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## UNIT 2 MURIEL SPARK – HER LIFE, HER WORKS AND THE TEXT

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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In the beginning of this Unit, we shall look briefly at the life of Muriel Spark and a short resume of some of her important works. Then follows a chapter-wise summary of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. These two aspects are important because they help us understand the attitudes of the writer and appreciate the evolution of her art. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is a novel that has strong autobiographical undertones. It can be better understood if we are familiar with the important events in the author's life and are aware of her perceptions about literature.

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### 2.1 THE LIFE OF MURIEL SPARK

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Muriel Spark was born in 1918 in Edinburgh, Scotland. She was the daughter of Bernard Camberg, a Jewish engineer. Her mother, Sarah Elizabeth Maud, was of Italian descent.

Muriel Spark was educated at the James Gillespie's School for Girls which she has fictionalised in her novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. She left school in 1935 and got a teaching job in a small private day school. Here she preferred to get free tuition in shorthand and typing rather than a salary and this experience stood her in good stead in later life when she was able to type the manuscripts of her own works.

In 1937 she got engaged to Sydney Oswald Spark who sailed to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to work as a teacher. Muriel joined him there after a few months and they got married. Her marital life was a turbulent one as her husband began to show signs of mental instability and had fits of violence.

Two years later, the second World War broke out and S.O. Spark had to join the army. It was then that Muriel decided to press for divorce, which came through in 1942. She sailed back to England in 1944 despite the dangers of being torpedoed by German submarines on the way. Once in London, she worked at the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office. This involved her active participation in psychological warfare that endeavoured to camouflage anti-Nazi propaganda.

A year after the War, Spark found a job in a good quarterly magazine called *Argentor*. Here she got a grounding in editing, proof-reading and copy-editing. The experience helped her when, in the spring of 1947, she took over as the editor of the *Poetry Review*. She was only

twenty-nine then and had joined the Poetry Society as a member just a year before. Her enthusiastic advocacy of Modernism antagonised members who, after initially expressing displeasure, eventually called for her dismissal. Spark left the Society in 1948 and founded a poetry magazine of her own called *Forum*. She continued to write poetry and finally published her collection, *The Fanfarlo and Other Verse* in 1952.

An important event in her life is her conversion to Roman Catholicism. Spark acknowledges that one of the major influences that brought about this conversion was the theological writings of John Henry Newman. In 1954 she was received into the Church of Rome and in *Curriculum Vitae*, her autobiography, she states, "I felt the Roman Catholic faith corresponded to what I had always felt and known and believed. There was no blinding revelation....the existential quality of a religious experience cannot simply be summed up in general terms." She later claimed that she began writing her novels only after she became a Roman Catholic and saw life in its totality rather than as a series of disconnected occurrences.

For some time, in the early fifties, Spark took a part-time job in the magazine *European Affairs* and also worked with Peter Owen, the publisher. Around the same time she began writing her first novel, *The Comforters*, which was eventually published in 1957. With this publication came financial security and Muriel Spark moved to Rome in 1966. This city, which continues to be her home even today, forms the backdrop of many of her novels.

Spark's writings have brought her critical acclaim and recognition. In 1951 she won a national short story competition organised by *The Observer*. She has been honoured with the Italia prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In 1967 she was named Commander, Order of the British Empire.

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## **2.2 THE WORKS OF MURIEL SPARK**

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Muriel Spark, in her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, states that "all experience is good for an artist" and the "essentials" of literature "lie out in the world". This claim is corroborated in her works which are born out of some of her most memorable experiences. Her involvement in the Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office is reflected in the psychological warfare indulged in by her characters as they seek to carve out their respective places within their environment. It is also reflected in her tendency to camouflage facts and draw out, through them, the truths relating to fiction.

Spark sees life as a chaotic state and strongly believes that it is for the novelist to perceive and evolve an order out of it. In her writings she endeavours to present the authorial perspective through the varied voices of her characters. The mundane and the trivial are transformed through reinterpretations that represent the vital issues and aspects of life. This truth, which emerges through fictive situations and characters, is what Spark aspires to present in her writings.

