
KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN

Band 489

Muriel Spark, THE PRIME OF MISS BRODIE

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PRÜFUNGSAUFGABEN MIT MUSTERLÖSUNGEN

In Ergänzung zu den Aufgaben im Buch (Kapitel 6) finden Sie hier zwei weitere Aufgaben mit Musterlösungen. Die Zahl der Sternchen bezeichnet das Anforderungsniveau der jeweiligen Aufgabe.

Task 5 *

Outline the manipulation techniques used by Jean Brodie and describe the consequences of her actions.

Model answer

FRUSTRATION

Jean Brodie is frustrated and unfulfilled: her frustration stems from the loss of her fiancé, who was killed a week before the end of the First World War, and from a discontentment derived from her job for which she has never gained any professional qualification.

COMPENSATION

To compensate for her frustration, she hand-picks a group of girls from among her students, whom she calls her favourites and with whom she socialises outside of the classroom. In selecting these girls for the group, it is the parents' psychology rather than empathy for the girls to which she attaches greater importance. Brodie selects children whose parents are not critical, those whom she knows will not ask awkward questions.

"Miss Brodie had already selected her favourites, 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 ..." (p. 33)

CULT STATUS AND
ELITIST CIRCLE

The children are 10 years old and at a vulnerable age when Brodie becomes their teacher. Naturally Brodie is aware of this. "Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life." (p. 10), and she does leave a big impression on them. However, she does not just impress them, she also manipulates them. The ways in which she achieves this will be illustrated below.

One of the techniques Jean Brodie uses is to create a cult status surrounding her person. She portrays herself as an extraordinary person with extraordinary talents, a woman who, as she herself says, is in her prime. "These years are still the years of my prime." (p. 11) For Brodie, being in one's prime is not dependent upon biological age but represents a special social status which makes her seemingly invincible and gives her power and influence. The girls are too young to see through this questionable self-portrayal, especially as Brodie gives them to understand that she is in a position to turn them into something great: "If only you small girls would listen to me, I would make you the crème de la crème." (p. 17) Brodie sets up an elitist circle which she dominates. For the girls this means social exclusion which ensures Brodie's position of influence.

EXCLUSION

To achieve this social exclusion, Brodie adopts a seemingly progressive approach to education and rejects the idea of team spirit. She describes her educational policy as "a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul" (p. 48). One might conclude from this that Brodie is interested in teaching her students about free will and in making them aware of their individual responsibility for their own destiny in life, but this is not the case. In actual fact, she is more interested in imposing her own view of the world onto her students, not even stopping at moral blackmail or at staging personal sacrifice: "I am dedicated to you in my prime." (p. 29)

Brodie's world consists of art and aesthetics amongst other things, which is why her students know about Victorian artists and poets but only have an inadequate knowledge of maths. Brodie is more interested in making ordinary and everyday events seem much more important and attaching greater significance to them, even if it is just about opening a window ("Six inches is perfectly adequate. More is vulgar." p. 60–61) or about sport ("Where there is no vision, Miss Brodie had assured them, 'the people perish. Eunice, come and do a somersault...'" p. 7). And she always strives to be the measure of all things, declaring not Leonardo da Vinci but Giotto to be Italy's greatest painter (see p. 12–13).

REJECTION OF
THE IDEA OF
TEAM SPIRIT;
RHETORIC OF
DEVOTION

A second strategy used by Brodie can be seen in her rejection of the idea of team spirit. Brodie knows that any influence of other people on her students would hinder her own manipulation of their psyche, which is why she cunningly portrays this in a negative light: "Phrases like 'team spirit' are always employed to cut across individualism, love and personal loyalties," she had said." (p. 103) Crucial for her are 'personal loyalties' because she can demand these for herself. Brodie's method is successful. This becomes clear when the headmistress' plan to encourage team spirit in an attempt to separate the members of the 'Brodie set' and to reduce Brodie's influence fails. They are Jean Brodie's 'crème de la crème' and she ensures that they remain loyal to her through her rhetoric of devotion:

"You girls are my vocation. If I were to receive a proposal of marriage tomorrow from the Lord Lyon King-of-Arms I would decline it. I am dedicated to you in my prime..." (p. 29)

BRODIE'S
EXPECTATION
VS. FREE CHOICE

After two years of indoctrination by Jean Brodie, the six students of the Marcia Blaine School for Girls become isolated as

"they had been immediately recognizable as Miss Brodie's pupils, being vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorised curriculum, ...and useless to the school as a school" (p. 4).

