

The Metafictional Strategy in *Loitering with Intent*

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Abstract

Structurally, *Loitering with Intent* by Muriel Spark presents the typical frame of metafiction, having complicated “fiction within fiction” and *mise en abyme* as well as texts from other genres. The exposure of artificiality in the novel is mainly carried out in three aspects: Fleur’s comments on the “novel within the novel” titled *Warrender Chase*; the vague boundary between fiction and reality; the imitation of fiction by reality. The metafictional feature in content is that Spark generalizes her viewpoints on issues with regard to the writer, the work, and the reader. The reviews of the creation in the novel itself demonstrate Spark’s self-reflexiveness and self-consciousness in the process of writing. *Loitering with Intent* is a connecting link between Spark’s present works and future ones, for it expresses her concepts of art creation and serves as a guide for her future creation.

Keywords

Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent*, Metafiction, Criticism of Fiction

1. Introduction

Muriel Spark was a prominent Scottish writer, who was regarded by Frank Kermode as one of the “most engaging, most tantalising” (Kermode, 1996: pp. 23-24) writers of her generation and considered by David Lodge to be “the most gifted and innovative British writer of her generation” (Hosmer, 2005: p. 127). In 1981, Spark (1981) was nominated, for the second time in her career, for the Booker McConnell Prize for *Loitering with Intent*. Though it lost to Salman Rushdie’s *The Midnight’s Children* (1981), it still was a piece of outstanding work worthy of intensive study and won great critical acclaim. The famous writer Byatt (2008) regarded it as “one of Muriel Spark’s most accomplished fables or novels” (*Rev. of Loitering*). Velma Bourgeois Richmond

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also thought highly of the novel: “*Loitering with Intent*, nominated for the Booker McConnell Prize for fiction, is Spark’s finest work in many years and provides an explicit statement about the relationship between art and life” (Richmond, 1984: p. 156).

Since its publication, *Loitering with Intent* has been explored from various aspects. However, not many critics have in-depth studies on its metafictional features. A few critics, like Dipple (142), Page (101-103), and Wittaker (123-124), mention that the novel is a metafiction, but they only draw a general conclusion without providing sufficient arguments in a comprehensive and convincing way. Indeed, *Loitering with Intent* is a typical metafiction and distinguishes itself from others by its extremely wide range of metafictional characteristics. In terms of its structure, the novel has the complicated “fiction within fiction” and *mise en abyme*. As to its content, it not only foregrounds the artificiality of the novel itself but also has literary criticism as its fictional object. In this article, the author of this paper attempts to explore these characteristics with regard to the novel’s structure and content in order to justify its designation of “a typical metafiction”.

2. The Metafictional Structure of *Loitering with Intent*

Loitering with Intent displays many a metafictional feature with regard to its complex structure, which contains several layers of fiction-within-fiction¹ as well as the relation of “*mise en abyme*” and disrupts the reader’s expectations of a genre by transgressing generic boundaries.

Loitering with Intent is unique for its multi-layered structure. At first sight, it seems to be a simple autobiography-as-novel. However, scrupulous reading can reveal its complex structure as fiction-within-fiction, or story-within-story. Waugh points out: “In metafictional novels, obvious framing devices range from stories within stories and self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory situations” (Waugh, 1984: p. 30).

Altogether, *Loitering with Intent* is comprised of three levels of stories. The outer frame, or the frame story, is about the protagonist’s experiences after she escapes from an organization named Autobiographical Association headed by Sir Quentin. In the frame story, the protagonist is Fleur as the first person “I”. It begins with Fleur’s own recollections about herself writing a poem in an old graveyard “one day in the middle of the twentieth century” (7)². It is later regarded as “the last day of a whole chunk of my life”, though “I didn’t know that at the time” (7). At that time, “I was close on penniless but my spirits were all the more high because I had recently escaped from the Autobiographical Association (non-profit-making) where I was thought rather mad, if not evil” (9). It then smoothly drops the hint that the protagonist starts telling the inner story: “I will tell you about the Autobiographical Association” (9). Thus the outer story just serves as an introduction to the second and the third level of story. In the last part of *Loitering with Intent*, this outer story reasserts itself: “From the day of the funeral to the day at the end of June when I sat in the graveyard writing my poem, Dottie kept me abundantly informed about the members of the disbanded Association” (209). It rather clearly conveys the message that the other two levels of the story just stop here and the whole work of fiction again returns to the outer story, or the frame story, as it may be called. The frame story, then just brings the fiction to the end through Fleur’s narration of her final success with her novel writing and her enthusiasm at being a woman and an artist in the twentieth century. This outer frame of story, or the first level of the story, provides a necessary frame for the novel *Loitering with Intent*. It ensures that both the younger Fleur’s and the mature Fleur’s opinions are conveyed, thus enabling Spark to give full play to her ideas through Fleur. Without the frame the novel seems merely an autobiography told by Fleur.

