

*"Antisyzygy" in Muriel Spark's*  
*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

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Muriel Spark (1918- ), a Catholic convert of Jewish descent and Scottish birth shows a pressing commitment to moral issues and to their relation to fiction form.<sup>(1)</sup> Her novels mark new advances in the British fiction. She is considered one of the giants of twentieth-century fiction. John Updike describes her in The New Yorker as "one of the few writers on either side of the Atlantic with enough resources, daring, and stamina to be altering- as well as feeding the fiction machine". With her numerous works, which include: The Comforters (1951), Memento Mori (1959), and The Ballad of Peckham Rye (1960), she joins two great traditions of the English novel: that of comedy of manners (similar to Jane Austen); and that of romantic-gothic fiction from the Brontes and Mary Shell.<sup>(2)</sup> Being a poet, her fictional style is characterized by "conciseness and precision".

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Hugh MacMiarmid has described Scottish Literature and character as: "Almost a zigzag of contradictions, a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history".<sup>(3)</sup> Muriel Spark has expressed in her novels what is literarily called "antisyzygy" which means the union of opposites. It is not to be conceived that "antisyzygy" is a fusion of contraries in which two entities lose their identities and become one, but an existing together of mutual exclusives.<sup>(4)</sup>

Muriel Spark has presented in *The Prime of Mass Jean Brodie* (1961) and through the heroine Miss Brodie, a complex character who combines different opposing forces. Spark believes that all human beings live a double life of goodness and self-deception. Jean Brodie is presented as a beautiful yet fierce, keen yet ignorant, intellectual yet deranged, passionate yet lacking a true lover. She is a progressive teacher in a conservative school.

In an interview with Frank Kermode, Muriel Spark says:

*I do not claim that my novels are truth, I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges. And I keep in my mind specifically that what I am writing is fiction because I am interested in truth- absolute truth.*<sup>(5)</sup>

Furthermore, Spark has fought with novel form refusing to accommodate herself to its existing forms. She believes that "fictions" are not lies, and she tries in her novels to present "truth" and "fiction". The union of these opposites: "Arts" and "Science", the "private" and the "public", "good" and "evil" are going to be tackled in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie extensively.

The primary action of the novel takes place at the Marcia Blaine School for girls in Edinburgh, Scotland, during the 1930s and focuses on a small group of girls, known as "the Brodie Set" and their school mistress, Miss Jean Brodie. The story begins in 1936, when the girls are sixteen, but quickly flashes back to 1930, when the girls-then in the junior level- began their two year course of study under Brodie's tutelage. Spark utilizes flashbacks and flash-forwards throughout the novel. Miss Brodie attempts to exert control over her girls' lives and fantasies and to mold their beliefs and aesthetic tastes. Although Brodie's influence on each of the girls varies, they remain distinct clique at the school after they leave the junior level and move through the senior level. Sandy Stranger and Rose Stanley are the principal figures among the girls, and it is through them that Brodie attempts to carry on a vicarious romance with Teddy Lloyd, the school's art master. Although Brodie is in love with Lloyd, she renounces him because he is married. Brodie

carries on an affair with Gordon Lowther, the school's singing master, but refuses to marry him. At this time of the story a new girl, Joyce Emily Hammond, arrives at the school and manages to befriend Brodie. At the same time, the Headmistress, Miss Mackey, is attempting and failing to have Brodie removed. Joyce eventually disappears; it is later learned that she was killed in Spain, where her brother was fighting the fascists in the Spanish Civil War. During the summer of 1938, Brodie tours Germany, where her admiration for fascism increases. Meanwhile, she continues to nourish the idea that Rose will have an affair with Lloyd, Sandy gets interested in the Catholic Faith. One day Brodie reveals to Sandy that she encouraged Joyce Emily's escapade, though she persuaded her to switch her allegiance to Franco. Sandy goes to the Headmistress and tells her that if she wants to get rid of Miss Brodie the charge should be not sexual irregularity, but fascism. In summer of 1939, Miss Brodie is forced to resign and consequently she dies of cancer, at a time Sandy has been received into the Catholic Church.

