

British and Continental Social, Historical and Political Context through Muriel Spark

Lina Sierra Ayala
Universidad de Alcalá

Resumen

El mundo y especialmente Europa están cada vez más cerca dada la convergencia existente en los aspectos económicos y políticos. Sin embargo, el mundo sigue dividido lingüística y culturalmente. Uno de los campos más interesantes de la Lingüística Aplicada es el de la Interculturalidad, esencial en la enseñanza de lenguas porque la comunicación cultural es un elemento básico para entendernos al expresarnos en otra lengua, por tanto la Literatura no debe olvidarse para lograr esa comunicación intercultural. Hemos elegido *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* de Muriel Spark, una novela que muestra la identidad cultural de Escocia/Gran Bretaña comparándola con los valores de otros países europeos. La lectura y análisis de la novela y la explotación de extractos seleccionados sirven perfectamente para enseñar la lengua y la cultura británicas.

Abstract

The world, and especially, Europe are increasingly drawing nearer, attracted by a convergence of economic and political activities. One of the most fascinating fields in Applied Linguistics is that of Intercultural studies, essential in language teaching because cultural communication is a basic element to understand the other when a language is spoken, so Literature should not be ignored to achieve this intercultural communication. We have chosen *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark to illustrate the cultural identity of Scotland/Britain comparing it with the continental values. The reading of this novel and the exploitation of some selected excerpts from it can be appropriately used to teach the English language and British culture.

The world and, especially, Europe are increasingly drawing nearer, attracted by a convergence of economic and political activities. Nevertheless, the world is split linguistically and it also remains a multi-faceted place with diversified traditions, values, heritages and cultures which may one day be combined to obtain a quality of life that today is still a distant dream. It is very easy for us to act according to our cultural patterns, convinced that our values can be applied internationally in every situation.

There is a Senegalese proverb which says that 'misunderstandings do not exist. Only the failure to communicate exists'. Communication is essential to maintain a culture and communities sometimes fail from lack of adequate communication. So the more languages we learn, the more different horizons we will be able to reach. In mixing with people from other cultures, we are sometimes surprised by a point of view which is different from our own or sometimes we feel nearly paralyzed because we do not know how to behave in a particular occasion. Take greetings and forms of address as an example. A Frenchman is shocked if you do not shake hands on every possible occasion, but an Oriental may feel rather uncomfortable if you do. However a warm smile is an internationally recognized way of establishing a good atmosphere. A greeting can be an opening or an ending if we ignore cultural differences. Therefore in case we do not know these differences, it is much better to watch how people stand or sit down, eat and drink, to observe 'faces', to look at what they do and they do not do and to listen to what they say.

Acquiring a language and the culture of the country/countries speaking this language will contribute to a better understanding in the world. Neither English, French, Spanish or any other language can give us a complete description of reality. Each language has its own way of describing, expressing reality and this reality is closely linked to a social structure. In any case an intercultural awareness will provide us with a better future if we are able to select the benefits and attractions offered by every society. In our opinion, cross-cultural communication is a basic element when a foreign language is spoken or taught and literature should not be ignored to achieve this communication. We agree with McGinity (2001: 154) when she speaks about 'developing intercultural competence'.

Conventional discourse and Literature are not the same, as Widdowson (1983) points out. He suggests that top-down processing skills are important but if we are convinced that bottom-up skills are also important, then literary texts have a place in the language classroom. Reading comprehension implies both general and specific information, though inference and prediction are also involved in this skill but by comprehension we may also mean that the student is capable of recognizing the structure of the text, guessing the meaning of unknown words from context, re-expressing the content of the text, re-writing the text, summarizing it, either in a written or oral way, or answering questions about it. So comprehension and expression are interrelated. When reading a passage we often know something about the topic and we

use that previous knowledge while reading in order to find out what is going on in the passage. However, with literary discourse we have to employ interpretative procedures of a new reality expressed in the passage. Furthermore, the literary text allows the students to respond autonomously to its creative character and they are given access to a world of attitudes and values of a different community. We agree with Kramersch (1996) when he states that Literature and culture are inseparable. Unfortunately, since 1945 the teaching of Language through Literature has been reduced or eliminated at intermediate levels in order to promote the acquisition of language skills. In the eighties, literary texts started to be defended by many researchers as a didactic tool in the teaching of English, among them Carter (1982), Widdowson (1983), Brumfit (1983), McRae and Boardman (1984), Quirk and Widdowson (1985), Ranzoli (1986), Hill (1986), Langley (1986), Pantaleoni (1986), Carter and Simpson (1989).