The second level of story is chiefly about Fleur’s involvement with the members of the Autobiographical Association and her experiences with the writing of the novel *Warrender Chase* as well as her attempts to publish it. In this story, there are more protagonists, such as Fleur herself, Sir Quentin and the like. The story happens “ten months before the day when I sat writing my poem on the worn-out graves of the dead in Kensington and had a conversation with the shy policeman” (9). And it ends with Fleur’s knowledge of Sir Quentin’s death and things that take place at the funeral. The third level of the story, namely *Warrender Chase*, tells about the happenings to the eponymous hero Warrender Chase. It interrupts the second level of the story from time to time. It is not told in a straightforward way. Neither does it have a complete plotline. Its summary can only be vaguely worked out: an evil character named Warrender Chase organizes a group with an ulterior purpose. He tries to control the

¹It is also called “Chinese box” structure or “story within story”. The origin of the structure can be traced back to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* and in Italy, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

²Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent* (London: Macmillan, 1981) 7. The references cited are all to this edition and the page numbers are included in the parentheses in the following texts.

members of his coterie by every possible means, resulting in the death of one of the members and deterioration of the mind of the members. Finally he meets his own doom in a car crash. In fact, there lie many similarities between the second and the third level of story. Generally speaking, these two stories are intertwined with each other, the difference being that *Warrender Chase* is not told in a continual time sequence and the story only exists in scraps told by Fleur. Nevertheless, if read carefully enough, *Warrender Chase* is found to contain some clear clues as to its plot. For example, the first time Fleur mentions it, she writes:

The novel I was writing, my first, *Warrender Chase*, was really filling my whole life at that time. I was finding it extraordinary how, throughout all the period I had been working on the novel, right from Chapter One... Not that I reproduced them photographically and literally. I didn't for a moment think of portraying Sir Quentin as he was (15-16).

In the paragraph immediately following this, Fleur expresses her concern that "in September 1949 I had no idea at all if I could bring off *Warrender Chase*. But whether I was capable of finishing the whole book or not, the excitement was the same" (16). In fact, she likes to talk about the writing of *Warrender Chase* when she recalls her involvement with the Autobiographical Association. At one time, she recalls that "I was fascinated by the strangeness of the job. I made no notes at all, but most nights I would work on my novel and the ideas of the day would resemble themselves to form those two female characters which I created in *Warrender Chase*, Charlotte and Prudence" (24). With Fleur's occasional remarks about its creation, *Warrender Chase* is closely connected with the second level of the story and establishes itself as the third level of the story in *Loitering with Intent*.

In the narration of the second-level story, Fleur talks about *Warrender Chase* so frequently that the reader comes to have an idea of its storyline step by step and at the same time has a perceptive understanding through her occasional discussion of the relations between the novel *Warrender Chase* and the second level of the story.

The three layers of stories combine to complicate the structure of *Loitering with Intent* and establish the novel as a typical one with the fiction-within-fiction structure. In the discussion about the typology of metafiction, Sarah E. Lauzen regards "the story within story" as a structure characteristic of metafiction: "Besides these diverse external schematisms that often substitute for or supplement linear plot structure, various kinds of play with frames and levels also count among overabundance of structure. The simplest case, which hardly need be considered metafictional, is the story within the story" (Lauzen, 1986: p. 104). To a large extent, the structure of *Loitering with Intent* manifests Spark's reflections about the creation of a work of fiction, and it demonstrates the author's application of metafictional devices.

Besides the consummate structure of "fiction within fiction", *Loitering with Intent* also has an extremely special frame relationship which is called *mise en abyme*³. In the discussion about metafiction, Wenche Ommundsen cites Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as an example to demonstrate the way to interpret a work as metafiction:

In order to read a textual element, such as Stephen Dedalus, as part of a metafictional enquiry, the reader needs to recognise a double function, or a metaphorical relationship, at work in the text: the element is at the same time part of the story and something else (comment on the story). This kind of relationship is generally referred to as *mise en abyme*, which means an embedded self-representation or mirror-image of the text within the text (Ommundsen, 1993: p. 10).

Accordingly, the third level of the story, or *Warrender Chase* by Fleur, is just the element which is at the same time part of the second level of story and the comments on it. It can be regarded as the mirror-image of the second level of the story. Their relationship is a typical *mise en abyme*.

Linda Hutcheon, in her *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, mentions Dallenbach's feelings about *mise en abyme* of which the central concept is the mirroring image and there are three distinguishable kinds:

One is a simple reduplication, in which the mirroring fragment has a relation of similitude with the whole that contains it. A second type is a repeated reduplication "in infinitum" in which the above-mentioned mirroring fragment bears within itself another mirroring fragment and so on. The third type of doubling is

³The term, borrowed from French and referring to the heraldic image of an escutcheon bearing in its centre a miniature replica of itself, or a small shield depicted within a larger one, originates from Andre Gide's novel *The Counterfeiters* where the author includes a fictional novelist writing a novel also entitled *The Counterfeiters*.

labeled “aporistique”, and here the fragment is supposed to include the work in which it itself is included (Hutcheon, 1991: p. 56).

