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"The Allure of Imagination in Identity Formation in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*"

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Abstract: In the context of Marcia Blaine School for girls, the paper addresses the influence and authority of the teacher figure represented by Miss Brodie, who shapes reality through storytelling and she understands it through the lenses she conveys to her students during their time together inside and outside the classroom. It moreover aims to show how perceiving reality from different perspectives offers more possibilities for some: Sandy is a clear representative in deriving knowledge from observation, referred to as "insight" in the novella. Perception coming from the senses triggers an imaginative drive to conceptualize the world and people in it for both Miss Brodie, through storytelling, and Sandy, through daydreaming. In Spark's fiction, words and stories work their way to become reality for the characters who contrive them.

Keywords: insight, identity formation, authoritarian influence, Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,* teacher-student relationship.

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The Allure of Imagination and Identity Formation in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

0. Introduction

At the beginning of Muriel Spark's novella readers are introduced to the Brodie set, a group of six girls—Monica, Rose, Eunice, Sandy, Jenny, and Mary—studying at the conservative Marcia Blaine School for girls in Edinburgh. They are known after Miss Jean Brodie, notorious for her radical and unorthodox teaching methods, her strong-mindedness in relation to that which is true, which is determined by her, and for her association with fascist regimes. Muriel Spark presents the relationship between this charismatic and authoritarian teacher and the six students, each of them selected according to specific criteria and identified through a peculiar trait. The object of this paper is to demonstrate that the main theme of this literary work is identity formation, with Sandy as the main character to be examined. This study delves into the relationship between identity and education.

In the context of Marcia Blaine School for girls , the paper addresses the influence and authority of the teacher and authorial figure represented by Miss Brodie, who shapes reality throughout the art of storytelling and she understands it through the lenses she conveys to her students during their time together inside and outside the classroom. It moreover aims to show how perceiving reality from different perspectives offers more possibilities for some: Sandy is the clear representative of this quality based on deriving knowledge from observation, referred to "as insight" in the novella. Perceptions coming from the senses trigger an imaginative drive to conceptualize the world and people in it for both Miss Brodie, through storytelling, and Sandy, through daydreaming.

However, the result of shaping perception through imagination leads to expectations that will not correspond with reality, leading to a clash between both inner and outer worlds. After this clash, the possibility of knowledge and identification concerning the individual and its position in the world is open in terms of either being able to see like Sandy or remaining blind as Miss Brodie. Both characters, central to the focus of this paper, are motivated by a thirst to be fascinated by the world around the and avoidance of boredom, killer of imagination, and, in Sandy's case, this leads to having multiple lives. Sandy's imagination already shows an incredible creative potential, but next to Miss Brodie's ability to shape reality it seems to diminish. Nevertheless, Sandy successfully surpasses Miss Brodie and there emerges a new motivation: that of putting a stop to Miss Brodie's selfish manipulation of the girls. This is extremely selfish on Sandy's part as well since she is mostly driven by a wish to make her life more enticing, to satisfy her aesthetic thirst and controlling the story. It ends affecting all of them one way or another. but in all cases having an everlasting impact, as in the case of Sandy, who after coming to resemble Miss Brodie and growing aware of its dangers, will imprison herself as the cloistered Sister Helena of the Transfiguration so as not to repeat history by becoming a surrogate Miss Brodie.

1. Imagination in Character Formation

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie recreates history through stories, in the sense that imagination and storytelling can shape individual perception and understanding of the world. For instance, Miss Brodie does not distinguish between fiction and reality whereas Sandy will be able to, even if it does not seem so at the beginning, being so lost in the imaginary worlds she creates In this matter, Miss Brodie equates her love life to Jane Eyre's (Spark 5), and Sandy, in contrast, takes that as an influence for her to write alongside Jenny a story called "The Mountain Eyrie." Laffin explains that apart from "fantasizing about love, Sandy actually commits her fictions to paper ... Throughout the novel, in fact, Sandy never seems capable of reconciling 'reality' (the evidence of her senses) with her innate sense of how things are or ought to be" (218). Although Laffin's claim consists in drawing another parallelism between Brodie and Sandy, it has to be assumed that the student is different from the teacher on the basis that Sandy has the insight to see beyond her teacher and beyond herself, as will be explained henceforward, so it is essential to also go beyond what lies in the surface, taking into account that Sandy will change Miss Brodie's schemes and her own destiny from repeating Miss Brodie's path. It is significant, however, how Laffin concludes that "Whether one arranges facts into patterns according to abstracted rhetorical, aesthetic, or moral principles, one necessarily distorts the truth" (219)

