

Approaching the Teaching Role in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

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Abstract: Teachers are often valued for their ability to function as moral role models which vary widely in literary works. The role of trustworthiness, for example, is very critical to develop moral relationships between teachers and students, embodied in Muriel Spark's novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. The purpose of this paper is to examine how teachers in the novel exhibit their roles around the central features of trustworthiness which have largely affected one's moral virtue as a teacher. It then argues that Miss Jean Brodie fails to embody trustworthiness, giving rise to ethical issues that confront both students and teachers.

Keywords: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; trustworthiness; moral role models; ethic

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标题: 斯帕克小说《简·布罗迪小姐的青春》中教学角色的伦理观照

内容提要: 教师能发挥道德榜样作用, 因此经常备受重视, 在文学作品中获得了多样的呈现。缪丽尔·斯帕克的《简·布罗迪小姐的青春》便体现了可信度对发展教师与学生的道德关系至关重要。本文旨在考察小说中的教师如何围绕可信度的核心特征展现其角色, 并且可信度极大影响了教师的个人美德。本文进一步认为, 简·布罗迪小姐无法体现可信度, 这导致学生与教师面临伦理问题。

关键词: 《简·布罗迪小姐的青春》; 可信度; 道德榜样; 伦理

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Reading Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), one can easily get amazed and even shocked by the line: "If you did not betray us it is impossible that

you could have been betrayed by us.” “It’s only possible to betray where loyalty is due” (135–36). Sandy Stranger tells her former teacher so. This retaliation from a student can be approached from various perspectives depending on what stance you will take. Certainly it involves moral and ethical issues, for it at least concerns an ethical selection in terms of betrayal. Marina MacKay notices its significant implication of treason, maintaining that “Sandy’s act of treason repays the betrayed in her own currency: Miss Brodie has betrayed the stolidly conservative school of which she is a part and Sandy has betrayed Miss Brodie; in both cases the reader is meant to concede Sandy’s point about the limits of due loyalty” (505). Behind such ethical entanglement between teacher and student is actually the novel’s ethical concerns about British school teaching. Miss Brodie is a typical example that embodies some features of British schooling at her time. She not only changes her school curriculum and acts firmly with strong determination to argue against her opponents but also guides her students to join adult debates as well as confrontation with her school authorities, incurring provocative issues that unavoidably lead to ethical concerns.

This essay examines *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*’s indirect and mediated representations of British school teaching through an ethical interrogation manifested in both content and form. Miss Brodie’s learning as a teacher is personal and a certain type of self-interest that can exert her position on students’ minds. This results in an ethical issue, for she undergoes an ethical dilemma that is accompanied by a cluster of moral issues so named. Nie Zhenzhao explicates clearly in his “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” the ethical values in a given work with reference to a particular historical context or a period of time in which the text under discussion is written (84). In Nie’s view, all literary works constitute documents of human ethical experience, and there always exist ethical lines in a literary text. Alongside these ethical lines, there is a set of ethical knots or ethical complexes. Accordingly, ethical dilemmas do not originate from logical reasoning but mainly from ethical contradictions due to value-positions often taken solely in person (Nie, *Introduction* 245). The same is true of Miss Brodie who, instead of following the school syllabus, lectures on her personal experience as well as Fascism in class to the detriment of essential course requirements, leaving her in an ethical dilemma. Since a lot of subjects she has taught in class are irrelevant to the authorized curriculum, Miss Brodie unavoidably violates her position as a school teacher even though she has tried to improve upon or correct some of the school’s pedagogical malpractices. Spark creates a character that embodies an underlying ethos for education. Hence it is necessary to observe the role of teaching in the novel through the

character of Miss Brodie. Seen as a whole, it is about school teaching, exploring the perils of personal and political infatuation among schoolgirls and their teachers. The story is carried by an omniscient narrator; however, I maintain that there are good reasons to argue for or against the protagonist Miss Brodie's teaching role, opening various avenues of discussion in terms of educational politics and ethics.

Schooling is often politically and ethically oriented involving the efficacy, viability, and sustainability of professional learning communities, so appropriate relationship between teacher and student is of paramount importance. Power struggles, ethical dilemmas, cultural conflicts, and communication problems would threaten to dismantle the effectiveness of learning communities. The tension between Miss Brodie and her colleagues as well as school authorities suffices to undermine the teaching and learning status quo at Marcia Blaine's School for Girls which obviously lacks sound learning environments, for "[t]eacher reflection in social context occurs as teachers engage in and share their reflections in diverse ways. The goal-directed nature of human activity in cultural contexts supports learning environments where people collaborate, use artifacts, strategize solutions to problems, and rely on other, more experienced members of the activity system" (Hoffman-Kipp et al. 251).

