THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE

What is this novel about? Is it about an eccentric but not unlikable teacher who loves to expand her students’ interests beyond simple teaching dry facts, or is it about an egotistical, domineering woman who wanted to control all of the thoughts and activities of her associates?

Is it about a sensitive teenager with a highly developed social conscience and a concern for others—a deeply religious person, or is it about a daydreaming adolescent who makes hasty decisions, one of which destroyed her former teacher?

Is it about religion—Calvinism with its doctrine of predestination, or the certainty of Catholicism and the potential comfort of a refuge in the cloistered life, or about the possibility of a sense of imprisonment from life in the convent?

All of the above—none of the above? The appeal of the novel is the fact that the reader is left to form his own answers to these questions.
Muriel Spark’s writings are not nearly so popular or highly acclaimed in this country as is the case in Great Britain, where she is recognized as one of the leading novelists of the 20th century. She was born Muriel Camberg in Edinburgh, Scotland, went to a private girls’ school there, and after graduation took a course in typing and shorthand and worked for a year or so as a secretary. At age 19, she immigrated to Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, to marry Sidney Oswald Spark, a move that she later characterized as a “disastrous decision.” He was 19 years her senior. Shortly after their marriage, his bipolar disorder became manifest and he had wide swings in temperament and sometimes became violent. A son, Robin, was born the year after their marriage and shortly thereafter they were separated. World War II began shortly after her arrival in Rhodesia, so that she was unable to return to England. In 1943, she placed her son in a Dominican convent school and managed to return to England on a troop ship that was not completely filled. He joined her family in Edinburgh a year and a half later. Upon return and during the War, she worked in the Foreign Office in an Intelligence Division dealing with propaganda broadcasts to the German populace. After the War, she worked in publishing, published a number of critical reviews on her own, reviews of Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, Emily Bronte, and John Masefield. Her first novel was published in 1957 and was followed in the subsequent years by a total of 22 novels, a volume of collected poems, a large volume of collected short stories, and two books of children’s stories. She received honorary degrees from the University of Edinburgh, Oxford, and Aberdeen University. In
1992, she received the Order of the British Empire, making her Dame Muriel Spark, the feminine equivalent of knighthood. In 1967, she left England to live in Rome for several years and then after that, lived with her longtime companion in a villa in Tuscany. She remained there until her death at age 88 in 2006.
Let me begin by making some personal comments about my reaction to this book. I am not a sophisticated objective reader; I become emotionally involved with the characters in a novel that I read and suffer when they suffer and am happy when they do well. This book, however, was different. I was very interested in Miss Brodie and Sandy, the two major characters, and in their activities and behavior. But I did not suffer when Miss Brodie was forced to retire, I did not become upset with Sandy’s behavior and her “betrayal” of Miss Brodie. Critics have commented that Muriel Spark distanced herself from her characters and she was successful in doing that in this book. She said that she thought it not good manners to involve her readers emotionally with her characters.

The book could be subtitled, “The Enigmas of Sandy Stranger.” Certainly, Miss Brodie is an unforgettable character, but her behavior is fairly predictable. The behavior of Sandy Stranger, however, is unpredictable and surprising on repeated occasions. I will speak more of that as we go along.

Mrs. Spark was said by one critic to be a “postmodernist” writer before this became a popular approach to literature. I am sure that I cannot define postmodernism, but Mrs. Spark said yes, that she was somewhat experimental in her early novels. A prominent feature of this book is the lack of a strict chronological progression. I was reminded of reading a Faulkner novel in that fairly close reading and, for me, rereading was required to establish a sequence of events in my mind. She employs the literary technique of prolepsis, meaning anticipation. I imagine that the English professors here
tonight know this word, but it was new to me. It means “the revelation of a feature that is to come.” She said that she could create suspense by telling the reader what would happen in the future with the suspense coming from wondering why it happened or how it happened. Certainly that is true in this book. For example, on page 26, we learn that Miss Brodie is betrayed (her word) by one of her students and forced to resign. That event is described on page 134.