According to Professor Lodge, Sandy is able to understand because she "has learned the difference between fiction and the real world" (qtd. in Laffin 219). Miss Brodie controls and rearranges the story of her life and those around her, something that fascinates the girls. They admire her for this and other qualities, as when, trying to imitate their mentor, they create fictional stories and letters that ooze Miss Brodie's presence. However, when fiction ceases to be just an imaginative exercise for entertainment, and it is gradually revealed as a vehicle for manipulation, a clash is bound to happen. This clash affects Sandy's perception and, consequently, her expectations toward Miss Brodie. This can be seen in how Sandy, as an adult, comes to perceive Miss Brodie as a "tiresome woman" (Spark 60). Her gazing through the window to try and reconnect with the image of Miss Brodie she had once, becomes textual evidence of this clash in her expectations: she wanted to find "the first and unbetrayable Miss Brodie, indifferent to criticism as a crag" (60).

Related to the art of storytelling and the forging of identity through this method, it is relevant to note that Spark related her character to William 'Deacon' Brodie: "I am a descendant, do not forget, of Willie Brodie, a man of substance", with the brief but meaningful remark that "[b]lood tells" (88), which could point out to Deacon Brodie's duplicitous nature inherited by Miss Brodie. By using this real-life character that influenced both Scottish authors Robert Louis Stevenson and Muriel Spark herself, there is a deeper emphasis on the duality of Miss Brodie's character. This is connected with storytelling and character construction since "after all, she prides herself on being the descendant of Edinburgh's much-mythologized Deacon Brodie, a respectable cabinetmaker by day and a robber by night" (MacKay 516), shaping reality into fiction. As mentioned before, Sandy and Brodie are opposite characters in the issue of daydreaming, in the case of the former, and storytelling, in the case of the latter; the first is characterized by awareness and the second by the lack of it, although it is important to take into account that the omniscient narrator embraces Sandy's perspective, hence, her

subjectivity permeates the narrative. Despite the age gap between teacher and student, Sandy's personality seems marked by introspection even as a child. The omniscient narrator embraces Sandy's perspective and thus the reader is able to have access to glimpses of her mind, and in one specific moment she "wondered if Jenny, too, had the feeling of leading a double life" (Spark 21). Laffin points out that:

> [T]here is considerable difference between fictionalizing by making patterns with facts, as a novelist must, and believing those fictions to be true, as Miss Brodie does. Like a novelist, then, Jean Brodie is a story-teller who tells lies. She does not lie deliberately; indeed, she is unconscious of lying, because she fails to understand that to arrange facts into patterns is to necessarily distort the truth. (218)

Moreover, Montgomery considers that "Miss Brodie uses her imagination only as a distraction, a device either to relieve her boredom or to defend herself from the present and the actual" (102), and this could be understood as a parallelism with Sandy and her reflections on boredom, for she "was never bored, but she had to lead a double life of her own in order never to be bored" (Spark 21). Sandy's insight enables her to see and understand Miss Brodie, and her ability to see was strengthened by the conscious awareness of being constantly observed when she was under the tuition of Miss Brodie. Sandy eventually realizes that Miss Brodie's gaze is what the teacher herself mistakes as insight, and that she misguidedly believes to be in possession of both instinct and insight, as well as being in her prime. Nevertheless, the whole context is essential for Sandy's eventual transformation into Sister Helena of the Transfiguration. Sandy's analysis of Miss Brodie is that she "thinks she is Providence ... the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end" (120). This poses no contradiction because Sandy is aware that Miss Brodie has influenced her in all aspects of her life, meaning that Sandy does not find Miss Brodie a fake idol, rather it is her complexity of character what she admires, even if at times there is bitterness in her tone. Sandy places Miss Brodie authority even above politics and religion. When asked about her major influence—"Was it political, personal? Was it Calvinism?" (35)—, Spark deliberately presents three key aspects that may shape one's identity which Sandy disregards, adding that "there was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime" (35).