Literature is an outstanding element in our understanding of the communities in which we live. We defend the teaching of Language through Literature as a component of modern education. Here are the reasons which support its survival: Literature gives pleasure to ordinary readers, Literature describes life, history, ideology, customs, institutions, values, etc., therefore Literature can help individuals to construct their value systems and it also contributes to cultural identity, moreover it helps the individual to be aware of the existence of civilized societies. We have chosen *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) by Muriel Spark, a complex novel, to illustrate the cultural identity of Scotland/Britain, though Spark makes us notice that Scotland looks towards Europe through Miss Brodie's eyes. The novel is set in the thirties in Edinburgh, 'the city of Hume and Boswell' (Spark, 1961, rpt. 1971: 43)¹ as the novelist states. Spark reinforces this fact, Edinburgh is not simply an ordinary city, it is the city of a famous writer and a philosopher. Boswell, one of the best known authors of the eighteenth century, was a Scot who travelled extensively in Europe, together with his friend Samuel Johnson he also went to the Hebrides. David Hume, an open and tolerant man, in a confession he wrote four months before his death in April 1776, denounced the lack of understanding between the English, Scottish and Irish, liberals and conservatives. He was criticized because he started his *History of Great Britain* with the arrival of the Stuarts and also for later lamenting the death of Charles I. Hume in

¹ All the quotations are taken from Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, 1961, rpt. 1971; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin. To avoid repetition, only the page will appear between brackets.

his confession also notes how his book *The History of the House of Tudor* caused an outcry even bigger than the first book. As a result he had decided to return to Scotland, his native country, proud of never having asked favours of anyone, even though Scotland had not treated him well. Hume always dreamt of his post as Professor in Moral Philosophy in the University in Edinburgh. In spite of the support from John Coutts, President of the University, Hume was not able to overcome opposition from William Wishart, a Churchman who held a high position in the University, and consequently Hume was not able to occupy the post left by Dr Pringle. Later he hoped to find a post as Professor in Logic in Glasgow University but this was not given to him either and he found himself ignored by the University Establishments of the country in which he was born.

Spark uses the Calvinist Edinburgh as a microcosm to portray Scottish/British society. Spark enjoys describing the city and tells us of the many outings made by Miss Brodie's pupils. Jenny on the tram sees 'the haunted twilight of Edinburgh across Dean Bridge' (20). The reader has the opportunity to visit the old part of the city with Miss Brodie's group,

They approached the Old Town which none of the girls had properly seen before, because none of their parents was so historically minded as to be moved and conduct their young into the reeking network of slums which the Old Town constituted in those years. The Cannongate, The Grassmarket, The Lawnmarket, were names which betokened a misty region of crime and desperation; 'Lawnmarket Man Jailed'. Only Eunice Gardiner and Monica Douglas had already traversed the High Street on foot on the Royal Mile from the Castle or Holyrood. (32) .

Spark not only describes the beauty of Edinburgh but also tells us about the way people live in this beautiful city. Miss Brodie's pupils go through both the historical part of the city and also in the poorer areas. The girls of these wealthy families also see the other world, men without work who survive with difficulty in this elegant town, 'They had come to the end of Lauriston Place, past the fire station, where they were to get on a tram-car to go to tea with Miss Brodie in her flat at Churchhill. ... A very long queue of men lined this part of the street. They were without collars, in shabby suits. They were talking and spitting and smoking little bits of cigarette held between middle finger and thumb ... 'You must all pray for the Unemployed ... You all know what the dole is' (39). Eunice Gardiner had not heard of it, and Miss Brodie says: 'It is the weekly payment made by the State for the relief of the Unemployed and their families. Sometimes they go and spend their dole on drink before they go home, and their

children starve. ... They are our brothers ... In Italy the unemployment problem has been solved' (39). Moreover, Sandy, Miss Brodie's favourite pupil, escapes to wander through 'the certainly forbidden quarters of Edinburgh to look at the blackened monuments and hear the unbelievable curses of drunken men and women ...' (109).