Pedagogically, there have been various methods of teaching: there is "teaching to teach and teaching to learn", "role play teaching" and "communicative teaching", etc., but one can be certain that any type of teaching involves a community/life in which teaching and learning interact, though in varying degrees and scales of interaction. Reading British literature, one is often astonished by literary presentations of teaching activities and teaching scenes in fiction; there is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) wherein we see descriptions of Jane's teaching role as a governess. Teaching in a broad sense can be found across many British literary texts such as Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), David Lodge's *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975) and Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), to name just a few. Teaching in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* draws our attention close to the personal and professional lives of Miss Brodie. Her devotion to the fascist Mussolini—a political commitment that ultimately costs her her teaching position—undoubtedly symbolizes her own psychologically abusive wielding of authority, her narcissistic exercise of power over the lives and minds of the five girls who make up the "Brodie set." Miss Brodie seems to be a literary exemplar of the "radical educationist" who, as Gale writes, "opt[s] for personal authority that is characterized by 'obedience [...] owed to the person' and that often appears in 'traditional' and 'charismatic' forms, as in the case of the ancient monarch or modern dictator" (50). If we read the text closely, we cannot fail to notice the concerns of Miss Brodie's teacher

learning are of both ethical and political issues. It is argued that teachers' work is complex and requires deep and foundational reflective practices, for teacher reflection is constitutive of teacher learning as praxis according to P. Freire who suggests that human "activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis it requires theory to illuminate it" (96). Peter Hoffman-Kipp, Alfredo J. Artiles, and Laura López-Torres further illustrate the teaching model suggesting that teachers face challenges "due to their explicit link between reflection-action and culture learning, and their attendant concern for power" (249).

Teacher learning has become one of the most important concerns of the educational establishment. It has been more or less assumed that teachers who know more teach better. This assumption has dominated multiple efforts to improve education in the arenas of policy, research, and practice by emphasizing what teachers know or should know. In my discussion, I do not question this basic idea. Rather, I argue that even though efforts to carry out such pedagogy are shared among many teachers, there are radically different views of what "knowing more" and "teaching better" really mean. In other words, there are radically different conceptions of teacher learning, including various ways to image or envisage knowledge to be carried out through different professional practices. Another conception often refers to the necessary and/or potential relationships that exist between knowing and teaching. More strikingly noticeable are the intellectual, social, and organizational contexts that support teacher learning; and above all teacher learning is deeply associated with educational change down to the very purpose of schooling itself. Thus "how teachers use reflection must be understood as situated in the activity systems of teacher education programs, classrooms, schools, and professional development events. At the same time, historical residua are found in all activity systems" (Hoffman-Kipp et al. 250). Different conceptions of teacher learning may lead to very different ideas about how to make improvements in the education of teachers and their professional development, how to bring about transformations in school and curriculum, and how to assess and license teachers over the course of their professional life span. Miss Brodie, forced to leave her position because the personal element of her teaching intervened, may be a case in point. Considered inappropriate by her colleagues as well as school authorities, Miss Brodie encapsulates the contradictions between person and politic, ethics and curriculum, innovation and profession. Her deliberate choice of subjects for teaching involves not simply personal likes or dislikes but rather an ethical dilemma for the wider community and professional culture. It is her viewpoint of value and teacher learning attitude that constitute her mind of ethical dilemmas.

What is most at stake in this discussion is how teachers and teacher learning can be understood and positioned in the debate as well as how educational institutions are actually structured as they perform teaching in real-time scenarios at school. It is clearly noted that various initiatives related to teacher learning are actually very different in purpose and have very different consequences for the everyday lives of students and teachers. What is embodied in the conception of teacher learning often unpacks differing images of which probes are made into knowledge for teaching. It is assumed that the knowledge teachers need to teach well is generated when teachers treat their own classrooms and schools as sites for intentional investigation at the same time that they treat the knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogation and interpretation. In this sense, teachers learn when they generate local knowledge of practice by working within the contexts of inquiry, forging localized communities to theorize and construct their work and connect it to larger social, cultural, and political issues. Read with reference to the above, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* shows forth these contradictions in the role of teacher learning. Miss Brodie teaches her students “a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorized curriculum” which enables them to know what they are not supposed to learn in class such as “the Buchmanites and Mussolini, the Italian Renaissance painters, the advantages to the skin of cleansing cream and witch-hazel over honest soap and water, and ‘menarche’ of girls.” Also referenced are “[T]he interior decoration of the London house of the author of Winnie the Pooh” and “the love lives of Charlotte Bronte and of Miss Brodie herself” (5), both offering a challenge to the school authority and holding Miss Brodie “in great suspicion” (7). Miss Brodie is thus considered a threat to the school, for she performs inappropriately as a school teacher and yet provides insight into the complexities of knowledge and practice. Seen from what she does as a teacher, Miss Brodie fails to use the formal knowledge and theory stipulated in the curriculum nor does she make wiser judgments or design interactive learning activities for her students. Instead of treating her classroom as sites for intentional investigation, she is occasionally misleading her students by misinterpretation of history knowledge.