A prolific writer, she began her literary career as a poet at the age of nine. During her sojourn in Africa she took to writing short stories but finally adopted the novel as her preferred medium for creative writing.

### **2.2.1 Poetry**

When she went to Rhodesia at the age of nineteen, Spark wrote some poetry and many short stories. Her poems were then published in 1952 in a collection called *The Fanfarlo and Other Verse*. In 1967 appeared *Collected Poems I* and in 1982 she published another collection called *Sotheby's and Poems*. Drawn from experiences in her personal life, Spark's poetry is subjective and lyrical.

### **2.2.2 Short Stories**

Africa serves as the inspiration and background of many of Spark's short stories and novels. In "The Go-Away Bird", a short story written after a poem with the same title, Muriel Spark describes the homesickness felt by the Whites in the alien continent of Africa. The story "Bang-Bang You're Dead" is based on a real-life incident that involved Spark's friend, Nita

McEwen, who was shot dead by her husband. In "The Curtain Blown by the Breeze", the writer describes the violent horrors of apartheid as she experienced it among the Rhodesian Whites. Spark was inspired by the Victoria Falls and subsequently wrote "The Seraph and the Zambesi", a story about the mystical experience of the river Zambesi's rain forest and the symbolic aridity of the White races. This story won a competition run by *The Observer* in 1951 and established Spark's reputation as a creative writer. For children, Muriel Spark has written *A Very Fine Clock* (1968). Like her poetry, Spark's short stories tend to fictionalise incidents from her own life.

### 2.2.3 · Novel

Her first novel, *The Comforters* (1957), was written shortly after her conversion to Roman Catholicism, a branch of Christianity founded by St. Peter in Rome. It combines the author's religious convictions and literary values while exploring the relationship between author and characters. The heroine, Caroline Rose, realises that she is a character in a novel and expresses her resistance to the plot imposed on her by the invisible author. Her attitudes reflect the conflict arising out of the clash between free will and pre-ordained existence. These realities have been summed up by Frank Kermode in "The House of Fiction" where he refers to *The Comforters* as "a novel about writing a novel". The title "describes the persecuting effect of 'voices' heard by the main character", writes Spark in her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*.

The second novel, *Robinson* (1958), takes up the story of plane-crash survivors marooned on an island. Only two men—Robinson and Miguel—inhabit the remote island of Robinson. The novel explores, in allegorical terms, Robinson, the man as well as the island. *Memento Mori* (1959) explores the metaphysical mystery of death. The story revolves round a group of elderly people who receive anonymous telephone calls, ostensibly from death itself, and are always made aware of their imminent mortality.

In her next novel, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), Spark delves into the supernatural once again. It revolves round the demonic figure of Dougal Douglas, who, as a personnel assistant, is given the task of looking into the inner lives of workers and helping them to enhance their professional performance. His sinisterly charismatic personality foment trouble wherever he goes. The characters in *The Bachelors* (1960) are caught up, likewise, in a web of demonology, spiritualism and spurious beliefs. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1960) is a novel about a school teacher whose fascistic tendencies come to the fore and result in her enforced retirement. The book served as the basis of a highly successful film.

In *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), Spark draws inspiration from her own life. Set in the post-war years, the novel harks back to 1947 when the author had to take up residence in a London hostel called the Helena Club. A fire in a girls' hostel is described as a catalytic event that transforms and places under judgement the lives of the inmates. Through Barbara Vaughan in *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), Spark describes Jerusalem, a city divided by the Mandelbaum Gate along religious and ethnic lines. It evokes the sense of divisiveness that characterises the Jewish, Christian and Arab populations of this ancient city. The sense of place is evoked again in *The Public Image* (1968). This novel is set in Rome and it explores the connections between reality and fiction by presenting the image-building industry that sustains filmdom. Frederick Christopher, resenting his wife's success as an actress, commits suicide in order to destroy her public image.