The *mise en abyme* in *Loitering with Intent* belongs to the first type of relationship defined by Hutcheon. This type of relationship just exists between the second and the third level of story, the former referring to the story about the involvement of Fleur with the head Sir Quentin and the members of the Autobiographical Association, and the latter to the story about the title figure Warrender Chase’s personal experience with the coterie members under his control. Actually, the third level of story, also called *Warrender Chase*, just as some critics hold, is “considered to be the interior duplication as one of the variations on frames and levels of the fiction” (Lauzen, 1986: p. 105). *Warrender Chase* contains a lot of information which corresponds to the second level of story, namely, Fleur’s autobiography of a certain period in her life. To begin with, the plots of both stories are about a “lunatic” who spares no pains to manipulate the members of an organization headed by him. To achieve the evil purpose, he resorts to every means, including the handing out of some medicine which can do harm to the users and the instilling of guilty feelings in the members. Besides the similar plotlines, the two levels of stories also share numerous similar details, including those about the behaviours and the remarks of the major characters. For example, the main character, Sir Quentin, and Warrender Chase, both cause the suicide of one of female member indirectly; both protagonists suffer the same fate of death in a car accident. What’s more, nearly all the main characters in Fleur’s autobiography have their counterparts in *Warrender Chase*: Sir Quentin, a “psychological Jack the Ripper” (60) corresponds to Warrender Chase, the title hero of *Warrender Chase*; the narrator of the autobiography Fleur to Marjorie; Lady Edwina, Sir Quentin’s queer but righteous mother, to Prudence; Beryl Tims, Sir Quentin’s odious housekeeper, to Charlotte.

Linda Hutcheon argues: “The *mise en abyme* might consist of an *énoncé* which reflects the text’s *énoncé*, its story. This could take the shape of any kind of plot resume, in narrative or in any other art form” (Hutcheon, 1991: p. 56). *Warrender Chase* just serves as an *énoncé* and it takes the shape of a novel, reflecting the text’s *énoncé* which is equal to the second level of the story. In this way, the existence of the novel *Warrender Chase* helps to promote reflections on the creating process and demonstrates Spark’s self-consciousness in the writing, which is a central feature of metafiction. As a natural result, it adds to the metafictional characteristics of *Loitering with Intent*. In *Loitering with Intent*, the *mise en abyme* demonstrates Spark’s critique of fiction itself and the structural level of reflection on fiction.

In the discussion about the structural incoherence of metafiction, Wenche Ommundsen points out that a metafictional text may refuse to live up to expectations set up by the genre to which it belongs, like the idea of a single ending or the coherence of fictional characters. She further maintains that such a text may also transgress generic boundaries, containing within a work of fiction elements normally found in other types of writing (Ommundsen, 1993: p. 9). Apart from the primary elements of a fictional work, *Loitering with Intent* also contains many writings that usually appear in other genres. The most apparent is the writing of biographies. In the novel, the frame story serves as the indicator of a novel, but when it moves to the second level of the story, it offers clues to Fleur’s writing of her own autobiography:

At that time I had a number of marvelous friends, full of good and evil... I had recently escaped from the Autobiographical Association (non-profit-making) where I was thought rather mad, if not evil. I will tell you about the Autobiographical Association (9).

From the above introduction, the reader may easily discern the autobiographical elements of the next part of the story. In it, Fleur from time to time reminds the reader that she is writing an autobiography. For example, at one time, she writes:

Now that I come to write this section of my autobiography I remember vividly, in those days when I was writing *Warrender Chase*... how I walked home across the park one evening, thinking hard about my novel and Beryl Tims as a type, and I stopped in the middle of the pathway... (25).

When Fleur accepts the job of editing the memoirs of the Autobiographical Association, she helps to edit and enliven the autobiographies by the members of the organization, so she often talks about their autobiographies. For instance, she writes at one time:

With the exception of Maisie Young who was still producing a quantity of material about the Beyond and the Oneness of life... All that had been achieved so far was Mrs. Wilks having had her blouse ripped open

by a soldier before her escape from Russia in 1917; Baronne Clotilde had been caught in bed with her music tutor in the charming French château near Dijon... With timid Sir Eric, it was a pre-school affair with another boy... (69).

In addition to the characters' autobiographies, Fleur also elaborates a lot on John Henry Newman's autobiographical work titled *Apologia pro Vita Sua* and the Italian Renaissance artist Cellini's work by the name of *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*. She directly quotes from their works many times and even goes so far as to repeat some of them as an adage to encourage herself. For example, she time and again makes use of the sentence "... by God's grace, I am now going on my way rejoicing" (127) to emphasize her happiness at being a woman artist in the twentieth century.

Together with biographies, there also exist a poem, some diaries, and a letter in the novel. When Edwina is visiting Fleur, she reads out an unpublished poem in which she "set great store even though it had been rejected eight times" (52). The first verse of the poem entitled "Metamorphosis" is written out there, which attracts the reader's attention and makes him wonder at the inclusion of a poem in a fiction. Also peculiar to the reader is the appearance of some passages from the diary in the novel. They are stolen by Edwina and given to Fleur. Altogether there appear five diary entries written by Sir Quentin in *Loitering with Intent*. They are presented in such a truthful way that some of the words are omitted as it is explained that "They had been torn roughly, so that some of the words at the beginning of each line were partly missing and equally at the end of the lines on the reverse sides" (184). Towards the end of the novel, a simple letter appears which comes from the publisher to invite an appointment with Fleur.

The existence of some biographies, diaries, a poem, and a letter in *Loitering with Intent* has the "general effect of making the reader stop and reconsider reading and sense-making practices which are taken for granted, thought of as 'natural'" (Ommundsen, 1993: p. 9). With this effect, the novel becomes more reflexive. Consequently, "by intensifying the artefact, making the transition from text to meaning more complex, reflexive fiction thus calls attention to the material existence of language and fictional systems, the 'stuff' of literature which the reader otherwise tends to overlook" (Ommundsen, 1993: p. 9). In general, the inclusions of writings of other genres in *Loitering with Intent* help to make it a reflexive novel and contribute to its metafictional character.