Another feature that struck me on reading and rereading the novel was the recurrent use of certain phrases. For example, we are told no less than 15 times of Sandy’s “little eyes”, “pig eyes”, “squinted eyes”. What are we to make of this? Does the emphasis on her eyes imply that Sandy saw more, do the repeated allusions to small eyes imply that she was more inscrutable? The reader is left to form his own opinion. Generally, Mrs. Spark does not give us the thoughts or the motives of her characters, but simply describes their words and actions and leaves us to interpret them. However, on one occasion she says in reference to Sandy’s eyes, “Eyes which it is astonishing that anyone could trust.” Similarly, on multiple occasions, Sandy is described as “gripping the bars of the grille of the door of the convent parlor where she received visitors” and of “desperately grasping” the bars of the grille. The descriptions evoke the image of a prisoner grasping the bars of his cell. Perhaps the author means to imply that Sandy feels confined, that she regrets her decision to enter the convent? Again, each of us can form our own opinion. Certainly Mrs. Spark is too skilled and the editors of The New Yorker magazine where this
novel first appeared in its entirety in 1961 are too careful for this to have been happenstance or sloppy writing. It seems the author wished to emphasize these features. Many of Muriel Spark’s novels are based on activities and events in her own life. This is true in part of The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. Mrs. Spark grew up in Edinburgh in a solid, stable middleclass home. Her father was a mechanical engineer who was employed throughout the Depression era. She attended the James Gillespie School for Girls, the model for the Marsha Blaine School described in our novel. There, at age 11 she became a student in the class of Miss Christina Kay, the teacher on whom the character of Miss Brodie is based. Miss Kay took a special interest in a few of the girls in her class, took them to plays and occasionally “films”, invited them to tea at her home, and activities such as those with which Miss Brodie indulged her girls. When the novel appeared, former classmates at the James Gillespie School wrote Muriel Spark and said, “I recognized Miss Kay immediately.”

In a brief autobiography published in 1992, which unfortunately described her life only up to age 39, she wrote of Miss Kay and said that she often commented that education means to bring out the natural ability of a student, not to put knowledge or ideas into the student’s head—a phrase that she has Miss Brodie quote frequently. She wrote, “Miss Kay took Frances and me (that would be Sandy and Jenny of the novel) to the theater, to concerts, sometimes to a good film, paying out of her own pocket. It should be added that Miss Kay had none of the more extreme political ideas that Miss Brodie is
made to express. “What filled our minds with wonder and made Christina Kay so memorable was a personal drama and poetry within which everything in her classroom happened.”

In the first chapter of the book which comprises only 10 pages, Miss Brodie is introduced and a preliminary character sketch is done, the girls are identified one by one, and we are told of the tension and conflict between Miss Brodie and the school’s Headmistress, Miss McKay. Interestingly, a new girl is brought into the school. That is described on page 4. It is page 134 before we hear more of her and the role she plays in Miss Brodie’s downfall.

Throughout the book we are given brief sketches that fill out Miss Brodie’s pattern of behavior and her personality. She was opinionated, independent, disdainful of others’ opinions, firmly fixed in the rightness of her actions and thoughts, very self-confident and self-assured. She was convinced that God was on her side. It is easy to see how such a person who was nonconforming in her educational approaches and beliefs would be a source of friction in the closed community of a smaller private school. It is also easy to see how she would be so appealing to a group of 10 and 11-year-old girls. She favored them with details of her personal life. A small select set that came to be known as the Brodie Set was treated to tea at her home, to the plays and movies, and to special performances such as the ballet theater. Furthermore, probably unwisely, she shared with them her conflicts with the school administration and the Headmistress, Miss McKay. The girls were, of course, flattered by this attention and became completely responsive to her wishes and
opinions. She said, “Give me a girl at an impressionable age and she is mine for life.” This proved to be the case for the most part. At first glance, Sandy Stranger appears to be an exception, but in fact she never escapes Miss Brodie’s influence. There are innumerable examples in the text describing her opinions and behavior and I will not try to cite or repeat those. One critic described her as “an unforgettable and sinister character.”