The conventional murder story is inverted in *The Driver's Seat* (1970). Lise, the victim, provides a twist in the tale by seeking out her own killer and, thereby, takes over from the novelist as an alternative plotmaker. Through her Spark poses the central question about who is in the driver's seat—the novelist or the character? Spark's next novel *Not to Disturb* (1971) is a thriller set in a stately home. At many places it parodies the traditional Gothic novel as the plot moves forward through the murder hunt. *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973) is set in New York in 1973 and in it the central conflict is between moral and metaphorical truth. It invokes psychological warfare that Spark describes so well after her stint in the Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office. Ethics and sanctity are the central thematic concerns portrayed in *The Abbess of Crewe* (1974). It is simultaneously a moral satire and a political allegory which revolves around the realities of electioneering. *The Takeover* (1976) is set in Italy and the plot has to do with the intrigues and fraud that surface in the world of

art. Set against the backdrop of Venice, *Territorial Rights* (1979) is about the blackmail and corruption that characterises big business interests.

In *Litering with Intent* (1981) Spark returns to an autobiographical heroine, Fleur Talbot, a novelist. The writer analyses the balance between fact and fiction and the novel becomes a self-conscious celebration of woman as artist in the twentieth century. Spark's fascination for Job is reflected in *The Only Problem* (1984). Job and his fortunes are the central focus in the Book of Job in the Old Testament of the Bible. The novel contains an account of Harvey Gotham who retires to France to write a monograph on the biblical character of Job. Vainly seeking peace and seclusion in daily life, Gotham finds modern-day counterparts of Job's persecutors and comforters constantly impinging on his time and inclinations.

*A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988) is based on Spark's experience at a part-time job at Falcon Press, London. It evokes the London of the 1950s and takes a sly, entertaining look at the publishing scene of those times. Insanity and religious mania are the predominant themes in *Symposium* (1990). Her latest novel, *Reality and Dreams* (1996), is set in London and revolves around the life of a filmmaker, Tom Richards. It is the story of a search for the right character by the filmmaker for whom all projects start as a dream prior to being presented before the audience as reality. Spark's fiction encompasses the mysterious nature of life in which truth lies beyond reason and is recognised through acts of faith. The contrariness of human nature is brought to the fore through paradox of situation and character.

#### 2.2.4 Plays

Spark has written a number of radio plays. These include *The Interview* (1958), *The Dry River Bed* (1959), *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), and *Danger Zone* (1961). Her first full-length play, *Doctors of Philosophy*, was performed in London in 1962. It takes up a theme similar to that of her novel, *The Comforters*, which seeks to make a foray into the relationship shared by authors and their characters. In the play, characters are constantly aware that they are taking part in a dramatic situation and feel restricted by the pre-ordained roles given to them by the author. Spark dramatises the relationship that exists between the author as creator and the characters as the created.

#### 2.2.5 Biography and Criticism

In the early 1950's, Muriel Spark worked on a few authors that particularly appealed to her literary sensibilities. With Derek Stanford, she edited a *Tribute to Wordsworth* on the centenary of the poet's death. She has also written a critical biography of Mary Shelley called *Child of Light* and has edited a selection of letters of the Brontes. Besides this she has also worked on the poet John Masefield.

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### 2.3 THE TEXT : A SUMMARY OF THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE

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At this level, you don't really need a summary. And I expect that you have read the novel by now. What follows then will help you to recapitulate what you have already read. Keep the text handy for ready reference.

A careful reading of the summary will help you understand the critical analysis that follows this Unit. Quotations from the novel appear within quotes and are followed by page numbers given in brackets. This will help you locate them easily in the novel. The particular edition from which the quotations have been taken is the one published by Macmillan in 1961.

