

Review

Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*: A Quintessential of Modernism

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The study reviewed Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* as a most perfect example of the modernist philosophical movement, with a view to explicating how certain features of the modernist period were manifested in the literary text. It concluded that not only did Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* exemplify the basic concepts of modernism, this novel helped to realise the significance of the theory of modernism to the study of other British novels that fall in line with the modernist period.

Keywords: Modernism, quintessential, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

INTRODUCTION

Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* seems to be a perfect reflection of modernist approaches to writing. The novel reflects modernism in a unique way. Muriel Spark meticulously presents the above-mentioned modernist characteristics in the masterpiece. No wonder the literary text brought Spark, international fame and made her a popular literary icon in the discourse of world literature. Although, some scholars see the modernist principle as a distortion, not only to traditional forms but to literature at large, the fragmented presentation-principle seems to be the most interesting aspect of the novel in my own opinion.

With regard to fragmentation of plot, Muriel Spark does not unfold the plot of the text sequentially, but piece by piece; making extensive use of the narrative technique of prolepsis [flash-forward]. For example, the reader is aware early on that Miss Brodie is betrayed, though sequentially, this happens at the end of their school

years. Coarsely, Muriel Spark reveals the betrayal and eventually, all the details surrounding the events are told. The death of Mary Macgregor also comes so soon in chapter two of the novel, even though she still keeps on functioning till the end of the narrative.

Looking critically at presentation of ideas and events, chapters lack coherence and harmony. For instance, chapter two is not the continuation of chapter one, while chapter three talks about another story entirely that differs from what we have in the first two chapters. Even within individual chapters, there are fragmentations of ideas. Chapter one begins with the clash between the Brodie set and the boys with their bicycles. It goes from there to the introduction of the Brodie set, and from this to the point in which Miss Brodie tells her girls to come to supper the following day so as to consult them about the new plot, which aims at forcing her to resign. It goes from there to the discussion of Stanley Badwin who "got in as

prime minister and got out again ere long.”(Muriel, 1961:13). In fact, a careful reader has to join all these fragmented ideas together to have a comprehensive understanding of the novel.

Muriel Spark develops her characters in this manner as well. Joyce Emily Hammond is introduced as the girl who is rejected from the Brodie set. Nothing is said about her past and the nature of life she lives in her former school before joining the Blaine school. What motivates her to join the Blaine school is not even mentioned, unlike others. Her character development is so dry and shallow. After her brief introduction in chapter one, nothing is said about her again until when the news of her death is announced. At this juncture, readers can feebly understand the fact that Miss Brodie encourages her to run away to fight in the Spanish Civil War on nationalist side, which she does, only to be killed in a train accident.

With this technique, the narrator of the story is omniscient and timeless, relating the entire plot, all at once. Muriel Spark creates deep characters, which are realistic in their human imperfections. The complexity of the characters of Miss Brodie and Sandy seems to mirror the complexity of human life. Jean Brodie is genuinely intent on opening up her girls' lives, on heightening their awareness of themselves and their world and on breaking free of restrictive, conventional ways of thinking, feeling and being. Through the character of Jean Brodie, I see this literary masterpiece questioning popular and long-held notion, or better still, breaking tradition.

Here, the philosophy of what education should be is questioned. To Miss Brodie, the word education comes from the root 'e' from 'ex', out, and 'duco', I lead. It means leading out. Education to Miss Brodie is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul (p.43). This idea contradicts the long-held notion of education which sees education as a putting in of something that is not there, which Miss Mackay upholds (Muriel Spark 1961:45). Jean Brodie smartly denounces Miss Mackay's philosophy of education in her relationship with her pupils. Whenever Jean Brodie addresses them, she looks around often to see if anyone is there to eavesdrop. This suspicious mentality hunts her throughout the narrative. In a way, this contradiction of ideas further expresses the modernist view of writing and also makes readers inquisitive to the idea that will eventually triumph.

The meticulous development of Sandy's character is also very interesting. As a matter of fact, Sandy seems to be the most important character with which the novelist achieves his set objectives. She is like a key that opens up readers' understanding of all other characters in the text. Of the Brodie set, Sandy Stranger is Miss Brodie's closest companion. Miss Brodie sees Sandy as a special confidant. Sandy is characterised as having 'small almost nonexistent eyes and a peering gaze.' Miss Brodie repeatedly tells Sandy that she has insight but no instinct. She grows in the direct fascist teaching of Miss

Brodie. As a result, she represents that character that develops from the fascist ideology but stands to pull down the totalitarian authority.