The problem with storytelling is that reality is always shaped so that it fits and adjusts itself to the author's intention. As MacKay puts it: "Miss Brodie turns her girls into artists by showing them that the world in which they live is intractably multiple and endlessly rewritable" (513); this statement implies that, in the process of becoming a different kind of artist, the girls can see life from many different perspectives. This becomes particularly dangerous in the case of Miss Brodie, since she does not realize the fictional dimension of her conceptualization of reality. MacKay is also aware of this and exemplifies it by stating that "Miss Brodie's dead lover, the soldier Hugh Carruthers, an early object of her pupil's fascination, is far more textual than fleshly" (513). In the novella, this is reflected as "a stupendous thought" (Spark 16) for Sandy and Jenny when talking about Miss Brodie's prime not being tainted by sexuality, and soon afterwards Sandy ponders Teddy Lloyd, who, in contrast to Miss Brodie, "must have committed sex with his wife" (17). The choice of verb Sandy makes can be understood as

determined by Miss Brodie's discourse, for the image she projects on the mind of the young girls is that sex is base, almost a crime, and the opposite of one being in their prime. There are examples to help support this statement such as when the girls discuss that "she never got married like our mothers and fathers", who "don't have primes" but have instead "sexual intercourse" (16). In Whiteley's words, this is connected "with how social affiliation shapes knowledge ... with how our social affiliations condition and confirm what we believe is true" (79), since Miss Brodie is precisely the figure with whom the girls are associated. This affiliation to Miss Brodie holds even in Senior school when "Miss Brodie has ceased to preside over their days" and they have been sorted into different houses so as to disintegrate the Brodie set, "because the headmistress intended them to be dispersed" (Spark 77). Affiliation is a word that is concomitant to politics, a very important aspect in this novella especially when dealing with the notion of identity—after all, "They had no team spirit and very little in common with each other outside their continuing friendship with Jean Brodie" (6). Each of them had been assigned a personality and assimilated their bond with Miss Brodie as well as their identity within the set, in terms of belonging to it or being one more among "the non-Brodie girls" (112). Additionally, the fact that when the Brodie set is in Senior school, Miss Brodie does not treat her new students in the same way "bound her set together more than ever and made them feel chosen" (79).

In this light, it is easier to infer that with regard to affiliation, politics but also religion play an important role. The emphasis lies on being chosen to play a part in a superior plan or working towards a superior goal, to form part of something bigger than the individual. In this sense of belonging to the exclusive Brodie set, it is "the group's consensus that Mary be the scapegoat becomes the touchstone for loyalty to Brodie", and it implies that every member of the Brodie set must agree on what it means to be a 'nobody.' Mary also has to accept that "self-nihilation definition" which determines her sense of identity, because, "[b]etter to be no one among somebodies, the logic goes, than to be no one among nobodies" (Whiteley 90). Thus, when Sandy tries to approach her, "Miss Brodie's presence, just when it was on the tip of Sandy's tongue to be nice to Mary Macgregor, arrested the urge" (Spark 30). Mary is also aware of this issue and, although tearful, accepts it. In this same moment, after this realization of the extent of Miss Brodie's influence, Sandy first conceives the group "as a body with Miss Brodie for the head" (30), an idea stressed more clearly in her impressions of Lloyd's paintings, all resembling Miss Brodie (120). From this point on, Miss Brodie will keep on determining the outcomes of the girls in the group: as when she expected Eunice to enjoy a well-off marriage, or, more tragically, when she convinced Emily Joyce to go to Spain and fight for Franco—causing her death even though Miss Brodie believes she "made her see sense" (124). By telling this to Sandy, Miss Brodie provides the perfect opportunity for the student to seize and overpass the master.

