

# Maternal Fluctuations in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

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A Scottish novelist, Muriel Spark (1918-2006) was born and educated in Edinburgh. The works of Muriel Spark expresses characters' deep psyche. Among them, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is most popular and recognized among her works. This novel is set in a prestigious junior high school and senior school in Scotland in the 1930s. There are six chosen students who admire Miss Brodie. They are called the Brodie set. The Brodie girls and Miss Brodie are similarly eccentric, and do not have a good reputation at school. Miss Brodie tries to bring them up as the *crème de la crème*. But, this scheme fails by a betrayal. In this paper the spiritual relationship between students and teachers in the novel, which ends in Brodie's fall, is going to be discussed. This paper also explores what the girls think about Brodie in the novel. Benilde comments that:

Nonetheless, most critics, like Sandy herself, becomes obsessed only with the character of Jean Brodie and thereby misread the novel as only a character sketch of her. They thereby relegate Sandy to secondary status... (Benilde 97).

Therefore the primary focus of this paper with reference to is what Sandy feels toward Brodie. This paper is divided into four sections. The first section considers Brodie's characteristics. The second section examines the Brodie set, to know how they function in this novel. The third one discuss what kind of girl Sandy is. To conclude, the hidden relationship between Sandy and Brodie is analyzed.

Miss Brodie has confidence in herself, often saying "I am in my prime" (9). She explains her characteristic compared with that of other women in their prime as follows.

... women from the age of thirty and upward, who crowded their war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion. (42)

Because of this recognition, she concludes that "She was held in great suspicion" by other teachers (6). Miss Brodie believes that she is right and does not have doubt in herself. She wants to be objective about teaching. However, her policy is not balanced. "... Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life" (9). Thus Miss Brodie thinks that she possesses her students. She unreservedly says, "You girls are my vocation. If I were to receive a proposal of marriage tomorrow from the Lord Lyon King-Arms I would decline it. I am dedicated to you in my prime" (23). She reveals her bias toward

marriage and career when she tries to close the distance between herself and her students. She opens her way of thinking to girls, having an interest in her students' motives. Miss Brodie tries to instill confidence in her students, and at the same time, she has them express her hostile feelings toward other teachers. Hence, we see Brodie's self-confidence in her teaching ability and educating the 'crème de la crème'.

“... Would that I had been given charge of you girls when you were seven. I sometimes fear it's too late, now. If you had been mine when you were seven you would have been the crème de la crème . . . .” (22)

Thus, Miss Brodie aims at giving her students good education, but she believes blindly in her own fascistic thought. In addition, she creates “the Brodie set” consisting of six girls. This satisfies Miss Brodie's desire. In this manner, the Brodie set looks like Brodie. “... the remained unmistakably Brodie, and were all famous in the school, which is to say they were held in suspicion and not much liking” (6). They follow Brodie's way of living to have glory.

... Miss Brodie had already selected her favorites, or rather those whom she could trust; or rather those whose parents she could trust not to lodge complaints about the more advanced and seditious aspects of her educational policy, these parents being either too enlightened to complain or too unenlightened, or too awed by their good fortune in getting their girls' education at endowed rates, or too trusting to question the value of what their daughters were learning at this school of sound reputation. (26)

Brodie's evaluation of the parent's trust in her has a great influence on Brodie's education, which inevitably reveals that her way of education is egocentric. Though she realizes that her educational method has enemies, Miss Brodie does not want to be disturbed by other teachers and parents. Environment has a great influence on a child's mental development. The balance of the relationships between students and teachers is important. Miss Jean Brodie, who is Sandy's teacher, has played a large part in Sandy's life. They spend a long time together, since Sandy was ten years old toward her adulthood. What Miss Jean Brodie said when Sandy was ten, gives them a sense of advantage for their future as followed. “If only you small girls would listen to me I would make of you the crème de la crème” (14). She often uses this phrase, “crème de la crème”. By using it she inspires her students to repeat the magical phrase to confirm the feeling of it; “Little girls, you are going to be the crème de la crème’, said Sandy, and Jenny spluttered her cream into her handkerchief” (16). They talk about Miss Jean Brodie very often, even outside school. They get excited with topic of their special teacher, and they like to daydream about their teacher's love, thumping she has a love affair with each of them.

Moreover, Miss Jean Brodie herself repeats, “prime is best” to her students in order to convince them that they will be able to get a share of her value. Thus, Miss Jean Brodie has influenced the girls by employing her strategies. She chooses a noninterference policy toward the children, so that she wouldn’t draw the attention of parents. She chooses neither to interfere with her children nor to rely on the parents’ discipline at home.