Miss Brodie centres her life around a belief that some subjects are more important than others "Art is greater than Science. Art comes first; then Science". "Art and religion first, and then philosophy; lastly science. That is the order of the great subjects of life, that is their order and importance".<sup>(6)</sup> In fact, Miss Brodie leads

a double life. She falls in love with the school artists, Teddy Lloyd, but refuses to be his mistress, presumably because of a reluctance to interfere with his family since he is a Roman Catholic. She uses religion for her own benefit. At the beginning of the story, she recites a passage from the Bible, "when there is no vision the people perish", (p.7), she recites the passage in such a manner that the children believe the words are hers, rather than the spoken words of God. Miss Brodie believes herself to be above the moral code, and that God is on her side whatever her course, and so "experiences no difficulty or sense of hypocrisy in worship while at same time she goes to bed with the singing master"(p.85). She goes to church every Sunday then goes to bed with the singing master. This is the best scene in the fact that Miss Brodie and the singing master are not married and the church considers this a sin since sex before marriage is forbidden by the church. This is one aspect of the "antisyzygy" or the union of opposites in Miss Brodie's character.

Miss Brodie is very intelligent and very careful to cultivate an appreciation for "the true, the good, and the beautiful" in her pupils. Initially, she tells the girls they are an elite group- the "Crème de la crème"- and she takes them into her confidence and tries to imbue them with her view on culture and life<sup>(7)</sup>. The girls learn quite a lot

of useful information mixed up with details of Miss Brodie's personal life:

*These girls were discovered to have heard of Buchmanites and Massolini, the Italian Renaissance painter...They were aware of the existence of Einstein and the arguments of those who considered the Bible to be untrue. They knew the rudiments of astrology but not the date of the Battle of Flodden or the capital of Finland.*

(pp.5-6)

Miss Brodie teaches her pupils in a peculiar personal way. She maintains: "To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul" (p.36). However, it is the exact opposite; she is brainwashing her pupils. She is trying to make them think and believe in the same things that she does. Miss Brodie asks "who is the greatest Italian Painter?" Then a pupil responds "Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie" Miss Brodie says " that is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite" (p.11). She wants her pupils to respond to her own opinions and thoughts, not their own<sup>(8)</sup>.

Miss Brodie's teaching contrasts favourably with the stiff approach of the rest of the staff. She is Romantic by taste and temperament. The whole story bears a parodic resemblance to Bronte's Jane Eyre, which we are often reminded, is one of Miss Brodie's favourite novels.<sup>(9)</sup> Miss Brodie reads Jane Eyre in a loud voice to the girls while they are having sewing lessons. Jane, Charlotte Bronte and Jean Brodie are all rebellious young women, teachers by profession, ardent feminists in search of personal fulfillment. Brodie's teaching methods are contrasted with other staff members. When she is absent through "illness", her girls are taught by the forbidding Miss Gaunt, who does not bother to remember their names and uses the Romantic Literature, dear to Miss Brodie, as a form of punishment: "A hundred lines of Marmion", Miss Gaunt flung at [Rose]" (p.57). Miss Brodie, too, is contrasted with Miss Lockhart, the science teacher, who could "blow up the school with her jar of gunpowder and would never dream of doing so".(p.114). At the end of the novel Mr. Lowther, Miss Brodie's lover, gets married to Miss Lockhart who stands for science rather than to Miss Brodie who represents Art.