2. A Teacher's Role in Students' Identity Formation

As a teacher, Miss Brodie's dedication to the girls is remarkable; but her intentions, noble and generous though they are, are marred by her self-interested use of the girls because, as Whiteley similarly contends, she "later exploits them for the sake of her personal agenda" (84). The following excerpt evinces that Miss Brodie only presents her own perspective so that the

girls remain her loyal followers, thus confirming the importance of storytelling and its power to shape reality:

> 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, these parents being either too enlightened to complain or too unenlightened, or too awed by their good fortune in getting their girls' education at endowed rates, or too trusting to question the value of what their daughters were learning at this school of sound reputation. Miss Brodie's special girls were taken home to tea and bidden not to tell the others, they were taken into her confidence, they understood her private life and her feud with the headmistress and the allies of the headmistress. They learned what troubles in her career Miss Brodie encountered on their behalf. (Spark 26)

Considering exclusivity, instead of inclusivity, as the basis of the corruption of Miss Brodie's methods renders it necessary to examine the transgressions she committed: trustworthiness and the girls' parents' permissiveness are two of the main factors that helped Brodie determine which girls were the fittest to be molded and to "grow up to be dedicated women as I have dedicated myself to you" (63). Miss Brodie wants to model her set after her own perceived image, "for it was intolerable to Miss Brodie that any of her girls should grow up not largely dedicated to some vocation" (62). Thus Miss Brodie regarded devoting her prime to these six girls as "some noble pursuit" (Katz 627). However, as Miss Brodie predicts, "[o]ne day, Sandy, you will go too far" (Spark 23). For Carruthers, "Spark recognizes both the human aspiration toward transcendence over everyday materialist reality and the faulty, fallen human propensity toward selfishly motivated articulations" (489). Precisely, this transcendence is reflected in Sandy exceeding Miss Brodie with the setting as the school days and the context of the educational formation of this elected group of girls. Rose makes a curious remark when she visits Sandy as Sister Helena of the Transfiguration in which she assesses that Miss Brodie "talked a lot about dedication ... but she didn't mean your sort of dedication" (Spark 121), and Sandy's transcendence or transgression (in defiance of Miss Brodie's expectation) becomes even clearer, because her efforts are directed towards stopping Miss Brodie as well as overpassing her, even if it means to be imprisoned and to clutch "the bars of the grille as if she wanted to escape from the dim parlour beyond" (35). In this highly complex short narrative where every page contains a variety of elements constantly triggering readers' imaginations and fostering their engagement in the construal of meaning, it becomes apparent that the novella demands a constant act of observation— making the reader an active participant.

Through stories one shapes truth and fiction, and the storyteller becomes the source of authority; as Miss Brodie would have it, this "is the truth and there is no more to say" (60). The Brodie set, like other children their age, are highly impressionable and, well-aware of this, Miss Brodie creates her own faction marked by loyalty and respect towards herself, their self-appointed leader. In addition to her irregular methods, this issue becomes another reason for Headmistress Mackay's distress and determination to dismiss Miss Brodie. "Does Miss Brodie tell you stories?" (65) the headmistress asks the students. Miss Mackay is aware that Brodie

is shaping the identity of her set, not only as individuals but also as a collectivity, fettered by her own sense of identity. Miss Mackay derides stories for their vast information "on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorized curriculum, as the headmistress said, and useless to the school as a school" (5). Miss Brodie as a teacher completely disregards the curriculum at Marcia Blaine School and instead teaches what she considers relevant, and her "strong opinions about art, religion, science and politics (most notably fascism) make indelible marks on the Brodie set" (Whiteley 80). Miss Mackay is trying to use sex as the reason to expel Miss Brodie—in fact, Rose believed that Miss Brodie was discharged on account of her teaching method being constantly interwoven with sex (121), to the extent of pushing Rose into a sexual affair with a married adult man. Even though "Rose only half-guessed at Miss Brodie's meaning", she "listened to Miss Brodie as if she agreed with every word" (110), which shows the great influence Miss Brodie has over the six girls, as well as over the more peripheral Joyce Emily. Her power comes from her determination to "make a deep, lasting impression of her students ... and mold them in her own image" (Katz 626). This determination is performed through her character and also through her power with words—often manipulative, as the study will later show. Along this line of thought, however, it is Sandy who gives the headmistress a wider picture. Sandy tips off Miss Mackay by telling her that "[Y]ou won't be able to pin her down on sex. Have you thought of politics?" (124).

