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Post War Fiction and Film

Assessment 2001/02

ASSIGNMENT 1

2. Referring to a film and novel of your choice, explain how successfully they articulate the themes of the period in question.

The film and novel pairing I have chosen is Muriel Spark's 'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie'. I have chosen this because of the large number of references made in the text that can be compared to occurrences that were happening in that period, and that have happened in Sparks own life.

Spark was born in Edinburgh in 1918. She was educated at 'James Gillespie's Girls School', which was in Edinburgh also. After finishing school, she left Edinburgh and moved to Africa where she met her husband. Spark then moved back to England, after divorcing her husband Oswald. Shortly after the war she became involved in the literary circles of London. She was then kicked out because she was described as "too adventurous". She was interested in poetry and in 1952 her first book, a book of poetry, was published. Then, in 1961, 'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie' was published.

In the novel 'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie' the plot involves a young, slightly eccentric in her thinking, complex schoolteacher at an Edinburgh girls' school, 'Marcia Blaine'. The text is set between the periods of World War I and World War II. Brodie's teaching methods include giving 'her girls' self-indulgent lessons on 'life'. These lessons involve teaching about love, art and politics. Her aim is to produce a generation of 'Jean Brodies' who experiment with sex and society. This can be reinforced by Brodie's quotation " Give me a girl at an impressionable age and she will be mine for life."

But, as the plot thickens we see Jean Brodie becoming romantically involved with two of the male teachers. With bemused horror she finds herself fighting to keep her job, or otherwise face destruction (this can be related to Muriel Spark getting kicked out of the London Literary Circles).

Brodie believes that she can always count on her 'favourite pupils' for support, but as the girls are no longer swayed by Jean Brodie, she begins to learn about love and life herself.

The reason I chose this 'pairing' in conjunction with the question is that within this novel I can see an exceptional amount of comparisons and issues referring to the period in question outside of the book, and to occurrences within Muriel Spark's life.

For example, the novel is set in the 1930's. This was a patriarchal period where men dominated. Also many men had died in the war, so there was less choice and the men were more sort after. But, it is not obvious that men dominated in this period because the text is written from a women's point of view; a spinster at that. But we can see a high interest in the infamous male 'art teacher' who both Sandy and Brodie lust after.

There were images of fascism within this period of time too, with the rise of world leaders such as Benito Mussolini. We see this in the book as it reflects post-war life and brings up political issues. It also warns about the dangers of fascism.

Fascism is defined as "a tendency toward strong autocratic or dictatorial control ... by forcible suppression of opposition." In the novel we see Jean Brodie almost taking on a fascistic role and fascist ideology by dictating to her girls her opinions on life and what she thinks is right and wrong. "She is the absolute creed of right and wrong" She expects them to take on board the 'Brodie ideology'. And comparable to individuals conforming to their leader in a fascist environment, in the beginning we see the girls practising all that Brodie preaches. Also, the girls have an unquestionable loyalty to Brodie, as do individuals to their leaders in their own fascist, tyrannical societies.

Within her favourite pupil sect we see her searching for her "crème de la crème" in a way which fascist leaders searched for their strong, pure race e.g. Adolph Hitler searched for his pure Aryan supremacy, and stopped at nothing to achieve it.

She aspired to be seen as a leader, and this can be backed up by the showing of the Mussolini screen showing to her pupils in the classroom. However, this only occurred in the video of 'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie' and not the actual text in novel form. So, in relation to themes of the period, I think fascism is a very good example because

we see the rise of many fascist leaders post World War I and pre World War II, which was when it was set. Also, we see Jean Brodie fall from power, like many of the fascist leaders did. This suggests that the author, Spark, is against fascism. She portrays the fascist ideology as not ending happily. It is hardly surprising that she takes this point of view because Muriel Sparks father was a Jewish engineer during World War II, when Hitler was in control, and Hitler was an anti-Semite. Muriel Spark's resentment for fascist leaders is shown in the character of Brodie. She rises and she falls.

