

## **What is the significance of the historical novel and/ or representations of history in the post-war British novel?**

After the Second World War, Britain saw extensive social and political changes. The gradual loss of Britain's colonies, the growth of the Welfare State, followed by its erosion from the 70s onwards and the anxieties linked to the Cold War, were just some of the developments that resulted in a change and redefinition of Britain's intellectuals' attitudes towards history (Connor 2002: 3). Conner (2002: 3) argues that "Britain seemed progressively to lose possession of its own history" because it has lost its belief "that it was the subject of its own history". This new understanding of history is reflected in the literature of this time. Many post-war writers perceived history as a "matter of gaps, absences and enigmas" (Connor 2002: 134) rather than a progressive 'grand narrative'.

Since the bases for "historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts" (De Man 2004: 493), many post war writers assumed that "both history and fiction derive from and produce texts" (Scanlan 2005: 155). Thus several post war novelists regarded their art as a way in which "history is made, and remade" (Connor 2002: 1). In this essay I will look at two post war novels that are both a response to English history and also a critical investigation of the "possibility under which history may be narratable at all" (Connor 2002: 133). In discussing John Fowles's *French Lieutenant's Woman* and Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, this essay will examine what impact the change in the perceptions of history had on post war novelists and how this affected their writing. In addition, I will outline the ways in which these texts expose the process of history making and therefore exemplify the post war authors' complex historical understandings (Deistler 1999: 97).

*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is set in the Edinburgh of the 1930s and as such “directly related to the history of fascism and the aftermath of war” (Cheyette 2005: 369). The 1930s were characterized by the rise of authoritarian ideologies, the still fresh memories of World War I and primarily by economic depression<sup>1</sup>. One of the effects of the great depression was an increased rate of unemployment, which is represented in the scene where Miss Brodie and her pupils walk through the slums of Edinburgh’s Old Town (Spark 2000: 27-41); “A very long queue of men lined this part of the street. They were without collars, in shabby suits...In England they are called the Unemployed.” (Spark 2000: 39). These images seem appropriate for a picture of contemporary Edinburgh and encourage the reader to understand the text as a realist depiction of life in the 1930s (Robb 1992: 11).

Hence, Spark’s representation of history or fascist ideology respectively, can be seen as “an attempt to render certain stories convincing” (Sinfield 1997: 35). Miss Brodie admires Hitler’s and Mussolini’s way of restoring economic order in their countries; she is attracted to uniforms and applies almost fascist methods to shape her set (Sumera 1996: 42). By highlighting those preferences, Spark attempts to describe how the increasing threat originating from Mussolini and Hitler went unnoticed by the public and was even positively perceived.

Spark’s characterisation of Miss Brodie suggests that fascism found its admirers everywhere; many “anti modernist, ultramontanist Catholics fell, like Brodie, too easily into the arms of twentieth century fascism” (Montgomery 1997: 100). Miss Brodie’s “unpleasant habits of manipulation, reward for information and of changing the clear meanings of things” (McWilliam 2000: xii) are attitudes that resemble a fascist dictator. Yet, Sandy after stating that Miss Brodie is “a born Fascist”, acknowledges that for Miss Brodie politics is a mere side interest (Spark 2000: 125).

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<sup>1</sup> The great depression was a result of the collapse of the New York Stock Market in 1929.

Apart from exploring the impact of fascism on Miss Brodie, Spark is also portraying the complexity of the political atmosphere and commitment in the 1930s.

Yet, the text is not only a passive reflection of an “already existing set of historical facts and conditions” (Connor 2002: 1) but it “performs many of the same functions as official history” (Connor 2002: 130). The Brodie set is “a sort of school within a school and thus an instance, designed by their mentor, of an elitist manner” (Heynes 1988: 69). Some critics conceive the set as “being limbs of a body whose head is Miss Brodie, a body integrated by carefully regulated use of power and cruelty” (McWilliam 2000: x). As a consequence, Miss Brodie’s *crème de la crème* is organised as a “corps of Fascists or a state” (McWilliam 2000: x) and as such attempts to unmask the ideology behind.