The different social classes also appear in Marcia Blaine School. The school is used by Spark to portray the various levels in Scottish society. The girls belong to the ruling class but nevertheless there are differences among them, Joyce Emily Hammond comes from one of the richest families and lives 'in a huge house with a stables in the near environs of Edinburgh' (116). The teachers in Marcia Blaine School also represent different classes, for example, the two teachers in love with Miss Brodie, Mr. Lloyd, the Art teacher, and Mr. Lowther, the Music teacher come from very different backgrounds. Lowther has a beautiful house in Cramond hidden from the eyes of curious onlookers. This house has a fine library, piano and stylish furniture 'carved, dotted with ornaments of silver and rose coloured-glass' (89) and is managed by his housekeeper. All of which tells us that Lowther comes from the upper classes and the Church of Scotland: 'he was an Elder of the church' (94). This grand house of Lowther's is in strong contrast with the humble home of Teddy Lloyd, 'a large and shabby, a warm and unconventional establishment in the north of Edinburgh' (91). Nevertheless Loyds flat is described among other things as being warm whereas it is said that Lowther does not feel at ease in his own house: 'Mr. Lowther never seemed quite at home in his home although he had been born there. He always looked at Miss Brodie for approval before he touched anything or opened a cupboard as if, really, he was not allowed to touch without permission' (90). Spark's criticism of the upper classes and people with power is implicit in these contrasting situations. The other teachers and the Headmistress, Miss Mackay, defend these traditional values and conventions. Miss Brodie and the history teacher, 'a vegetarian communist' (83), do not accept conventions and their influence is seen in their pupils. The positive influence of the history teacher leads Eunice to read historical novels about the life of Mary Stuart. Queen Mary in the novel represents Scotland, a country which is fighting against English domination. Scotland has its own history which in Edinburgh, its most famous city, Spark shows as having three distinct aspects: A historic city full of monuments where, for example, Sandy remembers seeing in Holyrood Castle Queen Mary's rooms 'where the Queen had played cards with Rizzio' (32); the city of ideas, beliefs, culture and literature; and lastly a city of terrible social differences, wealthy areas and areas of poverty, so different from each other.

In the novel there are many references to Art and Music. The pupils go to the Opera to see *La Traviata* and to the ballet to see Pavlova. Literature, especially Scottish Literature, is often referred to and Miss Brodie is actually compared to the Edinburgh festival 'She was an Edinburgh Festival all on her own' (27) which is how Eunice Gardiner describes Jean Brodie on one of her visits to Sandy in the convent. She makes this comparison when commenting on her visit to the Festival the previous year when she also put flowers on Jean Brodie's grave. In the novel Miss Brodie read these lines from Robert Burns:

Come autumn sae pensive, in yellow and grey,
And soothe me wi' tidings o' nature's decay'(47).

When quoting Burns perhaps Spark wants us to pay homage to this most Scottish of poets who belonged to the Romantic movement. But the most important writer in the novel is Stevenson who was also from Edinburgh and travelled throughout Europe, especially to France. It is his novel *Kidnapped* (1866) which Sandy preferred. Nonetheless, Sandy is also fond of English Literature; she has imaginary conversations with Mr. Rochester, the hero of *Jane Eyre*. Although Edinburgh dominates the novel, Spark also describes other areas of Scotland to us. Sandy dreams on one occasion of meeting Alan Breck, the hero of *Kidnapped*, in her new address 'the lonely harbour house on the coast of Fife' (37). Rose, another pupil, goes on holiday to the Highland and Mr Lowther wants to spend his honeymoon 'in the Hebridean island of Eigg, near Rum' (104).

The Scottish papers have also their place in the novel, especially Scottish establishment press. The engagement of Mr. Lowther and Miss Lockhart, the science teacher, was announced in *The Scotsman*, Edinburgh's most conservative paper whose first publication was as a weekly in 1817, until in 1855 it replaced the former daily, *The Stamp Duty*. *The Scotsman* was the first daily paper from outside London to have its office in Fleet Street.

Religion is also present in the novel. Muriel Spark did not write novels before her conversion to Catholicism; nevertheless her background was quite different: her father was Jewish, her mother Church of England and she was educated in Calvinist Edinburgh at James Gillespie's School for Girls, which is represented in the novel by Marcia Blaine School. Sandy is the character chosen by Spark to reject Calvinism. St Giles' cathedral 'with its tattered blood-stained banners of the past' (35) frightened Sandy. It was the oppressive nature of Calvinism which really horrified her, Calvin's

arbitrary theory of predestined fate in which the will of God determines what happens to men. This Calvinistic spirit weighs heavily on Edinburgh but nonetheless Edinburgh is a tolerant city in religious matters and all beliefs live peacefully together there. In 'the Brodie set' (5) (which is what they call Miss Brodie's group) we can find different religious undercurrents and practices. Sandy, Rose Stanley and Monica Douglas, although believers, do not practise their religion; Jenny Gray and Mary Macgregor are Presbyterians; Eunice Gardiner is Scottish Episcopalian; Mr Lloyd is a Catholic, and Miss Brodie, naturally, is strict Church of Scotland. Although Jean Brodie goes on Sundays to services in various Churches, she has her own moral standards, for example, she does not allow herself to accept the love of Mr Lloyd because he is a Roman Catholic and is married. On the other hand her religious principles do not get in the way of her relationship with Mr Lowther who is a single man.

