

Muriel Spark – *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

Chapter 1

1. Place and time

- 1.1 When and where is the novel set?
- 1.2 What does the reader learn about Marcia Blaine School?

2. Characters

- 2.1 What is “the Brodie set”?
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- 2.3 Characterise the girls of the Brodie set! What is each one famous for?
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3. Story line

- 3.1 What does Miss Brodie refer to when she talks about “a new plot” (9)?
- 3.2 What is the meaning of “one’s prime”? (10)
- 3.3 There s a gap between two paragraphs on p. 10. Why?
- 3.4 Explain the effect of Miss Brodie’s comment on the headmistress’s study. (11)
- 3.5 Comment on Miss Brodie’s teaching methods.
- 3.6 Speak about the use of comedy and irony.

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Chapter 1

1. Place and time

3.7 When and where is the novel set?

The novel is set in Edinburgh, Scotland. (6) In the first chapter the Pentland Hills (8) are mentioned.

The beginning is in the year 1936: “This is nineteen-thirty-six” (10), but there are flashbacks and flashforwards (1930s, 1940s).

3.8 What does the reader learn about Marcia Blaine School?

Marcia Blaine School is a day school for girls. Pupils wear school uniforms of deep violet (8) with panama hats. There are strict rules: hatlessness was not allowed even when the school premises have been left.

2. Characters

3.9 What is “the Brodie set”?

The Brodie set, as “the headmistress had given them the name, in scorn” (5), is a group of six pupils of Miss Brodie’s.

3.10 Miss Brodie is an unorthodox teacher. Explain why!

a) Irrelevant subjects

She teaches “subjects irrelevant to the authorized curriculum [...] and useless to the school” (5) They know the Buchmanites, Mussolini, Italian Renaissance painters, liquids for skin care, the word ‘menarche’, the love lives of Charlotte Brontë, Einstein, arguments of those who consider the Bible to be untrue, astrology, “but not the date of the Battle of Flodden or the capital of Finland.” (6)

b) Unorthodox teaching methods

While passing the headmistress’s study she wants her pupils to notice that the slogan “Safety First” on a poster is wrong. “Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first.” (10)

They often take lessons outside when the weather permitted. (10)

They have to hold up their books in case of intruders: “If there are any intruders, we are doing our history lessons ... our poetry ... English grammar.” (11) In fact, she tells them about her summer holiday etc.

c) her character

She is quick-witted: "Are you thinking, Sandy, of doing a day's washing?"
(12)

3.11 Characterise the girls of the Brodie set!

Each one of the Brodie set differs in the way she wears her hat: "The five girls [...] wore their hats each with a definite difference." (5) It shows that each one of them has her own personality and is somehow different from the others.

Each girl is famous for another reason:

Monica Douglas (famous for mathematics)

Rose Stanley (famous for sex)

Eunice Gardiner (famous for gymnastics and swimming)

Sandy Stranger (famous for her vowel sounds)

Jenny Gray (famous for her beauty and grace)

Mary Macgregor (famous for being a silent lump, a nobody)

3.12 What does Miss Brodie call her pupils? What does this signify?

The crème de la crème, it's an elite group, the girls are being manipulated.
(14)

3.13 How is the Brodie set received by the other pupils?

"they were held in suspicion and not much liking" (6)

3. Story line

3.14 What does Miss Brodie refer to when she talks about "a new plot" (9)?

Some of the other teachers try to expel her: "a new plot [...] is afoot to force me to resign." (9)

3.15 What is the meaning of "one's prime"? (10)

One's prime is the time in one's life when you are strongest or most successful

3.16 There is a gap between two paragraphs on p. 10. Why?

It indicates a flashback: "nineteen-thirty-six" – "Six years previously" (10)

3.17 Explain the effect of Miss Brodie's comment on the headmistress's study. (11)

3.18 Comment on Miss Brodie's teaching methods.

3.19 Speak about the use of comedy and irony.

Some passages of importance:

"Her manly portrait hung in the great hall, and was honoured every Founder's Day by a bunch of hard-wearing flowers. [...] 'O where shall I find a virtuous woman [...]?' (6)

"'Where there is no vision,' Miss Brodie had assured them, 'the people perish.' Eunice, come and do a somersault in order that we may have comic relief." (7)

"Taking inward note of [an odds between Miss Brodie and the rest of the teaching staff], and with the exhilarating feeling of being in on the faint smell of a row, without being endangered by it, they followed dangerous Miss Brodie into the secure shade of the elm." (10)

"Who is the greatest Italian painter?"

'Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie.

That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite.'" (11)