

12-15-2017

# Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961)

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### Recommended Citation

Berndt, Katrin (2017) "Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961)," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 2, 211–212.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss2/18>

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## **Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961)**

There is much to praise about Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, a short novel about an Edinburgh schoolteacher and the girls she educated in the years before the outbreak of WWII. Taught as a modern Scottish classic in and outside of Scotland, readers and critics alike have long been enamoured of its curious amalgamation of acerbic humour, elegance of style, Calvinist spirit, and careful poignancy of plot development.

Yet none of these qualities fully explains why the book continues to be one of Scotland's favourite novels. The popularity of *Miss Brodie*, I venture, derives not least from the pleasurable challenge to fully comprehend the charismatic powers of its eponymous protagonist. Glamorous and romantic, and with a proud self-assurance rarely bestowed on female characters, Jean Brodie is the centre of attention in a story in which she eludes everyone's emotional grasp. The novel portrays her as the product of the projections of her students, lovers, and colleagues. But while the motivations and feelings of the other characters are described and commented on, Miss Brodie's mind remains as unexplored as her personal background. She is brought to life in reported speech and action, in the paintings of her lover, and in the contemplation of her girls, but she is never represented in her own sentiments. The narrative voice, praised by Jenny Turner for its "waspishness" and "posh-Scottish camp," neither shares any of Miss Brodie's thoughts nor discloses them in free indirect discourse. Through the eyes of her discerning Brodie set, the reader experiences a dedicated teacher who seeks to imprint her ideas of culture, romance, and beauty on a chosen few students eager to follow her lead in becoming the "leaven in the lump." She is persuasive in her utter lack of self-doubt, disturbing in her political ignorance, and ultimately tragic in her failure to understand the errors of her judgment.

In the character of Miss Brodie, the novel configures two main themes: the deceptive power of fiction, and the joy of being different. The story shows her thriving on the fantasies she encourages, moving gracefully amongst her colleagues on "the chariot heels of her superiority." Never, she assures her girls, would she exchange her singular position at their "education factory" for a post at another school where her pedagogical ideas might be met with approval. The Brodie set duly acknowledges what

she labels as her sacrifice, realizing its self-serving manipulation only years later. Intriguingly, they thrive along with her on the fantasy, distinguished by the knowledge that Miss Brodie commits her prime to educating them. Her performance plants self-confidence in her girls, and encourages them to render their own stories larger than life. Yet Miss Brodie's fictions derive their strength from remaining fantasies that are nursed within but cannot be realized outside of the classroom space, and so disaster strikes, inevitably, in the moment when one of the girls attempts to translate fantasy into action.

In a time when fake news and post-truths begin to give imaginary inventions a bad name, the humour and morals of Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* act as a reminder of the power and the limits of fiction to make our lives seem grander than they are. In this regard, the desire to comprehend the mysterious Miss Brodie will hopefully remain unfulfilled, and continue to invite readers to meet the woman who could make her new stories fit the old.

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