As a side note, it is noteworthy that Miss Mackay "thought this rather unpleasant of Sandy" (125), maybe because she betrayed expectations of remaining loyal to Miss Brodie throughout. Yet Miss Mackay had planned different schemes, like approaching Mary, "thinking her to be gullible and bribable," but "as the only reason that Mary had wanted to learn Latin was to please Miss Brodie, the headmistress got no further" (77). This shows that Spark's novella does not present a black-and-white morality, because as Carruthers contends, that which one may be "fairly certainly dealing with is never far from revealing itself to be something sometimes differently edged" (498), consequently deeming Jean Brodie as "Spark's most exuberant creation" (497). Identity is always a significant matter, but Spark creates a different perspective since the text itself is inconclusive. What the narrative implies is that the characters' complexity can never be revealed. Interweaving the power derived from Miss Brodie's authority as an adult and teacher with the issue of identity, it must be noted that Miss Brodie teaches by example—and Sandy follows it to the end. It is therefore important to bear in mind that Miss Brodie is not just a figure of authority who passes knowledge on, but that she is herself the object of that knowledge. She becomes part of the educational process both as the instructor and the topic, further influencing the girls' perception and apprehension of the world. Just like Miss Brodie instructs her girls to be ready to lie about what they are learning, Sandy also conceals her betrayal. Treason can be regarded as a consequence of Miss Brodie's disappointing Sandy's expectations, which led her to feel betrayed in the first place. As MacKay contends, "Spark ties politically motivated falsifications and betrayals to acts of world-making fantasy, what the treacherous Sandy learns from the treacherous Miss Brodie is that it is possible to reshape the world according to her own needs and desires" (513), an idea that ties in again with the creative power of storytelling.

It is remarkable that Miss Brodie "fails to realize how she is manipulating her students' admiration of her as a gifted teacher ... a towering force of rebellious individualism for her own

self-centered purposes" (Katz 628); and she fails to notice this because, at the same time, she firmly believes that she is acting for the sake of the six girls. This can be seen in the analogy between "[g]ive me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life" (Spark 9) and how Miss Brodie considers that if they had been even younger, they would definitely become the very best of their kind (22). Katz also notes that Miss Brodie's disappointment emerges from the girls' non-compliance with what the roles she has determined for them (628). A clear example of this is how Miss Brodie appointed Rose as Teddy Lloyd's lover and Sandy as her informant (Spark 110), but instead Rose "shook off Miss Brodie's influence as a dog shakes pond-water from its coat" (119). This is verified when Miss Brodie confronts Sandy about ruining her plans; and, although "She was at first merely resigned to Sandy's liaison with the art master. Presently she was exultant" (123–124) because she realized that she could still live the dream through a different student. What really counts for her is that there is a surrogate lover, but since things are not unfolding as Miss Brodie had predicted, there is a clash and a power shift. Whiteley also notes that Sandy and other characters like Rose, and by extension the omniscient narrator that embraces Sandy's point of view as well as the reader's "[P]oke beyond Brodie's boundaries, sometimes showing how some of the girls have shaken off her influence and revealing matters beyond the scope of Brodie's awareness" (89). This transgression can occur since Miss Brodie is not bestowed with insight, which is an issue rooted in the narrative point of view that follows Sandy's perception in terms of awareness, processing information from the outside and from oneself, understanding and learning from it. And Miss Brodie, even if she makes some effort to learn (Spark 81), fails to fully comprehend insight, i.e. what insight truly means. Miss Brodie's power for storytelling also makes her blind to what is actually happening. Once Sandy develops her insight, the ability to see and understand the world around her, Miss Brodie's prophecy that "I am his [Mr. Lloyd's] Muse but Rose shall take my place" (120) shall never become reality. This blindness is appreciable when Miss Brodie learns of Teddy Lloyd's remark about Rose's profile, which becomes the trigger for Miss Brodie to choose and prepare Rose as Lloyd's future lover.