Mary, for instance, is an outsider because the group has decided to treat her like one. Although Sandy hates herself for nagging Mary she did it “with the feeling that if you did a thing a lot of times, you made it into a right thing”; and after all it is “for good fellowship’s sake” (Spark 2000: 30). Hence, in evoking this kind of atmosphere and climate of the 1930s the reader is forced to engage with the questions of how ideologies work and how contemporary characters were affected. Thus, Spark explores with her text the various perceptions of history by attempting to represent a plausible reality of the past but also to question what has happened during the 1930s in political and historical terms. As a consequence, literary texts are “part of a history that is still in the process of being written” (Benett a. Royle 2004: 113).

In this sense, literature offers history a permanent reactivation of the past. Sinfield (1997) points out, post war novelists are aware of the notion that “writing inevitably arranges and interprets” (35); “writing is one of the constructing agencies: it influences discursive processes as well as being influenced by them” (36). This

interplay can be seen in Fowles's *French Lieutenant's Woman*. Set in Victorian England, the text revisits the past and reflects on it in a self-critical and ironic way. Fowles characters, for instance, challenge the historical notions of traditional Victorians "featuring pluck, bravery, and emotional restraint" (Scanlan 2005: 148). Mrs Poultney is a model representative of the hypocritical Victorian thought system (Tarbox 1988: 62). She wants to preserve the Victorian status quo, which denies any sexual desire outside marriage and helps others only in order to rescue her own soul.

As Scanlan (1990: 6) argues, many historical post war novels tend to return to a well-known historical time period in order to focus on its hidden or inglorious sides. In the *French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles does not celebrate the Victorian era as an age of empirical success but rather refers to this period in English history as "an age of prudery and hypocrisy" (Spear 1990: 7). He is more interested in exploring the "great nightmare of the respectable Victorian mind", such as the impact of Darwin's new scientific findings, but not to reproduce Victorian stereotypes. As a consequence, in his text Fowles undermines the "great iron structures of their [Victorians'] philosophies, religions, and social stratifications" (Fowles 1977: 141) and therefore questions the historical certainties of an age. This questioning establishes the notion that fictional accounts of the past engage with history but acknowledge a caution about historical variability (Head 2002: 5).

Middleton a. Woods (2000: 21) points out that many post war novelists are "unconvinced that there is a single unitary truth of the past waiting to be recovered". As a matter of fact, a number of post war historical texts apply Benjamin's (2004: 434) understanding that "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably". Thus, several post war authors attempt "to present the past in a language of the present" (Middleton a. Woods 2000: 21).

Fowles's narrator in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be seen as an illustration of Middleton's and Woods' argumentation. The narrator establishes the notion that the text is a pure product of the author's imagination in stating "This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind." (Fowles 2005: 97). The narrator can be seen as a device that enables Fowles to introduce 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theories and interpretations, as well as understandings of the Victorian age into his text (Connor 2002: 146). In chapter thirteen, for example, Fowles engages with Roland Barthes theoretical essay 'The death of the author'<sup>2</sup> in stating that the fictional character Charles "has begun to gain autonomy" (Fowles 2005: 98). Another example is Fowles laying bare of history in extensive notes and quotes rather than interweaving his research invisibly (Alexander 1990: 128). Hence, Fowles relies on present perspectives and point of views to comment on the past; he "reproduces a Victorian convention, but takes a contemporary perspective" (Scanlan 2005: 155). As a consequence the text is not "contained within the chronological period in which it is set" (Spear 1990: 8) but introduces a dialogue between the past and the present.