In summary, *Loitering with Intent* has the complicated structure of fiction-within-fiction, the intricate relationship of *mise en abyme*, which rarely appears in British literature before the time this novel has appeared, and contains a lot of other writings that considerably upset the reader's expectations of an ordinary novel. As a result, it is a typical metafiction in terms of its structure.

3. The Exposure of Artificiality

In his introduction to the work metafiction, Mark points out two typologies of metafiction represented by David Lodge's *Small World*, which takes the world of professional literary criticism as its fictional object without explicitly highlighting the artificiality of the fictional process, and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which foregrounds the artificiality of its construction without reference to literary criticism (Currie, 1995: p. 3). In fact, *Loitering with Intent* has the characteristics of these two types of metafiction. In other words, it not only foregrounds the artificiality of the novel itself but also has literary criticism as its fictional object.

The artificiality of *Loitering with Intent* is reflected through the presentation and interpretation of elusive reality and fiction, which is one of the major concerns of metafiction, as Patricia Waugh argues that "the main concern of metafiction is precisely the implications of the shift from the context of "reality" to that of "fiction" and the complicated interpenetration of the two" (Waugh, 1984: p. 36).

Before we go on, the difference between reality and fiction between *Loitering with Intent* and other metafictional novels should be made clear: for ordinary novels, reality usually refers to real life or things outside the novel and fiction refers to the novel itself; as *Loitering with Intent* is a novel containing a fiction-within-fiction, the state of reality and fiction is rather complicated here. On the one hand, the fiction to be discussed may refer to the novel-within-novel titled *Warrender Chase* and the reality may refer to the real life of Fleur, who is the author of *Warrender Chase*; on the other hand, the fiction may refer to *Loitering with Intent*, while the reality is the real life of the author Spark.

A crude outline of *Loitering with Intent* shows that Muriel Spark explores the issue of fiction and reality through the creation of complicated structure and stories. As the story gradually unfolds, matters become more and more complex as reality, or life, imitates fiction step-by-step: Sir Quentin imitates Warrender Chase; the

characters in Fleur's real life are regarded by Fleur as "characters of my own" which refer to the characters in the novel *Warrender Chase* she is writing, etc. Early in the story, Fleur has already dropped the hint:

The process by which I created my characters was instinctive, the sum of my whole experience of others and of my own potential self; and so it always has been; sometimes I don't actually meet a character I have created in a novel until sometime after the novel has been written and published (24-25).

It is evident that the second sentence is a self-quotation from a television interview in which Muriel Spark told Malcolm Muggeridge that "sometimes I invent a character that I meet later on after the book is written" (Muggeridge, 1961).

So many displacements are set up in *Loitering with Intent* that the distinction between reality and fiction is unstable. Fleur finally finds herself in a state of madness and seems like a prophet as her *Warrender Chase* appears to be conjuring up the actual events of her real life. Actually, toward the end of the novel, it is apparent that the plot of *Warrender Chase* in some mysterious way foretells Fleur's genuine experience. The intrigues of Sir Quentin, his doom in a car crash, and even some of his words exactly correspond to those of *Warrender Chase* in Fleur's novel-within-novel. Also strange is that, Sir Quentin's sinister plots bear some resemblance to Fleur's plot-making, as she mentions, "so that his purposes were quite different from mine, yet at the same time they coincided" (37). Moreover, Fleur adds some fictional elements to the memoirs of the members in the Autobiographical Association to polish them up and make them more appealing, but she finally considers their real lives as sheer fabrications. She regards those around herself as "inventions of my own" (36). Fleur's work on the memoirs, as she herself says, "feeds my imagination for my novel *Warrender Chase*" (37). This demonstrates another level of connection between fiction and reality. Reality and fiction are so interwoven in *Loitering with Intent* that they at times become indistinguishable.

Reality and fiction coexist in *Loitering with Intent* in an apparent way. Just as Caroline Rose in *The Comforters*, who heard voices which she later identified as the sound of herself dictating, Fleur writes in a frenzied fury of creativity. She admits that she is an extremely neurotic writer. At one time she tears up her friend Dottie's memoir angrily; at another, she tears up some pages of her own manuscript of the novel in a fit of temper. She is described as "paranoiac" (87). Thus Spark implies that the reader has every reason to believe that Fleur may confuse reality and fiction, either subconsciously or consciously. She recalls that once she "sat and wondered if I were going mad, if Warrender Chase existed or had I imagined the book" (124). On other occasions, when she finds out that Sir Quentin is imitating the acts and words of Warrender Chase, she says, "I could have invented him" (106) or "I almost feel I invented him" (113). What adds to the confusion of reality and fiction is Wally's words to Fleur: "Sometimes..., you're suddenly not there" (203). The reader may recall that Georgina Hogg in *The Comforters* sometimes disappears mysteriously when the author does not perceive her. Their sudden and superstitious disappearances suggest that both of them are figments of the author, thus contributing to the artificiality of the novel.