One can perceive in the novel a definite criticism of religions with strict unyielding rules. Brodie does not approve of the Roman Catholic Church and thinks it is full of superstitions, a Church which is good for those 'who did not want to think for themselves' (85). The figure of John Knox, 'an embittered man' (33), appears on a number of occasions and always produces a feeling of unease whenever it is mentioned. One sees this in the letter to Mr Lowther signed by Miss Brodie even though it is written by Jane and Sandy which says: 'I wish to inform you that your housekeeper fills me with anxiety like John Knox' (73). The times of the intolerance of John Knox and Calvin envelop this city of Edinburgh but Spark wants to make clear that in the thirties Scotland is a country which tolerates a wide spread of ideas.

Politically, Spark does not defend the views of extreme nationalism. She is a European: 'We are Europeans' (33), Miss Brodie says. In Chapter III, Spark distinguishes Jean Brodie from her colleagues in Marcia Blaine School by describing her as a European in contrast to the others who are Scottish Nationalists: 'Some assisted in the Scottish Nationalist Movement; others, like Miss Brodie called themselves Europeans and Edinburgh a European capital' (43). Miss Brodie loves Europe and travels extensively in Italy and Germany: She admires the Italian artists Giotto and Boticcelli and states how 'we of Edinburgh owe a lot to the French' (33). Italy is especially praised in her lessons, its artists, its Literature: 'Here is a picture of Dante meeting Beatrice -it is pronounced *Beatrìchay* in Italian which makes the noun very beautiful- on the Ponte Vecchio' (46) and those who do not know Italian culture are declared 'narrow' (73) by Miss Brodie. She refers to Mr. Lowther's housekeeper in these

terms: '... she is rather narrow, which arises from an ignorance of culture and the Italian scene'(73). Her problem is that she also admires fascists, Franco, Mussolini and especially Hitler: 'Hitler ... a prophet-figure like Thomas Carlyle' (97). Muriel Spark compares Hitler with Carlyle, the Scottish historian and critic who graduated from Edinburgh University. This is perhaps understandable given that Carlyle, the son of a stern Calvinist, called for obedience and the established order and stressed the duty of the elite to direct the course of mankind. Brodie has such an admiration for fascism that one of her pupils, Joyce Emily, follows her advice and goes to Spain to look for her brother and fight on Franco's side in the war. The paradox is that her brother is actually fighting for the republicans and she does not die a hero's death but whilst travelling on a train which is attacked.

These contradictions in the character of Miss Brodie lie in her Calvinism. She is an intelligent, progressive, and independent woman. She is creative and romantic and finds the rigid atmosphere of Marcia Blaine School suffocating: 'The progressive spinsters of Edinburgh did not teach in schools, especially in schools of traditional character like Marcia Blaine's School for Girls' (42). Brodie believes in beauty, in Art and is ecstatic about a view in the country, a Keats poem or a painting by Giotto. She also supports equal opportunities between men and women and herself treats men as equals: '... like most feminists, (Miss Brodie) talked to men, as man-to-man' (43). Brodie inculcates in her pupils the idea of independence, she wants them to be strong independent women like Sybil Thorndike, the famous actress, or the ballerina Anna Pavlova. As a teacher the methods she uses are very different from the traditional teaching of Marcia Blaine School. For her education means 'a leading out' (36) which means not simply imparting knowledge but also

a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul... 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, from the Latin root prefix *in* meaning in and the stem *trudo*, I thrust. Miss Mackay's method is to thrust a lot of information into the pupil's head; mine is a leading out of knowledge, and that is true education as is proved by the root meaning. Now Miss Mackay has accused me of putting ideas into my girls' heads, but in fact that is *her* practice and mine is quite the opposite (36-37).