In the plainest terms, Miss Brodie could be said to be a “old maid schoolteacher” but she far transcended that category by the vigor of her mind, her openness to new ideas, and her determination to keep learning. Her unmarried state was by no means unusual and, in fact, she remained single by choice. There were many, many spinsters in Great Britain in the 1930’s because husbands and sweethearts had been killed in World War I or had died of the influenza epidemic of 1918. Those two accounted for the deaths of almost 1 million young men between 1915 and 1918. Despite her spinsterhood and the probability of earning a fairly low salary, Miss Brodie was able to be very generous with her girls. It is likely that she had an inheritance or an independent income to supplement her teacher’s salary. We are told nothing of her immediate family, except that one of her forebears of some 100 or more years ago had three daughters by two mistresses and was hanged “on a gibbet of his own design.”

The second point that should be made about Miss Brodie refers to her interest and approval of Fascism. I think that Miss Brodie saw the government of Mussolini and Hitler as bringing order out of disorder—of cleaning the
streets, reducing unemployment, and “making the trains run on time.” Furthermore, these ideas had some appeal to many in Great Britain and Europe. The British Union of Fascists claimed 50,000 members in 1936. It could be said that these strongly individualistic traits allowed Miss Brodie to transfigure the commonplace. Could Sandy have been thinking of her when she chose the title for the book she later published, “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace.”

Sandy Stranger occupies a central role in the book. Having read the book, it is impossible to think of Sandy without thinking of her eyes, which as I have said were described so many times as “little” and “pig-eyed.” It is also clear that Sandy was somewhat sensitive about this, because early in the book when there is a description of the story that she and her friend Jenny had written, Sandy’s heroine, clearly a self-portrait, is described as having “big eyes”. In another scene, Miss Brodie says to her that she thinks she is “short-sighted and that she needs spectacles.” Sandy replied, “I do not,” irritably.

She is pictured as being bright and observant. Does the emphasis on her eyes mean that she was more observant, that she saw more than the other girls? Does it mean that her inner self was more hidden? Again, we can only speculate. She was perhaps a bit less ready to have her thoughts and opinions completely molded by Miss Brodie than the other girls. On several occasions there is the suggestion, usually quite subtle, of tension between Sandy and Miss Brodie and on several occasions Miss Brodie says, “Some day you will go too far, Sandy.” She had an active fantasy life, imagining herself as characters in
Tennyson’s poem, *The Lady of Shalot*, Stevenson’s novel “Kidnapped”, and as being wooed by Mr. Rochester from “Jane Eyre”. Are the repeated descriptions of her fantasies meant to imply that she had an abnormal tendency to live out of herself so to speak, and that her imaginings were excessive?

At this point I should mention something of Miss Brodie’s love life. There were two men at the school, Mr. Lowther the Singing Teacher, and Teddy Lloyd, the Art Teacher. Both became infatuated with Miss Brodie and she reciprocated that interest for Mr. Lloyd, the Art Teacher. He, however, was married with a large family and she felt she must “renounce” his love. She did enter into a romantic, sexual relationship with Mr. Lowther, the Singing Master. For two years she went to his house on weekends, on one occasion they vacationed together, and later in that relationship after the girls were in the Senior School, they often came for tea on Saturday afternoons. During this time, the Art Teacher had elected to paint portraits of the girls of the Brodie Set and they went to his studio frequently. Of interest is the fact that all of the portraits resembled Miss Brodie. When they visited her at Mr. Lowther’s home, she unabashedly inquired in detail about their visits to Mr. Lloyd, her real love. Mr. Lloyd had decided to paint portraits of all of the girls of the Brodie Set, but had not invited Sandy to sit for him until all of the others had been done.