The number of the members of the Brodie set has symbolic implications. It consists of six girls. The number “six” represents perfect symbolism in the Bible. Though the Brodie set seems to build a perfect relationship, the fact that their relation is to break down clearly shows that the relationship is unstable and imperfect. Brodie sees the Brodie set girls as a part of herself and recognizes that each girl has some of her own characteristics. Among them Sandy has insight and confidence, but she is an ugly girl. Jenny is the most beautiful girl in the Brodie set. Rose becomes a voluptuous woman. Eunice makes Brodie find herself bright by her liveliness. Monika is good at math, but she is quick-tempered and easily gets angry. Mary is awkward and a victim of bullying among the set. She becomes the scapegoat for the feelings of Brodie and others in the Brodie set. Mary is a clear victim, but in a sense all the members of the set are victims of Brodie. Brodie shows off her power through the Brodie set’s girls. Six is a number that also symbolizes faulty. Therefore the Brodie set is going to break up by going to high school.

Brodie and the Brodie set have common features. Sugawara claims that her selection of special students is incompatible with her devotion to teaching, and her way of option is also arbitrary. Brodie’s method, by which she shortens the mental distance between her and her students, is a kind of brainwashing. Girls feel that Brodie has a special affection for them, so Brodie is like a surrogate mother for the girls. Yet, what the Brodie girls share is limited, for “they had no team spirit and very little in common with each other outside their continuing friendship with Jean Brodie” (6). The reason why they stay together is because each of them loves Miss Brodie.

Miss Brodie’s most favorite student is Sandy, regarding her as her useful private spy. Sandy is the main character of the novel. This novel is told from Sandy’s perspective with flash backs and forwards, so the chronology of the story is mixed up, going back and forth sometimes. Her characteristics are described as: “She was merely notorious for her small, almost non-existent eyes ...” (7). Such a description appears many times in the story, and this forms Sandy’s inferiority complex. Lloyd directly tells Sandy, ‘You’re just about the ugliest little thing’ (102). But Sandy imagines her physical self in a different way:

“Never!’ said Sandy, placing her young lithe body squarely in front of the latch and her arm through the bolt. Her large eyes flashed with an azure light of appeal” (19). In this way, while Sandy is an ugly girl, her imaginal self is totally different: she is a beautiful

slender girl with bigger eyes. This reveals her desperate need for esteem. This actually becomes an expression of her desperation. She is the most dependent of the Brodie set. One of the reasons for her dependence is caused by the difference in Sandy's feeling about Brodie and her frustration with her own mother.

Sandy felt offended and belittled by this [her mother remark]; it was as if the main idea of the party had been the food.

'What would you like to do now?' Sandy's mother said.

Sandy gave her mother a look of secret ferocity which meant: you promised to leave us all on our own, and a promise is a promise, you know it's very bad to break a promise to a child, you might ruin all my life by breaking your promise, it's my birthday. (17)

Here Sandy thinks that her mother is insensitive to her feelings, feeling anger at and discontent with her mother, because Sandy believes that her mother does not keep her promise, so humiliating Sandy. And above all, she lacks respect and sincerity compared with Brodie. Brodie's attitude toward Sandy makes Sandy feel more affectionate toward Brodie than her natural mother. As a result, Sandy feels and loves Brodie as her surrogate mother.

Sandy intends to take advantage of Mary, but this idea contradicts itself. It is because being kind to Mary, the lowest person in the hierarchical Brodie set possibly threatens Sandy's position. Sandy expresses her fear of losing Brodie's favor.

She [Sandy] was even more frightened then, by her temptation to be nice to Mary Macgregor, since by this action she would separate herself, and be lonely, and blamable in a more dreadful way than Mary... (30)

But, if Sandy to comes near Mary, Sandy will lose her position as "the Brodie set member". Sandy is afraid of this.

It occurred to Sandy, there at the end of the Middle Meadow Walk, that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie's fascisti, not to the naked eye, marching along, but all knit together for her need and in another way, marching along. That was all right, but it seemed, too, that Miss Brodie's disapproval of the Girl Guides had jealousy in it, there was an inconsistency, a fault. Perhaps the Guides were too much of a rival fascisti, and Miss Brodie could not bear it. Sandy thought she might see about joining the Brownies. Then the group-fright seized her again, and it was necessary to put the idea aside, because she loved Miss Brodie. (31)

In a similar manner, Sandy stops her action, because she feels that it will invite the group-fright. For these reasons Sandy holds onto her position in the Brodie set, even while maintaining a rebellious attitude toward the Brodie set. This indicates Sandy's sense of

belonging in the set and attachment to Brodie. On the other hand, Sandy analyzes and tries to oppose Brodie, unlike the other Brodie girls. On the other hand, Sandy honestly accepts Brodie's teaching. Spark comments that she did not describe Sandy as a wise woman.