When the girls are supposed to choose the subjects they would like to study in 6th Form, Brodie, while insisting that it is their own free choice, leaves them in no doubt as to her own expectations:

"I am not saying anything against the Modern side. ...Not everyone 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. 82)

Consequently, four of the six students decide against modern studies, the only exception is Eunice Gardiner, who due to parental pressure and to a love of sport decides to opt for modern studies. Mary Macgregor does not get to decide, as her grades are insufficient for the 'classical studies'. When Mary finds out about this, she is unhappy because once again she has not met Brodie's expectations (see p. 85).

The most obvious proof of how effective Brodie's manipulation techniques are is Joyce Emily Hammond's decision to fight in the Spanish Civil War on Franco's side – contrary to her original wish to join the other side.

Task 6 ***

Compare parallels in the behaviour of Jean Brodie and the 'Brodie set' with fascist systems.

PRINCIPLES OF
FASCIST SYSTEMS

Model answer

The rise of fascism plays an important role in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Jean Brodie, the novel's main character, is an admirer of Mussolini, but apart from that, both she and her 'Brodie set' display patterns of behaviour analogous to representatives of fascist systems and their followers. These will be outlined as follows.

In order to understand the parallels, it is necessary to explain the rudiments and basic principles of fascist systems first. Fascist systems result from political movements. These movements pursue totalitarian goals. They are authoritarian, hierarchical in structure and directed against the existing order. The political aim of the State is to establish a single-party system with one supreme leader. The leader strives for absolute power, all State institutions are subordinated to him.

SELF-PORTRAYAL

Leaders or leader personalities create a cult about their persons based on a carefully constructed portrayal of the self. Part of this portrayal of the self involves the leader himself attributing extraordinary personality traits to his own person. Despite being designed to set him apart from the masses, these traits do not stand up to close scrutiny.

In Jean Brodie we immediately find a parallel in her concept of 'being in her prime' (p. 11). This concept does not offer anything concrete, but through constant repetition it takes on a suggestive effect and, in the eyes of her subservient students, it enhances her status and invincibility. Another part of Brodie's portrayal of her self is her use of the rhetoric of self-sacrifice and pathos which are designed to appeal to the emotions and ultimately intended to manipulate the listener. The rhetoric of representatives of fascist systems, too, are full of pathos.

A leader needs followers. Jean Brodie has recruited six students, the 'Brodie set' (p. 3). The deciding factor in her selection of the students is not empathy but rather their parents' lack of criticism. In the same way as the followers of any charismatic leader, the 'Brodie set' are also to some extent stage-managed. When they visit Edinburgh, Brodie tells her chosen students to take up a march-like formation, similar to a studied choreography: "Form a single file ...and walk with your heads up ..." (p. 29). The intelligent Sandy recognizes the analogy:

"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 alone, but all knit together for her need and in another way, marching alone." (p. 41)

IDEA OF ELITE

Fascist organizations are hierarchical in structure and view themselves as elite. These characteristics are also mirrored in the 'Brodie set'. They regard themselves as the elite, the "crème de la crème" (p. 19), and within this group there is a hierarchy approved by Brodie. It places Sandy at the top and Mary Macgregor at the bottom of the internal social ranking, with her setting the standard of behaviour for the group.¹

Every leader has his programme. This programme is both antidemocratic and directed against the existing order. In the novel, both of these aspects find expression in Jean Brodie's educational policy, which, through the choice of verbs, demonstrates Brodie's claim to leadership and is diametrically opposed to that of the Headmistress, Miss Mackay:

"...I follow my principles of education ... The word 'education' comes from the root *e* from *ex*, out, and *duco*, I lead. ... To Miss Mackay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion ..." (p. 48)

**NEGATION
 OF INDIVIDUAL
 RIGHTS**

To secure power and influence, fascist systems use control and manipulation mechanisms which deny the rights of the individual. This characteristic can also be found in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*: Brodie's intention to continue to exert control over the girls becomes clear when she advises them to choose classical studies in the 6th Form. The fact that they might want to make their own choice, is of no interest to Brodie whatsoever.

**MORAL
 IGNORANCE**

Finally, it is important to mention that in fascist systems there is no place for a moral dimension. This is demonstrated in Brodie's victimization of Mary Macgregor and her manipulation of Joyce Emily Hammond, which results in the death of both girls.

¹ Some interpretations and essays maintain that Mary Macgregor is the victim of persecution and destruction, particularly as she dies in a fire. However, this to me does not seem logical because Mary Macgregor is a member of the 'Brodie set' and thus part of the inner circle.