Spark extends the theme, namely the relation between reality and fiction, so severely that the artificiality of the fiction is apparent in *Loitering with Intent*. By highlighting the fragile relation of reality to fiction, Spark in some way challenges the convention of mimesis, which argues that life precedes art and is imitated by it. In *Loitering with Intent*, it is easy to find out that art often exists before life. Fleur at one time admits that "sometimes I don't actually meet a character I have created in a novel until sometime after the novel has been written and published. And as for my character Warrender Chase himself, I already had him outlined and fixed, long before I saw Sir Quentin" (25). Spark presents Sir Quentin's activities as the true happenings in Fleur's life but regards Warrender Chase as undoubtedly a character in the novel written by Fleur. She talks about the activities or remarks of Warrender Chase, and then presents those of Sir Quentin's, showing that the former prefigure the latter. The characters in *Loitering with Intent* appear to tackle reality with what they learn from the novel *Warrender Chase*. Fleur and Sir Quentin are alike in their turning to it for reference. Sir Quentin follows the words and actions of Warrender Chase. Fleur plays the role of a detective who investigate Sir Quentin's conspiracy and his theft of her manuscripts. Sometimes, when she is in a dilemma as to what to do, she depends on her *Warrender Chase* for a way out. Once, when Dottie asks her why she cannot reveal herself thoroughly, Fleur answers that she will be able to explain when she writes a few more chapters of *Warrender Chase*. She further explains it when Dottie doesn't understand: "It's the only way I can come to a conclusion about what's going on at Sir Quentin's. I have to work it out through my own creativity" (66).

Accordingly, art precedes life, which is contrary to the traditional rules. Fleur is surprised to find "How Sir

Quentin was revealing himself chapter by chapter to be a type and consummation of Warrender Chase, my character” (60). Sometimes, the status of the above two is under question when Fleur reflects: “It was almost as if Sir Quentin was unreal and I had merely invented him, Warrender Chase being a man, a real man on whom I had partly based Sir Quentin. It is true that I felt tight-strung, but I remember those sensations very clearly” (182-183). Evidently, in *Loitering with Intent*, life imitates art. Normally, art is considered false. Here in Fleur’s case, her life imitates art; therefore the life is more false. Fleur’s life, in fact, is no more than the fiction created by Spark. As a result, the degree of falsehood is emphasized in regard to the fiction. The artificiality of the novel is thus thoroughly exposed.

Spark doesn’t stop her speculation here. She, through Fleur, demonstrates her feelings with regard to the confusion between reality and fiction. She even makes Fleur doubt her own existence: “For a moment I felt like a grey figment, the ‘I’ of a novel whose physical description the author had decided not to set forth. I was still, of course, weak from my flu” (95). On another occasion, when Fleur’s friend Dottie expresses her dislike of one character in Warrender Chase, Fleur answers: “How can you say that? Marjorie is fiction, she doesn’t exist” (73). Subsequently, she also has the same idea about Sir Quentin and his members. On one occasion, she says: “Warrender Chase never existed; he is only some hundreds of words, some punctuation, sentences, paragraphs, marks on the page” (85). On another occasion, she remarks: “I could have invented him; I could have invented all of them—the lot. I said Edwina was the only real person out of the whole collection” (106).

Besides the reality and fiction concerning the enclosed novel *Warrender Chase*, Spark also deals with the relationship between reality and fiction around *Loitering with Intent*. As is clear to all, Fleur and Spark are both experts on Newman. From this perspective, Spark’s life as reality and Fleur’s life as fiction converge. At the beginning of their career, both Spark and Fleur are enormously influenced by Newman and both write something about his life and his work. On the whole, Fleur thinks highly of Newman’s sublimity and graceful spiritual state. But at one point she disagrees with him when Maisie Young, one of the members of the Autobiographical Association tells her about Newman’s description of his boyhood religious feelings. He disbelieves material reality and only dwells on “two and two only supreme and luminously self-evident beings, my Creator and myself” (98). Fleur would not accept his opinion, and considers it to be “a poetic vision only”, and “the expression of a nineteenth-century romantic” (97). She thinks Newman’s *Apologia* “a beautiful piece of poetic paranoia” (98). This reminds the reader of the correspondence to the life of Spark, who took an interest in the study of some Romantic writers and sometimes opposed those who live a romantic vision. Therefore, Spark’s life as reality corresponds to Fleur’s life as fiction, in which way reality and fiction merge.

The study of reality and fiction in and around *Loitering with Intent* exposes the artificiality in the novel itself and forces the reader to consider *Loitering with Intent* as an artefact, undercutting its realistic impulses and turning it into a self-reflexive work. Due to the emphasis of its artificiality and self-reflexivity, *Loitering with Intent* turns out to be a paradigmatic metafiction.

4. Discussion about the Criticism of Fiction

In *Loitering with Intent*, employing the protagonist Fleur as her mouthpiece, Spark voices her criticism of fiction to theorize about the novel. She comments on a variety of topics concerning creation, such as the writer, the fiction, and the reader.

About the criticism of fiction, Patricia Waugh makes an impressive statement in her *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*:

Hence critics have discussed the “crisis of the novel” and the “death of the novel...”. Could it be argued instead that metafictional writers, highly conscious of the problems of artistic legitimacy, simply sensed a need for the novel to theorize about itself? Only in this way might the genre establish an identity and validity within a culture apparently hostile to its printed, linear narrative and conventional assumptions about “plot”, “character”, “authority” and “representation”. The traditional fictional quest has thus been transformed into a quest for fictionality (Waugh, 1984: p. 10).

