

Faith, Morality and Fascist Perspectives in “The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie” by Muriel Spark

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Abstract – *The present paper will analyse the concepts of faith, morality and fascism that emerge so strongly within this novel The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. According to ancient tradition, St. Peter, the chief apostle of Christ founded the Christian Church at Rome. The Church believes that in matters of faith and morals, the teachings of the Church are infallible. This means that they are free from all possibility of error. It thereby follows that when the Pope, speaking in his apostolic capacity, makes a pronouncement in matters of faith and morals, his teaching is also infallible. Moral disarray is conveyed through the strong presentation of Miss Brodie in touching manner. She tries her level best to wield moral power and control over the destinies of others significantly but her religious sensibility fails to provide her with a clear moral perspectives. The falsehood of Miss Brodie's claims is revealed in their documented fantasies and in their minds which are filled with her preoccupations. Her admiration for Hitler and Mussolini further supplement her image as an ideologue of fascism. Her betrayal and crushing defeat becomes inevitable. Finally, the defeat of fascism and the protagonist, Miss Brodie go together side by side, placing the novel The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie within the historical space that it seeks reflect and portray.*

Key Words – *Christian Church, Infallible, Pope, Apostolic, Disarray, Documented, Fantasies, Preoccupation, Fascism, Ideologue, Mussolini & Hitler etc.*

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The main objective of this article to trace the development of Modern English fiction with specific reference to the major shifts in literary perspectives that the novel offers on faith, morality and fascism. The article will examine a number of Issues that arise from the novel, and we are in position to identify the different issues, viz.: "Faith, Morality and Fascism" that lie hidden within the narrative. English literature of the early twentieth century is marked by a definite sense of transition. Modernist writing exploded the long-preserved myth of universal human nature. It acknowledged the breakdown of the pre-industrial way of life and economy and was influenced by urbanisation, destruction of reason, and the resultant uncertainties of the First World War. These issues loomed large in the consciousness of the writers whose works reflected apocalyptic, crisis-centered views of history.

Politics faded from fiction written during and after the First World War. It was replaced by a greater concentration on some religious and moral issues. The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie touches upon both and in Miss Brodie and Sandy are reflected diverse threads of Christianity. The teacher's attitude is related to Calvinism while the student's ideology is steeped in Roman Catholicism. To understand these divergent beliefs we shall look briefly at the doctrines expounded by Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox and

understand how their views differ from the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

Miss Brodie's religious leanings are distinctly Calvinistic. There is her disapproval of the Church of Rome which she considers to the "church of superstition" and believes that "only people who did not think for themselves were Roman Catholics". As a thinking individual she distances herself from the Roman Catholic Church and becomes, as Sandy says, "the God of Calvin... who sees the beginning and the end". Imbued with this sense of omnipotence, she sets about ordering her own life and also that of others. Her total lack of guilt in assuming this blurs her moral perceptions. "She was not," writes Spark, "in any doubt, she let everyone know she was in no doubt, that God was on her side whatever her course and so she experienced no difficulty or sense of hypocrisy in worship while at the same time she went to bed with the singing master". The sense of isolation and alienation that she encountered at the end of her life was brought on by a weakened sense of morality which she continues to justify for too long in her life.

Miss Brodie's attitudes to education are also related to Calvinism. She is like Calvin's God, holding sway over the Brodie set and expecting each of them to fulfil her expectations at each step of their lives. She

begins in an incongruous manner by adopting a psychological approach. To her students she portrays herself as a victim of the system that thwarts her high ideals by questioning the methods of her teaching. She then seeks to assure them of an "academic" salvation by promising to turn them into the "creme de la creme" among their peers if only they would follow her advice in letter and spirit. Once, having gained the confidence of her six girls, she sets about planning and organising their futures for them. She especially undertakes to run the lives of Rose and Sandy in whom she sees the potential of fulfilling her personal dreams. "It was plain," writes Spark in the novel, "that Miss Brodie wanted Rose with her instinct to start preparing to be Teddy Lloyd's lover, and Sandy with her insight to act as informant on the affair. It was to this end that Rose and Sandy had been chosen as the creme de la creme". Her dreams, however, are rudely shattered when just the opposite happens.