As far as her teaching content is concerned, Miss Brodie acts independently without following the curriculum as stated by the school. She believes that she is offering real knowledge that can inspire her students. That's why she often incorporates her personal experience, asking her students to “hold up [their] books” and in so doing she even encourages them to tell lies, to stage or engender a moral or ethical issue. If found by intruders, the students will follow her instruction and prop their books up in their hands and tell them that they “are doing [their] history les-

son [...] [their] poetry [...] English grammar.” What she is actually teaching in class mainly includes her last summer holiday in Egypt, the care of skin and hands, the Frenchman she met in the train to Biarritz and the Italian paintings she saw. Most ethically troubling is her grand affinities with Mussolini and Caesar, as Miss Brodie flattens those who despise her “beneath the chariot wheels of her superiority” (56). This brings her student Sandy to the point of betraying her to the school authorities and yet also puts Sandy behind iron bars at the novel’s end. Narration of such events relies heavily on various complex time frames which suggest irony, and various moral complexities.

Miss Brodie’s manner of teaching, since it is more manner than method, may involve some social framework of knowledge, for she displays an assertive mind that has influence upon her students. It is safe to claim that Miss Brodie creates an atmosphere conducive to a certain kind of knowledge production. Brodie’s classroom presentations, obviously solipsistic, make whatever knowledge she presents converge on her personality. In the Brodie set, knowledge is put at the service of maintaining maximum intensity in the bonds between them. Dissemination of knowledge is intended to magnify their bonds with Brodie, rather than to open the door for free, independent and interactive exploration. The domineering presence of Miss Brodie in knowledge transmission may help students assume that Miss Brodie herself is the creator of knowledge. Solipsism is apparent in her lessons whenever Miss Brodie stages them, moreover, so that she becomes simultaneously the subject *and* object of the knowledge she disseminates. What she observes often becomes identical to the mind that processes and presents it. As far as her students can know, she cultivates her own world in teaching that goes beyond her classroom. Her history and art lessons, filtered through autobiographical accounts of her summer vacations and romantic liaisons, may well imply educational value—enough to make plausible Eunice’s retrospective adult observation that Brodie “was an Edinburgh Festival all on her own” (40)—yet all knowledge converges on Miss Brodie. She fills her art history lessons with virtuosity, erudition and celerity that reveal an indisputable assertion of her own tastes:

“Who is the greatest Italian painter?”

“Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie.”

“That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite.” (18)

Here obviously lies an assertive mind. From her teaching, we see that Miss Brodie is an ingenious textual weaver and improviser, composing lessons out of whatever

materials are available. Both already attuned to the complex possibilities of conducting multiple lives in fantasy, Sandy the spy and the actress Jenny will instinctively come to understand Miss Brodie's methods of overwriting one reality with another: "the two girls listened with double ears, and the rest of the class with single" (76). Noticing that Sandy carries the weight and impact of Brodie's philosophy, confiding to her inquisitor that above literature, politics, and theology, the most profound influence on her development was Miss Brodie, Benilde Montgomery maintains that "Spark not only places the inquisitor both at the end and toward the beginning of the novel but also suggests that much of the novel is Sandy's reminiscence, a suggestion that provides Jay Presson Allen's dramatization of the novel with its structure" (97).

Miss Brodie acts firmly and with strong determination to argue against her opponents and even gets her students involved in such debates. "We shall discuss tomorrow night the persons who oppose me," said Miss Brodie. "But rest assured they shall not succeed" (21). She is quite certain that she will defeat those who oppose her for she strongly believes that she is still "in her prime". Miss Brodie often tyrannically assumes self-importance and acts freely upon instinct. She once "had led her new class into the garden for a history lesson underneath the big elm. On the way through the school corridors they passed the headmistress's study" (28). Seeing that "[t]he door was wide open, the room was empty" she called on the students to gather around the open door, "point[ing] to a large poster pinned with drawing-pins on the opposite wall within the room" (37). Her confrontation with school authorities, including her colleagues, makes her students realize in unexpected ways that there are many disagreements among teachers over different issues:

This was the first intimation, to the girls, of an odds between Miss Brodie and the rest of the teaching staff. Indeed, to some of them, it was the first time they had realized it was possible for people glued together in grown-up authority to differ at all. (20)

Miss Brodie's students are now conscious of the tricky adult world of authority and conflict, due to these intimations. Having been vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorized curriculum, these girls have been perplexed without knowing how to take sides between teachers. The adult world has exerted a far reaching impact on them resulting in betrayals embodied in Sandy's disclosure of Miss Brodie's teaching materials. She betrayed her teacher to the school authorities leaving herself behind iron bars at the novel's end.

