

## Is the Teacher-Student Relationship Depicted in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie Ethical?

### A Critical Study

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#### **Abstract**

This article studies critically the ethics of the sweet bonding between teacher and students as depicted in Muriel Spark's brilliant modern novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. This critical study on the relationship does not at all mean to point out the follies and drawbacks only, it does mean to analyze whether it is logical, useful, effective and can be applied in modern day aspects of education or not. In this article an effort is made to look into the necessary values and guidelines this kind of bonding should have to bear tasty fruits of mental growth. The kind of treatment the immensely famous teacher-character Miss Jean Brodie has shown, as the novelist has portrayed, to her students, especially to the members of the group of her own choice needs to be examined thoroughly to trace the psychology of the teacher. Our aim will also be to trace the reasons behind the popularity of the teacher and her impressive charisma in this context which she herself describes as "the Prime."

**Keywords:** Miss Jean Brodie, Muriel Spark, the prime, ethics of teacher-student relationship, teaching method of Miss Jean Brodie

#### **Introduction**

As Alan Taylor, the founding editor of *The Scottish Review of Books* and Author of *Appointment in Arezzo: A Friendship with Muriel Spark* (2017, Birlinn/Polygon) has said:

"Muriel Spark is not only the greatest Scottish novelist of the second half of the twentieth century, she is one of the world's greatest writers. She may be best known for *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, but that is only one among many of her books that deserves to be read and reread."

There is no doubt that *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is the best-known novel written by Spark. It can be assumed that a major part of her fame came to her due to this multi-layered,

multi-dimensional novel. And some of the modern themes presented with her master craftsmanship in this novel are- the influence of a teacher over her selected students, her control over the mental formation of her students, politics in the workplace, love, sex and of course the unique kind of treating the students what today's topic is about. A much critical analysis will unfold the multi-dimensional attachment Miss Jean Brodie has with her gang of six students namely, Monica Douglas, Sandy Stranger, Mary Macgregor, Jenny Gray, Eunice Gardiner and Rose Stanley.

### **A Critical Analysis**

The Brodie Set is the name of the group of six students chosen by Miss Brodie when they were admitted to the fictional school of Marcia Blaine School for Girls in Edinburgh, Scotland. All of them were 10 years old and it was the year of 1930. The novel is considered to have many autobiographical elements. Miss Jean Brodie is portrayed like the author's teacher Miss Christina Kay in Gillespie High School for Girls in Edinburgh, Scotland. Miss Jean Brodie, in the novel exclaims:

“Give me a girl at an impressionable age and she is mine for life.”

And she does get it. She does exactly what she exerts proudly. Through multiple flash-forwards, the novelist has been able to portray the kind Miss Jean was. Her self-confidence is to such an extent that she damn cares the rumours about her. She is an eccentric spinster and school teacher. She has made a fine art out of private judgement of characters and specializes in organizing the lives of the Brodie Set according to her own insight. She negates and scoffs at any inculcation of the team spirit which, in her eyes, contravenes individual freedom. And she treats the students freely in this way.

Brodie, determined that her students will get an education in the original sense of the Latin verb “educere” , ‘to lead out’, gives her students lessons about everything, from academical lessons to her personal life.

The best part in her relationship with her students is that, her complete machinery of teaching and her presence as a friend-philosopher-guide over the students is inspirational to modern day teacher-student bonding. It is what we expect. This kind of bonding is all what is referred to as the perfect definition of a teacher-student relationship for achieving the goal.

As William Arthur Ward, a philosopher and writer of inspirational maxims says:

“The mediocre teacher tells, the good teacher explains, the superior teacher demonstrates, the great teacher inspires”

So, Miss Brodie falls in the group of inspirational teachers without having a doubt. There is no doubt also that she may be the best kind of a teacher the literary world has produced since

the second half of the twentieth century. And the relationship she builds with her students is the kind mostly sought for by educationists. Miss Brodie has the unusual tendency of portraying herself in the role of a martyr who, despite the staff's hostility, has dedicated the best part of her life to the experimental enrichment of her students.

If we take some practical examples from the real world and look into the manners in which some of the great teachers of the world used to teach, we find this relationship a very prominent one. Anne Sullivan, the teacher of extremely impaired girl Helen Keller, also found this bonding a very necessary one for the well-being of her student. The great Indian teacher Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan also emphasized on the need to have an understanding bonding between teacher and students. So, from this aspect, our Miss Brodie has just done the same for the well-being of her students.

At the same time, an important aspect of her teaching needs to be studied well for a proper judgement. She has taken a wide area of subjects as her topic in the classroom- may be for her wishing to make her students 'crème de la crème'- the best among best. And this choice of hers has become the apple of discord. She teaches her students topics of the syllabuses and, more noticeably, beyond the syllabuses. She openly discusses about her personal experiences of love and romance with Hugh which became unfruitful. She openly discusses about sex and lust and her desires. Even she extravagantly discusses with her students about her affairs with two teachers in the school, Mr. Teddy Lloyd and Mr. Gordon Lowther. She tells her students that her affair with Mr. Teddy Lloyd did not proceed beyond a single kiss. She treats her students as adults and keeps on telling about her experiences and imaginations regarding sex and sexual pleasures. Now there is no doubt that, these are not the things coded to be discussed with the students in the classroom. Sex education, at this point of time is very important for every student at the beginning of their adulthood. But what Miss Bordie tells her students is not ethically sex education, rather it is the opposite. It grows a curiosity in them to know more about her sex life with her lovers. Under Miss Jean Brodie's wings, Sandy and Jenny, for example, become pre-occupied with sex, talk and giggle about it, fantasize and write about it. With a multiple flash-forward story-telling, we also come to know that Sandy even starts to think herself a detective who engages herself to find out more between Miss Brodie and Mr. Lowther. It is not from any angle ethical for an ideal teacher to discuss about his or her extremely personal feelings of love, lust and sexual pleasures with students. From this aspect, Miss Jean Brodie lags behind to be tagged as an ideal teacher. And, of course, this kind of teaching cannot be judged as effective in modern day education system.