In the concluding part of the same chapter, she claims that British fiction belongs to the type of metafiction which has the characteristic of probing the theme of fictionality:

“Metafiction” is thus an elastic term which covers a wide range of fictions. There are those at one end of the spectrum which take fictionality as a theme to be explored (and in this sense would include the “the

self-begetting novel”), as in the work of Iris Murdoch or... At the centre of this spectrum are those texts that manifest the symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but allow their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized or “naturalized” and given a total interpretation... Much British fiction fits into the first half of the spectrum, though problematically... (Waugh, 1984: pp. 18-19).

In “The Art of Metafiction”, Larry McCaffery expands the range of metafiction in that it not only explores the theme of fictionality but also deals with other subjects regarding the issue of writing:

By his own choice of forms, the anti-novelist indirectly criticizes past forms and suggests new perspectives on the relationship between fiction, the artist, and reality. When we examine a metafiction, however, we discover that fiction-making is not dealt with in such indirect fashion; instead, it takes as its main subject writers, writing, and anything else which has to do with the way books and stories are written. Not surprisingly, metafictions often present themselves as biographies of imaginary writers (McCaffery, 1995: pp. 182-182).

Accordingly, *Loitering with Intent* is a typical metafiction, for it is precisely and directly concerned with the subjects of the writer, writing as art itself, biographies, and the reader. It is “almost a handbook of the devices, theory, and points of view that govern her (Spark’s) career” (Dipple, 1988: pp. 141-142). Marilyn D. Button regards it as “to date Spark’s most explicit and satiric exposé of the art of fiction” (Button, 1988: p. 6). In an interview, Spark herself has admitted that “I like Cynthia Ozick, I think she’s a very interesting writer, extremely lively and eloquent. And I like this new tendency of literature about literature, I really love it” (Frankel, 1987: p. 456).

In *Loitering with Intent*, Spark often expresses her satisfaction with the role of writer through Fleur. Early in *Loitering with Intent*, Fleur recalls having exclaimed in 1949, “How wonderful it feels to be an artist and a woman in the twentieth century” (25). The thought gets demonstrated on many other occasions. Fleur reiterates the sentence that “I go on my way rejoicing” (222). This sentence in fact comes from the Italian Renaissance artist’s work *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*. It serves as a poetic refrain to encourage Fleur. The conviction that it is a pleasure to be an artist is evident throughout this novel. It appears to be the reason that *Loitering with Intent* is joyful in comparison with Spark’s other works, and shows Spark’s sincere and positive attitude toward the art as a profession. The strong sense of identity as a writer inspires Fleur and prevents her from being misguided by the desire for success. She would like to get her novel published and be successful, but she knows that “success could not be my profession in life, nor failure a calling for that matter. These were by-products” (122). What is significant for her, and for Spark as well, is to fulfill the duty of a writer and preserve one’s own artistic vision.

Spark has such a good opinion of the writer as vocation that she believes the writer has a privilege in the process of creation. In *Loitering with Intent* she writes: “The true novelist, one who understands the work as a continuous poem, is a myth-maker” (141). As Waugh maintains, “in most of Spark’s novels the author is flaunted as God in the novel, though necessarily a humanly fallible one” (Waugh, 1984: p. 120). *Loitering with Intent* is no exception. The author Spark is rather like God who can manipulate everyone and everything in the novel. Spark even takes advantage of the fiction-within-fiction *Warrender Chase* as a guide to tell Fleur’s memoir story. The end of the main character Sir Quentin is already revealed, though somewhat implicitly, near the beginning of Fleur’s story. This produces the effect of making the author look like God who knows about all and puts everything into a divine order.

As to the writer’s function, Spark gives her viewpoint when asked about the writer’s relationship to her community or age in an interview:

... some opposition and some innovation, I would say. Otherwise he’s not an artist; he might as well be a copyist. There’s no point unless you have something—unless you can improve on society, the best thing you can do is to keep quiet (Frankel, 1987: p. 449).

Fleur’s words about the role of the writer as the transfiguration of the commonplace to some degree echoes Spark’s viewpoint:

What is truth?... When people say that nothing happens in their lives I believe them. But you must understand that everything happens to an artist; time is always redeemed, nothing is lost and wonders never cease (117).

On another occasion, Fleur says: “I was aware of a daemon inside me that rejoiced in seeing people as they were, and not only that, but more than ever as they were, and more, and more” (8-9). This explains why the artist has such an active role in our lives: “Receptivity distinguishes the artist from others, so that even the threatening and unpleasant can be entertained” (Richmond, 1984: p. 157).

Towards the end of the novel, when a policeman veers from his path to check on Fleur’s unusual presence in the graveyard and talks with her, he tells her that among the offenses he thought she might have been guilty of was that she was loitering with intent. The book takes the title from this and it has a symbolic meaning—the writer’s act of loitering has to do with the observation of life and her intent is the transformation of life into art. Actually, for Spark, the writer tends to be off the path of ordinary people, loitering like a criminal, but the fact is that she is aiding instead of obstructing the society by her creation.

With regard to the tasks and obligations of the writer, Spark also voices her opinion through Fleur: “Words should convey ideas of truth and wonder... I see no reason to keep silent about my enjoyment of the sound of my own voice as I work” (82). She maintains that folly and weakness, guilt and sin, sadism and treachery should be treated with a light and heartless hand and argues that “it seems to me a sort of hypocrisy for a writer to pretend to be undergoing tragic experiences when obviously one is sitting in relative comfort with a pen and paper or before a typewriter” (82). It is just these thoughts that contribute to the lightheartedness and joyful mood of Fleur in *Loitering with Intent*.