Miss Brodie is not a teacher at all in the traditional sense. She teaches her pupils how to be individuals and this can only be done by an example and through mimicking of identification:

*"By the time their friendship with Miss Brodie was of seven years standing it had worked itself into their bones, so that they could not break away without, as it were, splitting their bones to do so".*

(p.115)

Yet on so many occasions Miss Brodie contradicts herself when she talks about and tries to lead out the potentialities of her pupils, but she is extravagantly overbearing and tyrannical.<sup>(10)</sup> Miss Brodie is unable to see the world except as an extension of herself. The "Brodie Set" exists only to carry out her wishes. The reader is frequently reminded of Miss Brodie's ability to place thoughts into the minds of her disciples:

*"I am not saying anything against the Modern side, Modern and Classical, they are equal, and each provides for a function in life. You must make your free choice. Not every one is capable of a classical education. You must make your choice quite freely". So that the girls were left in no doubt as to Miss Brodie's contempt for the Modern side.*

(p. 61)

Ironically, the word "freely" is mentioned in Miss Brodie's address towards the class, and yet the girls knew the implications of this statement. Miss Brodie insinuates to her pupils her hatred of the "modern" for that reason when the "Set" makes transition to the senior school they choose, with exception of one, the classical languages (Greek and Latin) over the modern languages. Miss Brodie forgets that each person, however low and powerless, is a human being with rights.

Instead of following the traditional order and curriculum established within the school, Miss Brodie begins to teach off-subjects and off-location. She always refers to her "prime to her set":

*"Attended me, girls. One's prime is the moment one was born for. Now that my prime has begun...Sandy, your attention is wandering*

*What I have been talking about?*

*"Your prime Miss Brodie"*

(p.12)

*"You girls are my vocation...I am dedicated to you in my prime "*

(p.23)

*"These are the years of my prime. You are benefiting by my prime".*

(p.44)

In fact, Miss Brodie is bold enough to show her pupils her sympathy for the fascist movement of the thirties. She praises the virtues of the fascist government, in particular, the abolishment of unemployment. In a walk through Old Edinburgh, Miss Brodie states, "in Italy the unemployment problem has been solved" (p.39). And later on in the novel "Mussolini is one of the greatest men in the world" (p.44). Miss Brodie goes abroad next year "not to Italy... this year, but Germany, where Hitler has become chancellor, a prophet-figure like Thomas Carlyle and more reliable than Mussolini" (p.97). In her prime, Miss Brodie embodies all of the characteristics attributed to the major Fascist leaders of her time. She absolved herself from wrong, placed thoughts into the minds of her disciples, and retained order by inducing fear into her girls.<sup>(11)</sup>

Sandy Stranger, the confident of Miss Brodie, decides to put a stop to Miss Brodie's rampant fiction and in doing so, she scores a victory for Science over Art.<sup>(12)</sup> If Sandy were nothing more than a copy of Miss Brodie, it is not likely she would ever have had a strength to turn against her. However, Sandy joins the subjectivity

learned from Miss Brodie, to an objectivity learned from the science teacher, Miss Lockhart.<sup>(13)</sup> In fact, Sandy takes a scientific way in achieving a necessary result. She manages to move from the Artistic to the Scientific point of view. When Sandy finally betrays Miss Brodie, it is clear that she uses the charge of fascism merely as an expedient. The last straw for Sandy is the discovery that Miss Brodie connived at Joyce Emily's fatal expedition to Spain. It is not that Miss Brodie encourages the girl to switch her allegiance to Franco that shocks Sandy, but the fact that Miss Brodie encouraged her to go at all.<sup>(14)</sup>

Sandy seems, not exactly guilty about having betrayed Miss Brodie, but wistfully regretful. For Sandy, Miss Brodie was not a wicked woman, but a dangerously innocent one. "Oh, she was quite an innocent in her way", said Sandy to Jenny.(p.127) Frank Kermode comments on The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie by saying that "the dominant image is the justified Miss Brodie presiding calmly over a lost innocence".<sup>(15)</sup> As a young girl Sandy obsessed with understanding Brodie's psychology. However, as Sandy matures, her fascination with Brodie gives way to the realization of her moral obligations to the welfare of others and compels her to put an end to Brodie's tenure at the school, thus preventing her from influencing another set of girls.

