what John Updike referred to as "... the happiness of creation; the sudden wilful largesse of image and wit, the cunning tautness of suspense, the beautifully firm modulations from passage to passage, the wonderfully blunt yet stately dialogues all remind us of the author, the superintending intelligent mind."

Add to this the Scottish tradition of unreliable narrators and paired oppositions. Not only are Spark's narrators unreliable, they are detached, which places them in a perfect position to both insinuate and comment directly.

Like *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The New Yorker* published *The Driver's Seat* in its entirety. It is Spark's favourite of her novels, which she described as a 'whydunnit'; Lise is an accountant in a Northern European city and early on we are told she is to be the victim of a murder investigation.

Most remarkable of all is the fact that this is a testament to Muriel Spark's faith, her belief that we need a spiritual

dimension in our lives and that a religious belief makes sense of suffering and pain. Lise has known prolonged illness, and for all its detachment the novel is about a woman who, having lost control of her life, aims to control her death.

Fairytale romance is subverted in the same way as the drive towards individualism has produced isolation and cults have replaced spiritual fulfilment. Chaos has replaced moral certainty and pseudo-spiritual experiences and beliefs are exposed as little more than fads which deprive and subvert social and spiritual values.

Lise's limited, barren existence drives her to search for an ideal lover. Her failure and its consequences suggest modern isolation cannot be cured by love, far less by love affairs, and our social, sexual and spiritual values are lies and deceitful travesty.