

The issue of desire in literature



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In most novels, the issue of passionate desire is examined and experimented as characters undergo various stages in their lives – either as the feverish seducer or the object of desire. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), *The Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), and *Moon Tiger* (1987) all cover various aspects of desire such as the woman as a sexual object of desire, sexual development, repressed sexuality, and variations of sexuality. All three novels cover the woman's early sexual experiences from childhood, the prevailing Madonna image of the woman accepted by society, sexual liberation, and their unconventional lifestyles. All set in the United Kingdom, the stories trace and disclose the life of the English woman. The novels are written in the post 1960s after the sexual revolution where many sexual taboos are lifted and most people feel an individualistic, unbridled freedom to express their desires.

In the novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), the title is self-explanatory in dealing with the issue of desire for the prime does not only signify having the best of health, but also enjoying one's peak in sexuality or sexual activity. Miss Jean Brodie is a young, bachelorette teacher who is in quest of a partner so as she enters the realm of school, she has to confront desire in fellow teachers, Mr. Lloyd (a married man) and Mr. Lowther. Throughout the novel, Brodie manipulates both men with whom she has a triangular love affair. Her pupils "found in (Miss Brodie) the only sex-bestirred object in their daily environment" (Spark 50). She awes the Brodie set with her past love affairs and lays bare to their view her sex life. The principal and some of the teaching staff frown on her educational deviance

and continue to probe into her sexual life in order to set up Brodie for a downfall.

Desire is also manifests itself in the school girls, more commonly called “ the Brodie set” as the book spans their adolescent periods (pun intended). Like a bildungsroman novel, Sparks traces the development of the six girls as they grow into women under the watchful eye of Miss Brodie. In the early chapters of the novel, Sparks observes that “ the year to come was in many ways the most sexual year for the Brodie set” (Spark 45). At the start, Brodie begins educating them at age ten and maintains active interaction with them until they are eighteen, therefore Brodie and the Brodie set are both in their prime of life. Through her, they glean much information about sexual maturity, menstruation, and love. Because sex is taboo, they live in a restrained environment where sexuality is subtle if not altogether cloaked (to which Sandy’s monastic life and the scandalous nature of open sexuality point).

A juxtaposition of opposites of desire also arises in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* where innocence seduces and experience repulses. Sparks describes Rose Stanley as being “ famous for sex” (Spark 57) because of her attractive appeal however she confesses that Brodie’s erotic affairs inspire no desire within her and remains indifferent to sex although she generates wide passion. On the other hand, after Sandy has sexual intercourse with Mr. Lloyd, she converts to the Roman Catholic church, choosing to lead the celibate life of a nun (Sparks 132). Her one-time sexual experience has made her turn away from living a promiscuous life as her teacher, Brodie does. In *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), is a novel replete with sexual desire

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and the sexualized, objectification of the woman. The beginning of the novel begins with male voyeurism as John Fowles “ the telescopist” (Fowles 2) peers through his binoculars looking at an engaged couple, Charles and Ernestina, walking along the seaside and then turns his vision to Sarah, “ stretching eyes west over the sea wind foul or fair, always stood she prospect-impressed” (Fowles 1), longing and disappointed in love, staring at the sea. These three individuals are all in their sexual prime but are frustrated romantically.

The title of the novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, also relegates an inferior position to the woman, for her identity is hidden and thus irrelevant apart from her association with the French lieutenant. The overwhelming and provocative interest in Sarah arouses not only Fowles, but Charles. The rest of the village also looks at her as a specimen embodying strangeness, yet rare attraction. Although notorious rumors fly, which she does not attempt to contradict, she still incites much attraction and performs to perfection her role as an object of desire. Repressed desire functions to provide insight into the society and its acceptance of different expressions of desire in individuals. Fowles tells us that Ernestina, the first mentioned fiancée of Charles, lives a sexually repressed life peculiar to the Victorian Age, the time frame of the novel. The telescopist observes her outfit which “ was feminine by way of compensation for so much of her expected behavior” (Fowles 3). Charles soon gets bored with Ernestina for her plain, Victorian outlook cannot satisfy his sexual desires. More overt sexual desire adds to the enigma and resultant desirability. This observation proves true as Charles' fascination for Ernestina transfers to Sarah, whom society has ostracized and abandoned.