Middleton a. Woods (2000: 22) argue that many post war texts are concerned with "the relation of the past to the present, with where the past is and how it persists in our lives, and how it can be experienced or resisted". Spark explores this relation between the past and the present in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Sandy, for instance, did not succeed in transcending her old self when she became a nun. She is still captured by the influences of her past. In addition, Miss Brodie's life is in many ways predetermined as an echo of Deacon Brodie (McWilliam 2000: v). McWilliam (2000: v) understands Willie Brodie as Spark's bridge to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which shows that history cannot be overcome but repeats itself. Also, Fowles perceives

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<sup>2</sup> Barthes suggests, "the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it" (Barthes 2000: 147).

time and history not as linear, but as nebulous and parallel (Tarbox 1988: 6). Tarbox argues that Fowles' perceptions of history and time as parallels result in the assumption that the faults of the Victorian era are "shared by our age and, furthermore, by all ages" (Tarbox 1988: 78). In this sense "many contemporary works of literature are historical mediations which challenge dominant beliefs about the intersections of time, space and history" (Middleton a. Woods 2000: 4).

Coming back to Benjamin and the understanding that many post-war novelists recognised history increasingly as "the 'history of the present'" (Bennett a. Royle 2004: 115), I would like to argue that Spark uses this notion to show how history works. For Miss Brodie memory and history "comes to apply more naturally to the present than it does to the past" (De Man 2004: 487). Miss Jean Brodie is "typical of a whole generation of women" (Robb 1992: 17), because she lives in a state of "war-bereaved spinsterhood" (Spark 2000: 42). Her fiancé was killed "the week before Armistice was declared" (Spark 2000: 12) and Miss Brodie is left to come to terms with his death in telling and retelling the story of their love to her pupils. Over the years Miss Brodie develops the narrative in adding facts and incorporating qualities until her fiancé resembles more and more the art and music teacher. Hugh was suddenly "very talented at both arts" (Spark 2000: 72); singing and painting. With Brodie's adaptations of her love story, Spark is exposing the process of history making; "Miss Brodie was making her new love story fit the old" she was "making patterns with facts" (Spark 2000: 72). Spark shows that the understanding of the past and history has altered and the past has become a rewritable text "according to the authority and power of those doing the rewriting" (Middleton a. Woods 2000: 10). As a consequence she highlights the "unreliability of all narratives, whether purporting to be fact or fiction" (Alexander 1990: 127).

This is also reflected in the narrative style of Spark's text. Spark rejects a straightforward chronological order in favour of a "fragmented and continually shifting narrative style" (Cheyette 2005: 369). In addition, she betrays the ending before the plot requires it and works with flashbacks and flash-forwards. These techniques show that only in using different perspectives and multiple voices history might become an accessible reality again. This refers again to many post war novelists' "diminished belief in originality, or in the possibility of retrieving the pure original version of anything" (Scanlan 2005: 114).

Yet, once the authority of history is undermined, it results in "an explosion of histories and authorities" (Connor 2002: 136). As a consequence some post war novelists perceived the personal experience of history as more valuable and started to represent the past "through the lives of characters detached from rather than significantly connected to history" (Connor 2002: 134). On the one hand, this development contrasts the theories of Lukács, who demands a link between small individual lives and the large historical narrative. In this context it is interesting to point out that the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy, as well as the Second World War itself, had considerably less impact on the life of Spark's characters. As Robb (1992: 17) points out, "it kills non of them, and hardly seems to divert their lives from their courses". On the other hand, the focus on personal histories offers an opportunity for local histories, which have often been silenced in the name of universal accounts (Connor 2002: 133-134). The focus on Miss Brodie's personal history anticipates a broader identification and recognition within the readership (Head 2002: 12). In addition, the personal rise and fall of Jean Brodie serves as a symbol for the events in contemporary western history (Montgomery 1997: 101).