Sandy analyses and sorts out the people around her, like Miss Brodie does, by deeming them either in possession of insight or in possession of instinct: just as Brodie declares that "Rose has instinct but no insight", Sandy recounts the same thing to the art teacher Teddy Lloyd (123). Such is Jean Brodie's influence that she becomes the essential role model for Sandy. Just like "Pavlova contemplates her swans in order to perfect her swan dance" (63), Sandy observes and analyses Miss Brodie at the same time that she relies on her to conform her own identity.

Another instance of analogy between both characters is how they verbalize their judgements of others. Miss Brodie plays down the horrors of Nazi Germany when admitting that "Hitler *was* rather naughty" (122), thus belittling dangers of fascist regimes. Similarly, Sandy considers that Miss Brodie "was quite innocent in her way" (127). In this instance, she also neglects the dangerous impact Miss Brodie has had on students, and apparently fails to see how she has also been affected by it, even if her insight is eventually proven to go beyond Miss Brodie.

Sandy's fascination with Miss Brodie increases gradually, and the way it is presented in the text is reminiscent of Eve Kosofsky Sedwick's homosocial theory, here applied to women.

In her studies of what she referred to as "male homosocial desire," Sedwick encompasses "the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination" (227). Sandy admires and is absolutely fascinated by Miss Brodie and her personality, perhaps because it is as complex as hers, but the reason is never explicitly stated as therein lies the complexity of all human beings. Spark refuses to spell out the ambiguities and incongruences of their relationship. This appears as a sense that individuality—what makes the self unique—can never be reduced to somebody else's point of view, or, in Carruthers words, that "the indefinable essence of the human person—that the perception of any other individual alone is never enabled nor entitled fully to view" (501). There is a degree of identification, but it breaks down as Sandy develops her insight and realizes that Miss Brodie falls behind. Sandy's fascination with Miss Brodie is evident when she takes a deep interest in Mr. Lloyd, not only to dismantle Miss Brodie's plans, but also because she knows that he is in love, even obsessed with her, and the "more she discovered him to be still in love with Jean Brodie, the more she was curious about the mind that loved the woman" (Spark 123).

3. Conclusions

Identity in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is constantly shaped by different influences, ranging from politics and religion, education and art, to literature. Sandy's construction of identity grows out of boredom, or out of fascination. Either way, Sandy needs to lead a double life so as not to be bored, a process through which she ultimately becomes Miss Brodie. Since Sandy is able to see as well as to be duplicitous, she inserts herself in Miss Brodie's narrative and takes hold of her creative power, causing Miss Brodie's destiny to unfold differently from what she had foreseen. Sandy's insight is makes reflect and wonder "to what extent it was Miss Brodie who had developed complications throughout the years, and to what extent it was her own conception of Miss Brodie that had changed" (119–120). Perception and people are bound to change—after all, change is intrinsic to life. It is through insight that Sandy is able to understand the world just as Miss Brodie is able to control it through fiction, but always something escapes the eye. Miss Brodie is only paying attention to her expectations and she loses track of the complexity of the world; in contrast, when Sandy experiences this clash, she develops an awareness of external reality. Fascinated by its intricacy, which is similar to her fascination about the complexity of Miss Brodie, she construes her own identity by impersonating and eventually outgrowing Miss Brodie. She consciously puts an end to Miss Brodie's schemes, which had entailed the configuration of character of the whole Brodie set, both as a group and as individuals—but Sandy acts out of self-interest, too.

Daydreaming to avoid boredom, she finds in Miss Brodie such an intriguing puzzle that she sets out to test the extent of her fascination. Spark's novella reveals how Miss Brodie's authority emerges from storytelling, thus suggesting that reality can be shaped into fiction and used for personal goals despite impacting the lives of others. Whether positive or negative, this manipulation is a selfish transgression of the individual right to self-definition. The blindness subsuming the puppeteer of words when absorbed by her purpose unleashes another treacherous and, to an extent, similarly selfish scheme: betrayal. It is in this context that the narrative delves into the convoluted relationships between teacher and student, the individual

and the group, observation and knowledge, fiction and reality and, ultimately, into the drive to fictionalize reality in order to secure and preserve the allure of life.

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