Miss Jean Brodie has chosen only six students from all the students in the classroom to make a group- "the Brodie Set" to give her lessons. This kind of partiality in the classroom is not scientific at all for imparting education in the classroom. Actually, this kind of mentality of a teacher creates negative impact on the minds of the remaining students. The modern methodical way of teaching makes all the students in the classroom feel themselves equal and important. There should not be any discrimination in the classroom on the basis of anything.

So, this is a clear refusal to one of the ethics of a good teacher-student relationship. It should not be applied at any cost in modern day education system.

Miss Brodie grooms her set of students in her own special way, which is radically different from the orthodox formal education imparted in the classroom. The central thematic concern, around which the action takes place, has to do with the identification of fraud and humbug that Miss Brodie exercises. The readers are lured into the world of Marcia Blaine School which has only one teacher, Miss Brodie, standing apart from the rest of the staffs.

Another aspect of Brodie's effort of building a strong bond with her group of students and directing their thought-process is her one-sided share of thoughts about fascism with them. She herself was an admirer of fascism and she wishes the same from her students. Thus she discusses about Mussolini and describes him as her icon. This one-sided and extremely political thought-sharing with tender minds cannot be treated as ethical at all. It actually imparts negative impression on the little mind of students, to whom the words of their teachers are like universal truths. And the quick result can also be traced in the novel itself in the case of Emily Joyce, who gets impressed by the thoughts of Brodie and leaves school to join General Franco in the Spanish Civil War, and ultimately gets killed in the train accident. In this point of view, Miss Brodie's way of controlling the tender minds of her students is not unique; rather it needs a serious reformation.

Miss Jean Brodie, in her way of imparting education, notices her impact and control over her students; what she does is not ethical teaching, rather it can be termed as trying to control the thoughts of her pupil according to her own way of viewing this world. Her unique style of communication is very attractive that makes the students cheerful at times. Her gracious presence over their lives motivates them to some extent. But her teaching is entirely teacher-centered, an old version of teaching method. Today, all over the world, schools follow student-centered teaching process where the role of a teacher is just like a facilitator. The teacher remains 'passive' in the classroom. Student-centered learning puts students' interest first, acknowledging students' voice as central to the learning experiences. This is in contrast to traditional education, which places the teacher as primarily 'active', as we find Miss Jean Brodie in this novel. According to Lev Vygotsky's theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development(ZPD), students typically learn vicariously through one another. Vygotsky says:

"Learning which is oriented toward developmental levels that have already been reached is ineffective from the viewpoint of the child's overall development. It does not aim for a new stage of the developmental process but rather lags behind this process."

So, what Miss Jean Brodie does in the classroom to attract the little minds, is not up-to-date and lacks modern technique of teaching. Actually, she deliberately tries to penetrate her thoughts into the minds of her students to make her impression last forever in them.

Out of all her protégés, it is Sandy who is able to perceive hidden aspects of Miss Jean Brodie's personality. She decides that she will not always fall in the line with Miss Brodie's future plans regarding the girls. She begins to see Brodie in a negative light, as a being who equates herself with God and Providence and views herself as a deity that presides over the lives of others. She sees in Miss Brodie's revolutionary methods of unconventional teaching and her ideology a deliberate attempt to legitimize the immoral and fraudulent. Determined to put a stop to this, ultimately we notice that Sandy actually betrays her. Though she betrays her, at the end of the novel we find her to put Miss Jean Brodie at the first place of all the idealistic impressions she had in her life. So, this is what keeps the novel alive and makes it evergreen. Brodie's impression on her students is rooted to such an extent that, even the one who betrays her, admits to have the greatest impact of Miss Jean Brodie over her.

### **Conclusion**

Though the relation between teacher and student as depicted in the novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, after this simple analysis, cannot be termed as ethical, it can be termed as inspirational with some drawbacks. Not all the aspects of this bonding should be followed in modern way of teaching, but there are multiple bits of diamond in a piece of coal. All students naturally take their teacher as their idol, and try to mould their lives in the path mentioned by him or her. In this case Miss Jean Brodie should not be taken as a path-leading teacher who does everything for the improvement and well-being of her pupils.

So, the teacher-student relationship as portrayed in the novel is not the one which is to be followed or implemented in present day scenario where child-centered teaching, T.L.M or model-based teaching have become scientific and fruitful method of teaching.

In contrast, the senior science teacher Miss Lockhart seems to be the novel's model educator, a priest in relation to her discipline who does not regard the girls in her class personalities, but rather more appropriately as students.

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