In addition to the problem of the writer, Spark elaborates a lot on the issue of art or fiction as art in *Loitering with Intent*. As Alan Bold argues, “Loitering with Intent is a suspense story..., but it is also contemplation on the nature of fiction and the nature of all ‘life-stories’. And it is a tribute to literary tradition (Bold, 1984: p. 63). Norman Page holds the same opinion, declaring that *Loitering with Intent* is a remarkable and exhilarating examination of the nature of the novelist’s art and a spirited urging of the high seriousness of fiction” (Page, 1990: p. 105).

In the novel, Spark expresses through Fleur her fascination with art which is regarded as her primary concern like a lover to her: “it took up the sweetest part of my mind and the rarest part of my imagination” (60). Fleur is so immersed in art that she cannot spare anytime for other activities, which is proved by another statement: “I had an art to practice and a life to live, and faith abounding; and I simply didn’t have the time or the mentality for guilds and indulgences, fasts and feasts and observances” (131). Here and there in the novel, Fleur demonstrates how art intrigues her.

The nature of art is pinpointed towards the end of the novel. When Dottie sees that Fleur has become a successful novelist with a novel like one telling the story of Sir Quentin, she accuses Fleur of “having plotted and planned it all” (220). Fleur agrees that she has been “*Loitering with Intent*” (220). Again she reiterates the nature of art and reaffirms art’s active role in enriching everyday life; as Alan Bold states, the nature of art is “a habit of purposively haunting the earth while possessed by creative vitality” (Bold, 1984: p. 114).

Sometimes Spark’s involvement with art is reflected through her views on fiction. Spark attaches importance to the connection among fiction, poems, and myths. Once, Fleur, the spokeswoman of Spark, says that the novels are “continuous poems” (141). She tells Dottie: “I’ve started a novel which requires a lot of poetic concentration because, you see, I conceive everything poetically” (28). Certainly this habit is related to Spark’s experience, for she started her career as a poet instead of a novelist. Just before her success with the first novel *The Comforters*, Spark was mainly known as a poet. As is known, most of Spark’s novels including *Loitering with Intent* are written gracefully with a poetic note and the economy of a poem. Early in 1970, Spark admitted that “I think I am still a poet. I think my novels are the novels of a poet. I think like a poet and react as one. I had resisted the novel because I thought it was a lazy way of writing poetry. For me, poetry was literature, as it was for Aristotle” (Gillhan, 1970: p. 412).

Spark’s requirements for art are displayed through Fleur’s perspectives on the relation between fiction and poetry. The demand most emphasized by Spark is the style of precision and economy which accounts in part for Fleur’s love of poetry. Fleur’s remark in the novel reflects Spark’s demand for economy: “how little one needs, in the art of writing, to convey the lot, and a lot of words, on the other hand, can convey so little” (84). The highest criterion for Spark is to precisely convey the most with the least words. This is exactly the reason why nearly all of her novels are less than 200 pages. It is just her style of precision and economy that dramatically appeals to many readers.

Spark’s points of view with regard to the necessity for a mythology in the novel exactly coincide with Fleur’s in the novel:

Without a mythology, a novel is nothing. The true novelist, one who understands the work as a continuous poem, is a myth-maker, and the wonder of the art resides in the endless different ways of telling a story, and the methods are mythological by nature (141).

In fact, she may mean by myth a universal element in the plot, as Alan Bold argues that “without myth, presumably, the random events displayed would be too diverse and incoherent” (Bold, 1984: p. 84). Having the myth in mind, Spark usually implicitly expresses her thoughts and often leaves something for the reader to meditate on.

One more way to understand Spark’s attitude toward art is through the study of her autobiographical writings. Spark herself has talked about the planned novel that is to be “in the form of an autobiography... called *Loitering with Intent* which sort of sums up my life” (Glendinning, 1979: p. 47). Bryan Cheyette’s view corresponds to that of Spark’s: “*Loitering with Intent* is a meta-narrative which does not merely incorporate aspects of Spark’s biography but radically interrogates the assumptions that lie behind the retelling of her life-story” (103). In fact, *Loitering with Intent* is about a successful novelist who is describing her creative life and reflecting upon the relation between fiction and autobiography.

Fleur speaks for Spark when it concerns the problem of writing autobiography. Early in the novel, she mentions that there are three vices to be avoided in the writing of autobiography: “One of them was nostalgia, another was paranoia, a third was a transparent craving on the part of the authors to appear likeable” (31). What she stresses is the quality of truth in the writing of autobiography: It should tell “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” (19). Fleur also regards truth as the thing to distinguish autobiography from fiction:

While I recount what happened to me and what I did in 1949, it strikes me how much easier it is with characters in a novel than in real life. In a novel the author invents characters and arranges them in convenient order. Now that I come to write biographically I have to tell of whatever actually happened and whoever naturally turns up (5).