I don't put Sandy as the wise woman of the novel, I put Miss Brodie as the wiser — the thing about Miss Brodie is that she has no restraining influence whatsoever, whereas Sandy did. (Spark 151)

Spark depicts Sandy less wise than Brodie, but Sandy who has an influence on Brodie and the Brodie set. Sandy feels confidence in herself as an influencer, and her manner is similar to the opinionated Brodie's.

Sandy and Jenny talk about sexual topics, Sandy has faith in Brodie's respectability, saying "I don't think she [Brodie] would notice that it was naked,' Jenny said, 'She [Brodie] just wouldn't see its thingummyjig.' 'I know,' said Sandy. 'Miss Brodie's above all that'" (20). They come up with a conclusion that Brodie is different from other adults. Sandy thinks that Brodie is innocent. Also, Sandy expresses her like a goddess who has an excellent understanding. Therefore, girls keep Brodie's situation as holy and heroic. But one of the members catches a sight of Brodie kissing with a male teacher. This makes the girls think of Brodie as a woman who is full of sexual urges. On the other hand, Sandy is different as seen from Brodie, "I'm sure Sandy's mind is not on motor cars, she is paying attention to my conversation like a well-mannered girl' (37). Sandy is a model student in the set for Brodie. Over again, Brodie expects Sandy, to be better than the other girls. "Do you know, Sandy dear, all my ambitions are for you and Rose. You have got insight, perhaps not quite spiritual, but you're a deep one ..." (107). Sandy is a mediator of the set and useful so that Brodie can secure her position in the school.

"There was, indeed, a change in Miss Brodie. It was not merely that Sandy and Jenny, recasting her in their minds, now began to try to imagine her as someone called 'Jean'" (53). Sandy's viewpoint of Brodie is eventually transformed. Sandy calls Brodie "Jean" by her first name for the first time. They make a new image of Brodie, an image which is different from that of Brodie that they used to have. It is the start of the breaking down of their relationship. This is caused by their finding out of Brodie's sexual life, which disillusioned them about her. Especially Sandy obtains a different opinion of Brodie.

Now Sandy considered Miss Brodie not only to see if she was desirable, but also to find out if there was any element of surrender about her, since this was the most difficult part of the affair to realize. (89)

She does not suspect Brodie's integrity, although the discovery makes Sandy rethink about the double side of Brodie till then. Sandy feels that Brodie is still dominant. This means

that Sandy feels not a little affected by the change of opinions of the other girls about Brodie. However, Sandy begins to form a mindset, which leads to the breakup of the Brodie set. It becomes clear from her idea that her dependence on the Brodie set members decreases and the relationship between Sandy and Brodie is changing. This situation turns Sandy into an informer that will result in Brodie's expulsion.

Spark says: "Evil exists. Evil is in the world and we know it because we are born with a knowledge of good and evil" (Spark 150). Sandy's unconscious evil side causes her betrayal of Brodie.

whine in her voice – '... betrayed me, betrayed me' – bored and afflicted Sandy. It is seven years, thought Sandy, since I betrayed this tiresome woman. What does she mean by 'betray' ? She was looking at the hills as if to see there the first and unbetraysable Miss Brodie, indifferent to criticism as a crag. (60)

Sandy becomes disgusted by Brodie, but she continues the relationship with Brodie for seven years. Sandy dislikes 'Jean'. However, the sustained relationship is indicative of Sandy's attachment to Brodie.

Sandy becomes a nun after that betrayal. Ono notes "Sandy knows the limitation of Brodie's control. She discovers genuine affinity for Catholicism" (Ono 383). But it seems that Sandy fills her sense of loss, by seeking God as eternal existence. Brodie is an absolute surrogate mother and a noble existence for Sandy. Sandy keeps an early image of Brodie. So, she discards Brodie's later influence. The reason Sandy becomes a nun is to seek God, who never changes. Sandy is a favorite student but is not only student for Brodie. To serve God, is the most powerful resistance to Brodie.

The relationship between Sandy and Brodie is based on intense and mutual trust. However, it fades out because of the disintegration of Brodie's image in Sandy's mind. Moreover, the love for and the worship of Brodie's "motherhood" fluctuates. From the above Sandy always wants attention and love from Brodie as a powerful woman and an environment that makes Sandy feel special.

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