Miss Brodie lives by personal insight and experience rather than by any theory and doctrine and Spark suggests that the Catholic Church was a suitable channel for normalizing her. If Miss Brodie had lived within the parameters of doctrine and community, she might have avoided the pitfalls of personal judgement. Her vital personal energy could have been channelized in better directions rather than in planting explosive ideas in the minds of her naive followers. When Sandy perceives the devastating effect of Miss Brodie's imposition of personal ideology and enthusiasm, she understands the suffocating potential of her teacher. She is alarmed by the images on Lloyd's canvases where all girls resemble Miss Brodie, and is especially perturbed to hear of the circumstances of Emily Joyce's death. Sandy senses that Miss Brodie "has elected herself to grace" and saw her as a symbol of power that ruled the lives of lesser beings. Miss Brodie's self-righteousness and lack of humility irritate Sandy who sees "an excessive lack of guilt" in her teacher. In later years, when Sandy read John Calvin, she found it hard to reconcile to his doctrine in which the human soul was blindly enslaved to sin and gave people "an enormous sense of joy and salvation" so that "their surprise at the end might be nastier". Calvinism's deterministic streak is rejected by Sandy in favour of the more redemptive Roman Catholicism. She visualises Miss Brodie as a Calvinistic presence designing and determining the future of innocent minds and vows to put a stop to it. She achieves this end but at the cost of personal guilt that flays her constantly and makes her uneasy as a nun. The author's sympathies, however, lie with Sandy. When Sandy recovers from her place of moral righteousness and looks back, she realise that Miss Brodie's defective sense of self-righteousness had not been without its beneficent and enlarging aspects.

Like Sandy, Muriel Spark personally rejects the determinism of Calvin and Knox in favour of the inclusiveness that she finds in orthodox Catholicism. Spark values seeing the truth and that too without sentimentality. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*,

humbug and falsehood become targets of her denunciation.

Moral disturbance and degeneracy characterised Spark's vision in the novel. Moral disarray is conveyed through the presentation of Miss Brodie. She tries to wield moral or psychological power and control over the destinies of others but her religious sensibility fails to provide her with a clear moral perspective. By believing that "God was on her side", Brodie gives herself a false metaphysical aura and justifies the excesses in her life. Her success lies in influencing her girls to such an extent that begins to see her actions lying "outside the context of right and wrong" and her blurred moral perspectives are thus transferred to the girls. It takes the sensitivity of Sandy to expose us to the dangerously destructive aspect of her psychological power over people.

At one point the author intervenes openly to state that only the Roman Catholic Church could accommodate Miss Brodie's extreme temperament. "It could have embraced, even while it disciplined, her soaring and diving spirit, and it even "might have embraced, even while it disciplined, her soaring and diving spirit, and it even "might have normalized her". Miss Brodie, however, is never freed from her illusion that her own judgement would provide her with an absolute truth and this belief epitomizes her stunted ethical outlook. This narrowness of view is highlighted through the attitudes of Sandy and Jenny, who after being freed from her influence, understand and are overcome by the boundless possibilities of life. When Jenny is attracted by a man in Rome, "the concise happening filled her with astonishment whenever it came to mind in later days... the sense of the hidden possibilities in all things". When Sandy becomes a Catholic, her mind is as "full of religion as a night sky is full of things visible and invisible". The girls' feelings not only negate Miss Brodie's egocentric ideas of herself but also emphasise the difference between Miss Brodie and Sandy. The latter emerges as the most imaginative and most moral of the Brodie set, repeatedly envisaging life around herself in terms of fiction and romance. Her literary pursuits in documenting Miss Brodie's love life is an illustration of this. Sandy is torn between ethics and imagination and resolves this internal conflicts by giving weightage to ethics. Her moral leanings are further highlighted her psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception called "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace."

Though seeming to represent diverse moral positions, Miss Brodie and Sandy are ironically, involved in a common pursuit—the personal transfiguration of the commonplace. Miss Brodie is involved in shaping the lives of her set while Sandy is preoccupied with art and imagining. Through these characters, Spark is involved not only in examining the relations between moral responsibility and the

transforming imagination but is also reiterating the connections between art, freedom and destiny.

Spark's scrutiny of moral concerns brings to the fore the struggle between good and evil. Evil is shown to be the attempt to take over human beings and we see it is Brodie's exercise of moral and psychological power. Sandy's imaginative way of thinking makes her perceive that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie's "fascisti... all knit together for her need". She is able to understand why Miss Brodie disapproves of the Girl Guides who she imagines are a threat to her hold over the Brodie set. Brodie sees them as a rival fascistic whom she cannot tolerate. Sandy's perceptions do not result in aversion for Miss Brodie when she is young. This impression, however, remains in her subconscious and surfaces before her decision to betray her teacher.

Miss Brodie's concept of education is ostensibly "a learning out of what is already there in the pupil's soul" but she dominates the girls rather than responding to their innate gifts. The falsehood of her claims is revealed in their documented fantasies and in their minds which are filled with her preoccupations. She believes in enriching the lives of her students but, paradoxically, is resentful of their forming any attachment with other mistresses in school. This possessive attitude, along with her scorn for girls opting for the modern side (rather than the classical) in Senior School, show her in a negative light. Like Adolf Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels, Miss Brodie fires the imagination rather than the intellect. She manages to mystify rather than inform. Her admiration for figures like Mussolini and Hitler further supplement her image as an ideologue of fascism. We cannot help comparing her to these men with whom she shares a sinisterly powerful influence. Her betrayal and defeat at the end, therefore, becomes inevitable. It symbolizes the origin of evil within human beings, especially its inherent presence within civilized and educated people, and its close link with the individual will. The defeat of fascism and Miss Brodie go together, placing *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* within the historical space that it seeks to portray.

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