Also in the text, we see her as having a very middle class attitude. Referring to the period in which the novel was set I can see a strong relationship between her attitude and the attitude of those within the 'Bloomsbury Set'. The Bloomsbury Set was the name given to a literary group that made the Bloomsbury area of London their centre of activities from 1904 to World War II. If we consider the actual names firstly, we see very strong similarities to the name of 'The Bloomsbury Set' and 'The Brodie Set' which is our first clue.

One of the main members was a woman called Virginia Stephen Woolf who was interested in defining qualities specific to the female mind, a bit like Brodie. Woolf was also interested in things of the natural world, such as rocks and plants, because of their solitude and self-sufficiency; we see that Miss Jean Brodie possesses both characteristics.

They were known as a social clique. There were a few Cambridge graduates and they would assemble on a weeknight for drinks and conversation. Members were committed to a rejection of taboos of Victorianism on religious, artistic, social and sexual matters. They remained a tight knit group for many years. The group were involved in many tangled relationships within the set. By the 1920s their reputation as a cultural circle was established. Their mannerisms were parodied and 'Bloomsbury' became a connotation for snobbish, snotty, inward-looking or narrow-minded behaviour. The group were of high popular interest amongst scholars.

Like those of the Bloomsbury set, Brodie as a character has the notion that she is better than everybody else. This is typical of 'her class'. This is typical English middle class philosophy. It seems like Spark is poking fun at this attitude. It is like Spark uses Jean Brodie as a metaphor for the English middle class society with her snobbish aestheticism and her tight knit group (her favourite pupils) as her main characteristics. Spark is poking fun at this. Also, a major contributory clue to this

theory is that Spark was a secretary to a poetry society within the London Literary Circles and was kicked out for being “too adventurous”. Her view of the middle class ideology, the ‘Bloomsbury Set’, and alike is expressed in her text and the views themselves act like revenge against those of that class.

In relation to Spark herself we see many similarities between the novel ‘The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie’ and Muriel Spark’s own life.

Muriel Spark attended a school for girls just like the girls attending ‘Marcia Blaine School’. Spark describes her days at her school happy as do the Brodie Set, “ The first years with Miss Brodie, sitting, listening to all those stories and opinions which had nothing to do with the ordinary world, had been the happiest time of her life...” (Pg 15) .

Muriel Spark, like Brodie, had a great love for the arts. “Art and religion first; then philosophy; lastly science. That is the order of the great subjects of life, that is their order of importance.”(Pg 25)

In the Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, Spark models Brodie on one of her ex-teachers, Miss Kay. Miss Kay loved the arts, and she too admired Mussolini and hung a picture of him on her wall. Miss Kay like Miss Brodie would describe her exotic travels to her class. Also many of the extra-curricular activities that we see Miss Brodie doing with her set were also done with Miss Kay’s students and used in the book. Miss Kay took the girls to the theatre and concerts. Miss Kay, like Brodie, feared that the pupils were not receiving enough of a cultured background from their parents. Both Kay and Brodie wanted to hold over the pupils. It is interesting to see also that a ‘Miss Brodie’ used to read to Spark as a young child. Another striking similarity to actual event and fictitious plot is that Spark had a young friend who died quite suddenly and tragically, much like the death of Mary in the book.

Muriel Spark has successfully blended in facts from the time the novel is set and facts and experiences from her own life into a very creative and expressive novel. She is clever in the way she has made them all blend together and we get an insight into the author’s own life for a change instead of just reading a straight forward novel.

Through the novel we can understand her beliefs and comprehend her opinions. In answering the question ‘ how successful is the author in articulating the themes of the time into the novel?’ I would say very successful. With fascism, the Bloomsbury set, and Sparks own experiences we see a vast array of political issues, questioning of

society and an insight into the authors past. We could call this a political novel, but in a curious way.