As we will see later, Miss Brodie had hit upon the plan of having Rose Stanley become Mr. Lloyd’s mistress—serving as a surrogate for her.
At age 18, the Art Master’s family was away for the summer and Sandy went to his studio twice a week to sit for her portrait. On one of those afternoons, she essentially dared him to make love to her by looking at him as insolently as she had three years before when he kissed her. He picked up on her challenge and they became lovers for the rest of the summer. It seems that she was an enthusiastic participant in this affair, because at times it was said that if callers or Sandy’s friend Rose Stanley came, they ignored the “screaming of the bell.” Toward the end of the summer, after five or six weeks, she became less interested in him and more interested in his religion, Roman Catholicism, and that her thoughts were filled with religion as the night sky is filled with stars. And in another descriptive sentence, that she became more of a fury with Christian morality than John Knox. In this fervor of religious concern, she became judge and jury for Miss Brodie. She converted to Roman Catholicism and, as we know, subsequently some years later entered a convent. What attracted Sandy to Catholicism? We are told nothing of the details of her conversion, but I wonder, given her romantic preferences in literature if the ritual and pageantry of Catholicism was not appealing to her. “Sandy entered the Catholic Church, in whose ranks we are told she found quite a number of Fascists much less agreeable than Miss Brodie.” Muriel Spark had converted to Catholicism a few years before the novel was published. In many of her novels, she makes slighting remarks like this one about the members of the Catholic Church. In the interim between her conversion and entering a convent, Sandy published a book, which made her a minor celebrity
in psychological circles. The book dealt with the perception of moral choices and was titled “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace.”

It seems surprising to me after having come to know Sandy during the earlier part of the novel to see her become obsessed with religion and convert to Catholicism. We have no hint as to why she ultimately entered a convent, but there are two earlier sentences, telling sentences, I think. The first is: “It seemed afterwards to Sandy that where there was a choice of various courses, the most economical was the best and that the course to be taken was the most expedient and most suitable at the time for all the objects in hand. She acted on this principle when the time came for her to betray Miss Brodie.” The second sentence is: “It was 25 years before Sandy had so far recovered from a creeping vision of disorder that she could look back and recognize that Miss Brodie’s defective sense of self-criticism had not been without its beneficent and enlightening effects.” The implication of these sentences to me is that Sandy made hurried decisions at times—expedient decisions without fully weighing the consequences and that she had come to appreciate the lack of self-criticism, that is, the lack of guilt feelings, in Miss Brodie and envied her. I think it can be said that she felt guilt over having betrayed Miss Brodie or perhaps over her sexual fling with Teddy Lloyd and that entering the convent was an attempt to expiate that guilt.

There are two “tip points” that lead to her seeing and speaking with the Headmistress about Miss Brodie. One of these was her realization that Miss Brodie was serious about her plan to have Rose Stanley become Teddy Lloyd’s
mistress. When this was first mentioned, it seemed game-playing, but as time went by and as she realized that Miss Brodie was serious about it, Sandy found it off-putting. Secondly, and probably more importantly, she learned that Joyce Emily, the young girl that we heard of in the first chapter, had been encouraged and in fact urged by Miss Brodie to go to Spain to fight for Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Shortly after arrival there, she was killed. Sandy began to sense what led to the makings of Miss Brodie, who had elected herself to grace in so particular a way and with more excited, suicidal enchantment than if she had simply taken to drink. “She thinks she is Providence,” Sandy thought, “She thinks she is the God of Calvin.” (This is one of only two times in the book that we are given a character’s thoughts.) And, of course, there is the obvious Calvinistic parallel in Miss Brodie selecting a group, the crème de la crème. It seems that these things and Sandy’s new-found religious fervor prompted her to speak to Miss McKay at their annual interview. She said that Miss Brodie was a born Fascist. Miss McKay replied, “I didn’t know you were interested in world affairs.” Sandy responded by saying, “I am not interested in world affairs, only in stopping Miss Brodie.”

Miss McKay cruelly tells Miss Brodie that one of her own girls had spoken with her about her political activities and this ultimately led to her forced resignation. Subsequently, Sandy received a letter from Miss Brodie saying that she could not understand why she was betrayed. Sandy replied with the gnomic cryptic sentence, “If you did not betray us, it is impossible that you could have been betrayed by us. The word betrayed does not apply--.”
As I noted earlier, Sandy became something of a celebrity because of the publication of her “strange” book on psychology entitled “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace.” Her reputation and the book brought many visitors to Sandy at the convent, where she spoke with them “clutching the bars of her grille more desperately than ever.” She was asked by an interviewer what were the main influences in your school days—literary, political, personal? And then comes the one emotionally charged sentence in the book—the near perfect concluding sentence, “There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime.”