Truth is also the priority of Newman and Cellini whom Fleur admires and talks a lot about in her novel. They are quite different in many ways, but alike in their emphasis upon keeping a true record of themselves. Newman writes: “I wish to be known as a living man, and not as a scarecrow which is dressed up in my clothes” (198). Cellini has the same idea and thinks it important for a celebrated man to write his own autobiography:

All men, whatever be their condition, who have done anything of merit, or which verity has a semblance of merit, if so be they are men of truth and good repute, should write the tale of their life with their own hand (127).

On the one hand, Fleur’s contemplation of the writing of autobiography reflects Spark’s criticism of art. On the other hand, it indicates that *Loitering with Intent* is a metafiction, for Larry McCaffery has said: “Metafiction often present themselves as biographies of imaginary writers... or even as autobiographical reflections of the authors themselves” (183). *Loitering with Intent* is just one of the examples to offer autobiographical reflections of Spark.

In an interview, Spark remarks that “My whole aim, and I think the whole aim of art, is to give pleasure in one way or another” (Gillhan, 1970: p. 421). Can we suppose that while giving pleasure to the reader, she herself derives the same degree of pleasure from art? As is obvious in the novel, Fleur repeats the sentence “I go on my way rejoicing” (103) again and again. This shows that on the one hand, Fleur takes intrinsic delight in a world full of wonder and surprise; on the other hand, and more importantly, she finds out that the art is the best device for her to explore her experience of life.

With respect to the issue of the reader, Spark explicitly expressed her thoughts as early as 1971, during an interview when she was asked whether she had the reader in mind when she wrote:

But I’m aware of readers all over the place, that’s what I write for—readers, more than anything. Publishers think I write for them, but they’re quite wrong... There aren’t so many readers in the world. Most people can’t read or write. Readers are a very meager species, like poets (Gillhan, 1970: p. 412).

In *Loitering with Intent*, Fleur often meditates on the same problem. When she summarizes her career, she says: “It was a long time ago. I’ve been writing ever since with great care. I always hope the readers of my novels are of good quality. I wouldn’t like to think of anyone cheap reading my books” (220). At first glance this

quotation may seem like Fleur's high requirements of her readers and corresponds to what Spark says in 1971: they should be intelligent and well educated. However, it also reflects Spark's intentional flattery of the reader: those who read her novels are a rare species and distinguish themselves from ordinary readers with their intelligence. By this, Spark is finding an excuse for her favored way of implicitness in the novel: readers are so excellent that there is no need for the author to provide obvious statements for them to understand.

Spark also elaborates a lot on the issue of the general reader. She creates Dottie in *Loitering with Intent* to be a representative. In the novel, Dottie tends to misunderstand both the author and the characters in the novel, as can be reflected in the talk between her and Fleur:

"Then Marjorie is evil" (Dottie says).

"How can you say that? Marjorie is fiction, she doesn't exist".

"Marjorie is a personification of evil".

"What is a personification?" I said, "Marjorie is only words".

"Readers like to know where they stand", Dottie said. "And this novel they don't. Marjorie seems to me to be dancing on Warrender's grave".

Dottie was no fool. I knew I wasn't helping the reader to know whose side they were supposed to be on. I simply felt compelled to go on with my story without indicating what the reader should think...

"You know", Dottie said, "There's something a bit harsh about you, Fleur. You're not really womanly, are you?" (73-74).

In the above passage, Dottie imposes false moral values and disagrees with the inhuman "coldness" of the author's attitudes and viewpoints as well. The description of a character in only a few words and the fact that no moral judgment is pronounced upon result in the total confusion of the reader. Though the reader is left free to sense the stands and different levels of meaning imposed by the authorial intelligence, most readers fail, as Dottie does, to do the right work as the author thinks they would. This leads to the negative statements about the general reader in the novel:

I told him (Solly) that Dottie continued to complain about my *Warrender Chase* and consequently I was sorry I had ever started reading it to her.

...

I said, "Dottie's sort of the general reader in my mind".

"Fuck the general reader", Solly said, "because in fact the general reader doesn't exist".

"That's what I say", Edwina yelled, "Just fuck the general reader. No such person" (77).

Since no general reader exists, there are only talented and elite readers left. Spark spares no pains to advocate the cultivation of such readers through her novels.

5. Conclusion

With the special structural features, the foregrounding of the artificiality, and the meditations on critical theories, *Loitering with Intent* exactly falls into the category of metafiction which, according to Wenche Ommundsen, "presents its readers with allegories of the fictional experience, calling our attention to the functioning of the fictional artefact, its creation and reception, its participation in the meaning making systems of our culture" (Ommundsen, 1993: p. 12). The reflexive text in it functions as a microcosm and points to larger structures in the human world. The text-world relation is what makes the novel relevant in more ways than as a substitute for literary theory. Thereupon, the meaning of the novel is "ultimately neither more nor less than the meaning of the human world" (Ommundsen, 1993: p. 12).

With *Loitering with Intent*, Spark convincingly justifies Patricia Waugh's comment:

Indeed, it could be argued that, far from "dying", the novel has reached a mature recognition of its existence as writing, which can only ensure its continued viability in and relevance to a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized (Waugh, 1984: p. 19).

Also, with this metafictional novel, Spark "self-consciously probes the nature of fiction making" (Cheyette, 2000: p. 102), summarizes her reflections as well as ideas about her creation in the past, and makes it guidance

for her future novel-writing. Therefore, the significance of *Loitering with Intent* lies not just in Spark's skillful application of the metafictional strategy, but in its being the connecting link between Spark's present works and future ones.

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