Another illustration of the use of personal history can be found in Fowles's text where he shows on the example of Sarah and Charles that "what matters most in

history is often experienced on its margins” (Scanlan 2005: 146). The gulf between the rich and the poor, the indignities suffered by women and the oppression of conventions are explored within the text. Fowles is concerned with social injustices and the character’s notion to urge “emancipation from oppressive social structures” (Gasiorek 1995: 110). In representing Charles as caught in a life style, in a behaviour system, in an age - “He was trapped. He could not be, but he was. He stood for a moment against the vast pressures of his age” (Fowles 2005: 286) – Fowles aims to highlight the “entrapment in a historically determined present that precludes the possibility of individual freedom of choice, self-expression, and purposive action” (Gasiorek 1995: 112). Having become familiar with Sartre and Camus views of authenticity and personal freedom at Oxford, Fowles creates with Charles and, in particular, with Sarah, characters that explore the concept of existentialism (Acheson 2005: 399). He insists upon “one’s right to an authentic personal destiny” (Tarbox: 1998: 4) and attempts to elude “a history that threatens to constrain the individual” (Gasiorek 1995: 112).

However, apart from preferring to represent history from a personal perspective, many post war novelists grant in their texts a “unique insight into the key themes of post-war life in Britain” (Head 2002: 12). Fowles character Sarah can be seen as influenced by the new feminist voices that appeared during the 1970s. In taking on the challenge of existentialism she is constantly struggling to define and establish a place in society. First a social outcast, she obtains an authentic existence in the household of the Rossettis where she is a representative of the New Woman “in dress, attitudes and independence” (Alexander 1990: 132). Despite the fact that Sarah has given birth to Charles’s daughter, in one of the endings, she shows a disinterest in marriage and prefers to make a “twentieth-century speech about needing space and ‘congenial work’” (Scanlan 2005: 155). Thus she resists the most



established Victorian convention by insisting that one needs not to be married in order to be fulfilled (Acheson 2005: 403). Given Sarah's metamorphosis it could be argued that it is significant to reject conventions and go beyond the role a society has established in order to find the truth about oneself.

Yet, it is important to emphasize that post war novelists are aware of the "incompatibility, between past and present viewpoints and languages" (Connor 2002: 142). On the one hand, Fowles constructs dialogues in a language that is appropriate for the Victorian age. On the other hand, he introduces expressions, such as *computer*, which did not exist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition he displays "an existentialist awareness before it was chronologically possible" (Fowles 1977: 140). Yet, Fowles was also eager to establish the notion that there are constants, which are able to overcome each age (Tarbox 1988: 79). One example for such a constant would be love, which is to be found in all ages. When Sarah and Charles kiss each other "the moment overcame the age" (Fowles 1977: 243). As a consequence, Fowles represents the "world as a place that is endlessly complex and uncertain", which is mirrored in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by "self-conscious arbitrariness and constructedness" and also by the fact that he provides the reader with three different endings (Acheson 2005: 399).

In conclusion, Spark and Fowles acknowledge in their texts that history as the 'grand narrative' has come to an end. In looking "at the England of a hundred years ago with a somewhat ironical eye" (Fowles 1977: 142), Fowles reconstructs and deconstructs the Victorian age with its certainties and conventions. In addition to Fowles, Spark explores in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* the complexity of the 1930s with its impact of fascism and shows how ideology works. In doing so both authors suggest that the past is not monumental and closed but open to transformation and rewriting (Bennet a. Royle 2004: 115).

It can be argued that Spark and Fowles understood their texts as an authentic medium for this rewriting. In focusing on personal experiences and difficulties within the large historical narrative the authors “witness or inspect or assist the coming into being of events, the passage of history into History” (Connor 2002: 130). In this sense, post war novels establish a “dialogue between the past and present and between generations” (Roberts 1991: 15). Whereas Fowles represents this dialogue in using 20<sup>th</sup> century expressions, theories and perspectives, Spark lets Miss Brodie interlink attitudes of her current lovers with her past one. Therefore, both authors make it clear that their writing about the past participates in the process of writing and rewriting history and “by making representation of plausible reality, literary texts intervene in the world” (Sinfield 1007: 35).

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