What is taught at school then should follow a school's authorized curriculum

and the teacher is supposed to design a syllabus accordingly to differentiate subjects amongst a curriculum in accordance with the overall purpose of an education. Miss Brodie in the novel emphasizes individuality, infatuated with the opportunity fascism provides for the “exercise [of] iconoclastic forms of individualism” (169). According to fascist strategies at work which specifically address women, Miss Brodie represents both danger and elitist nonconformity as well as familiarity and safety; the price for this thrilling but secure rebellion is, however, the girls’ surrender of freedom to the set” (172). In the interest of protecting the intensity of relations within the Brodie set, like “the communion”, it strongly resists outsiders, especially those most sensitive to the group’s attractiveness. To extend the set widely enough to include other girls in the class, let alone the school, would jeopardize the special intensity of the bond. Brodie’s most obvious strategy for keeping “the communion” glued together is her designation of outsiders as threats. Her strategy of exclusion victimizes not only her colleagues but her students as well. Joyce Emily, for example, is never included and becomes the most unfortunate victim of Miss Brodie’s exclusion even though she is strongly attracted to the Brodie set. When she first meets Joyce Emily, saying, “I think I haven’t met this new girl,” Brodie is deeming her unworthy of direct address and implying that simply her not having met the girl marginalizes her. Moreover, when she does address her, it is only to ignore her with a few well-chosen words: “Well, we must be on our way, my dear” (14). Again, Miss Brodie acts arrogantly and self-importantly in defiance of others, exercising her individual power, which is considered part of her opposition and challenge to the school authorities. Miss Brodie’s deliberate exclusion of her students unavoidably causes victimization that accompanies ethical issues. Peter Robert Brown has offered an insightful discussion of Mary Macgregor’s victimization in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* suggesting a far stimulating topic that probes the ethical and political dangers inherent in the narrative. He claims that the novel “offers a broad critique of institutionalized power and the narrative authority that such power often assumes” (229). He further argues that Spark in the novel actually “involves readers in the victimization of Mary and, through her irony, enables them to become aware of that involvement” which he believes “can have real moral and political impact” (229). Obviously, Mary is the scapegoat of “the Brodie set,” and often considered the ways in which Mary is victimized not only by her teacher Miss Brodie and her set but also by the narrator and the narrative of the novel, again incurring in the mind of readers an ethical dilemma about both victimizing and getting victimized.

Being overly autocratic, Miss Brodie often reinforces her students’ roles in her

power structures whenever she singles them out and even exploits them for the sake of her personal agenda. Her declarations of the girls' specializations—most notably Sandy's for insight and Rose's for sex—enhance intensity by simultaneously deflecting opportunities for competition within the Brodie set, or communion. When Miss Brodie holds that Rose's specialty is sex she means that Rose is singularly provocative in ways that none of the other girls would ever try to be, given their own specializations. Miss Brodie's imposition on her students well proves that she is hurting or even harming the communion, which may also cause her to leave her teaching job.

To conclude, the narrative concerned explores the teaching role of a school teacher Miss Brodie but the reader is never made privy to her inner mind. We are simply presented with Miss Brodie in various classroom scenarios, through the speculations of her young students or a bemused larger world. Yet Miss Brodie, so ostensibly the risible object rather than the narrating subject of Muriel Spark's novel, triumphs through her own overtly ridiculous, vivid style: "I wore my silk dress with the large red poppies which is just right for my colouring," she tells her girls. "Mussolini is one of the greatest men in the world" (46). The inappropriate juxtaposition manifests the teacher's delusive charm as well as the novel's juggling of affections and ethics. Miss Brodie's elitism and fascism, Miss Mackay's plots against Miss Brodie, and Sandy's identification with established authority all point to ethical issues questioning the power and authority of those who construct them, and urging readers to reflect on the ethics of narrative and their own ethical responses to narratives. The character of Miss Brodie is a case-in-point, for while she wields knowledge in intoxicating ways, she also ethically transgresses, transfigures and gets transfigured as a result. She reveals that there is a fine line between the constraints of professional ethics and the activity of teaching as inspiration, a fine line between the dissemination of knowledge and the integration of knowledge and practice. We can, so to speak, learn from Miss Brodie's errors, both in our own teaching and our own efforts to create a syllabus that inspires our students. Basing knowledge in and for practice, we may avoid the pitfalls of the overbearing personality and addiction to conflict, so that we teachers, too, learn from the knowledge we impart.

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