To sum up, the world of The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is a fallen world in which everybody is to some extent imperfect, including members of the true church like Sandy. The true and the good are not to be found in an absolute and pure form except in God. Although most of Spark's characters are women they are certainly not singled out for any special sympathy. Muriel Spark is skeptical about the behaviour and motives of her characters. She feels most people live lives of self-deception evasion and lies. Muriel Spark who is a great admirer of the elliptical novels of Robbe-Grillet manages to fuse her knowledge to a very Scottish theme- the twining of good and evil and the inability of each to exist without the other.<sup>(16)</sup> Spark manages successfully to present the "antisyzygy" or the union of opposites in her novel: Art and Science, the inner and the outer, good and evil, and finally truth and fiction.

## *Notes*

1. James Vision (ed.), Contemporary Novelists (London: ST James Press, 1973), p.1159.
2. N.A." The prime of Miss Jean Brodie" URL: [www.emazine.com](http://www.emazine.com). Retrieved in Sept.12.2007.
3. Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid (London: Evans, 1969), p.58.
4. Alan Kennedy, The Protean Self: Dramatic Action in Contemporary Fiction (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.152.
5. "The House of Fiction", interview with Frank Kermode. rpt in The Novel Today, (ed.) Malcolm Bradbury (Manchester: Macmillan, 1977), p.68.
6. Muriel Spark, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (London: Macmillan, 1961), p.25. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.
7. John Knox "Miss Brodie the Hypocrite" URL:[www.forerunner.com](http://www.forerunner.com). Retrieved in Sept. 12.2007.

8. David Lodge, The Novelist at the Crossroads and other Essays on Fiction and Criticism (New York: Cornell University Press, 1971) p.131.
9. Kennedy, p.158.
10. Lodge, p.139.
11. N.A." The Rise of Miss Jean Brodie's Fascisti" URL: [www.denise and vernon.demon.co.U.K.](http://www.deniseandvernon.demon.co.uk) Retrieved in Sept.14.200.
12. Lodge, p.141.
13. Kennedy, p.159.
14. John Knox "Miss Brodie the Hypocrite "URL: [www.forerunner. Com.](http://www.forerunner.com) Retrieved in Sept. 12. 2007.
15. Frank Kermode, Continuities (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968) p.206.
16. N.A. "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" URL: [www. Emayzine. Com.](http://www.Emayzine.com) Retrieved in Sept. 12. 2007.

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## ملخص

## "اجتماع الأضداد" في رواية ميوريل سبارك

شباب الأنسة جين برودي

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أظهرت الكاتبة الاسكتلندية الكاثوليكية (1918- ) ميوريل سبارك – وهي من أصل يهودي – التزاماً واضحاً للقضايا الأخلاقية وعلاقتها بالشكل الروائي. وسجلت رواياتها تحولاً جديداً في الرواية البريطانية. عدّها الكثير من النقاد واحدة من عمالقة الكتاب في القرن العشرين. ووصفها John Updike بأنها واحدة من الروائيين القلائل على جانبي الأطلسي التي تتمتع بمواهب عديدة فهي جريئة ولديها القدرة على التحمل للتغيير وإدامة ماكنة الرواية. لها عدة روايات من ضمنها Comforters, Memento Mori وكذلك The Ballad of Peckham Rye هي وريثة اسلوبين تقليديين روائيين عظيمين: الأول الأسلوب الهزلي لجين أوستن والثاني الأسلوب الرومانتيكي - القوطي امتداداً لـ آل برونتي وماري شيلي. تميز أسلوب ميوريل سبارك الروائي بالدقة والإيجاز كونها شاعرة.

وقد وصف Hugh Macmiarmid الأدب والشخصية الاسكتلنديتين بكونهما "يكادان يكونان وجوداً متعرجاً من التناقضات وانعكاساً للأضداد التي يبيدها الشخص الاسكتلندي في كل طور من تاريخه السياسي والكنسي". وقد عبرت ميوريل سبارك في رواياتها عن ما يدعى بالمفهوم الأدبي "اجتماع الأضداد" والذي يعني اتحاد المتناقضات. ولا يجب أن نفهم بأن اجتماع الأضداد على أنه اندماج يفقد فيه كل من الكيانين شخصيتهما ويصبحان كياناً واحداً بل بصيغة كيانين مجتمعين مستقلّ أحدهما عن الآخر.

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