The epitome of sexual repression is Mrs. Poulteney who is reputed for her piety, charity, and tyranny. Living under the roof of Mrs. Poulteney imposes Sarah with restrictions on her whereabouts and by extension, associations. Poulteney thinks herself always in the right therefore, the unorthodox or bohemian would never sit well with her. As a consequence of differences in desire, Sarah and Mrs. Poulteney ultimately part ways as Sarah repeatedly flouts Mrs. Poulteney's commands to not follow a particular path along the farmhouse. This statement is pregnant with meaning since Sarah still ventures out alone, which works against mainstream directives. Out of Mrs. Poulteney's stifling control, Sarah could reveal her sexual desire more liberally. Marriage is no longer held as the only institution under which one fulfilled sexual desire. Charles and Sarah have sexual encounters, although unmarried. In the end, Sarah chooses not to marry however she continues to live an unconventional life with the Pre-Raphaelite artists which composed controversial art and literature. Charles still desires marriage as a means of consolidating the union between him and Sarah, however, Sarah rebuffs him, standing unique as a Victorian woman who does not aspire to marriage or family.

Moon Tiger (1987), authored by Penelope Lively, chronicles the life of a bohemian woman who lives a sexually unbridled life, hinged on desire. Unlike most women, she never falls into the regular, mainstream category of female tradition. Accounts of incest, homosexuality, and promiscuity pepper this novel, making it non-conventional and iconoclastic. The novel traces the sexual development of her and her brother, Gordon "from the first stirrings of sexual desire" (Lively 25). They undergo many changes during which they

carry on an early incestuous relationship. Their filial and sexual ties permeate their lives. Desire is the compass which leads the sibling duo to each other's arms. Moon Tiger explores incestuous desire, parallels historical records of incest, and justifies it. While doing coverage in Cairo, Egypt during WW II, a tour guide mentions that "the wife of pharaoh was also the sister of pharaoh. He is loving his sister...incest said the Army Padre, quite acceptable in those days apparently" (Lively 74). The incestuous desire runs through the book once both siblings are alive for they both object to each other's sexual partners and seem unfulfilled in their own relationships. Claudia confesses that desire for Gordon never extinguishes in her life and when he dies. When Claudia and Gordon reveal their incestuous relations to Sylvia and Mrs. Hampton, Claudia gets physically sick and is emotionally disturbed. Yet, the two prefer to classify their relationship as "classical, very high class. Look at the Greeks" (Lively 142). Since this book is written by a historian, several references to world history are not uncommon. The Greeks were a people who are said to found classic civilization and who favored incest and homosexuality.

Claudia rejects wifedom and motherhood as a bohemian woman. Claudia does not have the inclination to marry and rejects the proposals of several men to marriage. She prefers to preserve her own freedom by remaining single. Jasper offers to marry Claudia after finding out that she bears their child. Although she gets impregnated a few times, she refuses marriage as a way out to escape reproof. She attests that "no one has ever married Claudia" (Lively 53) -which not only appears as a confession, but also a resolution. Gordon marries and settles down with Sylvia, and it can be

argued that because she cannot marry her brother, she spurns marriage. In spite of her lack of will to get married, Claudia chooses to have “ a sexual field day” (Lively 91). Working in a male dominated realm allows Claudia opportunity to explore more desire in herself and sparks the desire of other male soldiers in the camp. A highly desirable woman, she enjoys herself as the men make erotic advances to her especially since women are rare. She also denies her daughter, Lisa, a maternal relationship since her birth came about with a man for whom she does not love enough to marry.

In sum, the novels all delve into woman’s desire and the ways in which she expresses her sexuality whether covertly or openly, conventionally or otherwise. Desire drives the women to pursue passionate relationships, where they either become fulfilled or hurt. Within framework of female desire is male sexuality which is sparked by the female presence. The texts deal with the recourses which women have to take in order to live contentedly with themselves, their sexual desires, and their partners and point the reader to wider considerations such as culture, belief systems, and the woman question.

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