She is the least expected of the set that could ever betray Miss Brodie. Eventually, she turns away from the personality which Miss Brodie has initially created in her to becoming Sister Helena of the Transfiguration. She maintains her stand that it is possible to betray where loyalty is due. Contradiction of ideas is also seen here. Sandy is against the idea that Joyce Emily Hammond should go to war to be killed. She sees Miss Brodie's encouragement to Emily as a destructive one. She is a character that is good at creating things imaginatively. For instance, the idea that Hugh Carruthers, Miss Brodie's first love, comes back from war to enquire about Miss Brodie at school, where the person he meets is Miss Mackay, who tells him that Miss Brodie does not desire to see him is a mere composition of Sandy Stranger and Jenny Gray in their book *The Mountain Eyrie*. Sandy is the very character that investigates the relationship between Mr Teddy Lloyd (the Art Master) and Miss Brodie. She also investigates the relationship between Mr Loether (the Music Master) and Miss Brodie. She is the same character that sees into the rumoured love affair between Rose and Mr Teddy Lloyd. She is all in all and so important to the narrative. Little wonder she eventually becomes a celebrity.

Something so central to the modernist movement is truth. The question of what constitute an established belief is one of the leading characteristics of the age. Modernists are of the opinion that one can never arrive at truth. They believe strongly that sometimes, truth is based on a lot of flimsy impressions and costly assumptions. Miss Brodie believes in her fascist idea. She rigidly holds on to this belief and does not feel any other opinion can overshadow hers. Change, people say is constant. Miss Brodie is not ready to change her belief. Interestingly, Muriel Spark seems to challenge Miss Brodie's teaching philosophy as the type that finds the truth and sticks with it as if it is the final. I think this is a big mistake made by Miss Brodie. She is so rigid and does not want to internalise someone else's view.

The modernist tradition emphasises individual belief. The so-called truth can be mistaken and misconceived. What things appear to be may not be what they really are, and if one does not understand, one can ruin people's lives. In a related manner, Miss Brodie believes that it is Rose who would have sexual intercourse with Mr Lord but it turns out to be Sandy Stranger, who is the least expected. Rose Stanley, who is conceived to make a Cream De La Cream, shakes off Miss Brodie's influence as a dog shakes pond-water from its coat.

Stream of consciousness technique is extensively employed in the text. The novelist presents her characters through their inner minds. Readers can fully understand the characters by studying how their inner

minds work. This technique is different from omniscient point of view where the author tells everything; in stream of consciousness, the author withdraws leaving the reader to do the interpretation. For instance, readers are made to know about the betrayal of Miss Jean Brodie through the mind of Sandy Stranger:

It is seven years, thought Sandy, since I betrayed this tiresome woman" (Muriel, 1961:75)

Also, the notion that Mr Lowther is in love with Miss Brodie is portrayed through the mind of Sandy:

It is impossible to imagine Miss Brodie sleeping with Mr Lowther. It was impossible to imagine her in a sexual context at all and yet it was impossible not to suspect that such things were so. (Muriel, 1961:75)

The girls, particularly Jenny Gray and Sandy Stranger carefully and repeatedly study the minds of the Music and the Art teachers respectively, during lessons to discern their innate affections for Miss Brodie. The noticeable changes that occur in Miss Brodie's physical appearance are made known through Sandy's inner feelings. Sandy concludes that Miss Brodie's physical structures (i.e. her breasts and buttocks) stand erect whenever she appears before Mr Lowther and Mr Llord. Little wonder, Miss Brodie constantly questions Sandy on her wandering attention whenever she is lecturing her set on her prime (Ibid 1961:15).

CONCLUSION

Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is an educative, entertaining and interesting masterpiece that perfectly depicts the modernist ideological engagements. It confirms the fact that nothing in life is ever permanent and should be permanent, as seen in Miss Jean Brodie's rigid approach to her philosophy. More importantly, it questions the notion of established truth and reflects on

fragmentation of plot and characters. It extensively explores the technique of stream of consciousness and largely reflects life as vanity. The review opens up a new vista of reading and comprehending Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* on the one hand and other British novels that fall in line with the modernist period, on the other hand.

REFERENCES

Muriel S (1961). *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1961.