Brodie is a challenge to the ideas of Marcia Blaine School which represents the traditions of this Scottish upper middle classes. It is because of this that Miss Mackay feels obliged to sack Brodie although as a strong woman, secure in her own principles, Brodie fights against this. Only with Sandy's help does the Headmistress manage to

dismiss her. Sandy, her most intelligent pupil, in whom Brodie confided, is the one who betrays her, because Sandy is afraid of the power of this teacher with her strong personality and above all of her views on religious education. Sandy destroys Brodie in order to save the group. A group which is so tightly controlled by this woman who sees herself as having a divine right to carry out her task. Sandy refutes this Calvinistic theory which Brodie encapsulates and the novelist symbolizes this rejection by Sandy's conversion to Catholicism and her later withdrawal to the convent. Brodie's contradictory personality appears to be like that of her eighteenth century ancestor, Deacon William Brodie, one of the most famous people in Edinburgh, almost mythical, a man with a double life, a respectable person by day but by night the leader of a band of burglars.

Willie Brodie, a man of substance, a cabinet maker and designer of gibbets, a member of the Town Council of Edinburgh and keeper of two mistresses who bore him five children between them ... He played much dice and fighting cocks. Eventually he was a wanted man for having robbed the Excise Office - not that he needed the money, he was a night burglar only for the sake of the danger in it. Of course, he was arrested abroad and was brought back to the Toolbooth prison, but that was mere chance. He died cheerfully on a gibbet of his own devising in seventeen-eighty-eight. However all this may be, it is the stuff I am made off ... (88).

Brodie is a woman with two personalities, an individualist who rejects the 'team spirit' (78) of the school but nevertheless is attracted to fascism. Knox causes her anxiety, but she is convinced by Calvinist theories and, although a romantic, refuses Teddy Lloyd with whom she is in fact in love, but she accepts the advances of a man, Gordon Lowther, whose love she does not return.

The people in the novel are all Scottish, except Mr Lloyd who is 'half Welsh, half English' (48) and Sandy who is also half English. In fact some of the names are names of Scottish clans. Mr Lowther's first name is Gordon, the name of a clan from Inverness; the surname of the Headmistress, Miss Mackay, is from the Mainland and MacGregor, a name of one of the girls, comes from a Perthshire clan.

As regards language, Muriel Spark uses words that are used with different meanings in Scotland from their usage in England. For example when the girls refer to unemployed men during one of their walks, Sandy uses the word 'Idle' (39) to describe them and Miss Brodie says that 'In England they are called the Unemployed' (39). Spark also refers to the Scottish accent when Miss Brodie speaks 'in her best Edinburgh voice' (31), whilst Sandy 'being half-English, made the most of her vowels, it was her

only fame' (22) and Jenny sings in her voice which is 'high and pure as the sea maiden of the Hebrides' (23).

As we have seen, the novel deals with the Scotland of the thirties. It shows us a picture of Scotland and especially Edinburgh in which we can pick out the traditional Calvinism of Knox and also the more open Edinburgh related to the European perspectives of Boswell and Hume. The novel re-lives the History and Literature of Scotland. The works of Carlyle, Burns and Stevenson are mentioned and quoted in the novel. Spark describes to us also the remarkable scenery of Scotland, makes us take note of the different use of words and of Scottish accents. Above all it deals with Scottish society with all its beliefs, emotions, traditions and contradictions. Religion, political life, English oppression and liberalism are shown through Spark's characters. In this way Muriel Spark can praise or criticize either Scotland, England or the Continent as she wishes.

To conclude, reading *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark can be an interesting framework for analysing social conventions, social classes, historical events, political, religious and philosophical ideas in Britain and on the Continent. The question of religion (Calvinism, Catholicism, the Anglican Church) is fully studied through different characters as their representatives. Scottish history versus English history is also dealt with in the book with the references to Queen Mary, the Queen of the Scots. We also find many literary references in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*: Robert Burns, Boswell and Stevenson, Charlotte Brontë, D. H. Lawrence are mentioned in the book. Furthermore three continental countries appear in the book: Germany, Italy and Spain. Italy is especially praised due to its art, 'Primavera' by Botticelli and Florence with its *Ponte Vecchio* are shown to Miss Brodie's pupils. The Spanish Civil War appears in the novel, and one of Miss Brodie's students decides to go to Spain to fight there. Muriel Spark is also interested in continental politics: Hitler, Mussolini and Franco though apparently admired by Miss Brodie are criticized by Spark because Miss Brodie is finally dismissed from Marcia Blaine School. The novel emphasizes British tolerance against fascism and criticizes extreme nationalism.

The reading of this novel and the exploitation of some selected excerpts from it can be appropriately used to teach the English language to upper intermediate or advanced students of English within an intercultural context to observe the cultural make-up of British society and compare it with continental values.

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