#### 2.3.1 Chapter I

The novel, set in Edinburgh, Scotland, revolves round Miss Jean Brodie, a teacher in the Marcia Blaine School for Girls. It is in the autumn of 1930 that the book opens and the school's staid atmosphere, characterised by tradition and conformity, is shaken by Miss Brodie's presence. She views herself as "a leaven in the lump" (p.7), a kind of progressive rebel who adopts extremely unconventional modes of educating the impressionable young girls put in her charge. Her motto is "Safety does not come first, Goodness, Truth and Beauty

do."These words succeed in establishing that there is a subtle difference of approach and interpretation between Miss Brodie and the rest of the staff, and underlines the fact that she is at odds with them. As lessons proceed, Miss Brodie's dominant personality succeeds in making her pupils participate and share in the guilty secret of only pretending to do school work but actually listening to tales of her unfulfilled romance with Hugh Carruthers. The highly romanticised tale of a relationship nipped in the bud has some of her pupils regarding her in the light of a tragic heroine who, despite great personal odds, is struggling to transform them into the "creme de la creme of society" (p.6). By imbuing them with a sense of distinction and making them feel a cut above the rest, Miss Brodie manages to win the affection and loyalty of six girls who, for ever afterwards "were held in suspicion and not much liking for showing no signs of team spirit " and having "very little in common with each other outside their continuing friendship with Jean Brodie" (p.2).

Among them was Monica Douglas who was, in later life, well-known for her mathematical prowess and her quick anger; Rose Stanley who became "famous for sex" (p.3); Eunice Gardiner who was a spritely gymnast; Sandy Stranger who, with her exceptionally small eyes, came to be known for the clarity of her vowel sounds; the graceful Jenny Gray who became known for her histrionic capabilities; and Mary Macgregor "whose fame rested on her being a silent lump" (p.5) an insipid personality without any of the distinction that marked the others.

Once their confidence had been secured, Miss Brodie took to grooming them according to her insights. They were often invited for meals by her and then indoctrinated with principles that Miss Brodie held dear to her heart. Only with them she discussed the differences she had with her colleagues and the unsuccessful attempts that had been made to remove her from the school's staff. With these frequent reiterations of the difficulties she ran into while imparting education to them, Miss Brodie emerged as an admirable figure in the eyes of the young girls. Their sense of indebtedness intensified with Miss Brodie's constant reminders of how all else in her life was secondary as she had dedicated her "prime" to them. The result was that each of them not only started to idealize her but also endeavoured to protect her from the machinations of the headmistress, Miss Mackay, and the other mistresses. The Brodie "set" (p.1) was thus born and each member swore eternal allegiance to the woman who, they had good reason to believe, had sacrificed all to make them the "creme de la creme" from among their peers.

Though not very well informed about the subjects that formed their curriculum, the Brodie set had more knowledge than their peers about Mussolini, the Renaissance painters, skin-cleansing creams, menarche, Einstein, the love life of Charlotte Bronte and the rudiments of astrology. By the time they were sixteen and had reached the fourth form, they were each symbols of the non-conformity that was associated with Miss Brodie herself. To publicly publish and reiterate their individuality, each girl wore her school hat in a different manner and at a different angle.

### **2.3.2 Chapter 2**

Much later in life, when Mary Macgregor was deserted by her boyfriend, a corporal, who did not turn up at a date, she remembered her school days as the happiest period of her life and relapsed into her usual bewildered state. She died, rather horrifically, at the age of twenty four, in a fire at Cumberland Hotel where her usual dullness led her to repeatedly run through smoke-choked corridors and bring on asphyxiation.

Sandy and Jenny also shared with her this sense of ecstatic happiness. Sex predominated the imagination of these two girls who started writing their clandestine literary venture called "The Mountain Eyrie". It was an imaginative saga of the great romance that Miss Brodie had with Hugh Carruthers, a soldier who died ironically just a few days before the Armistice. The story is laced with sexual innuendo which, the girls feel, sullies the the purity of the relationship. They declare that any of their liaisons in future would be free from sexual familiarity but at the same time, express a desire to closely see and inspect the nude figure of a Greek god in the local museum. They plan the trip with Miss Brodie, knowing that nudity could never bother her like the other grown-ups.

There is an account of Miss Brodie's poetry class in which she recites Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shallot". Through it she wants her pupils to cultivate the art of "composure"

practiced by the lady and, which she feels, is "one of the best assets of a woman" (p.25). Jenny with her golden ringlets and sweet voice enraptured Mr. Lowther, the music teacher, who daringly twirled her curls and encouraged her to sing. Miss Brodie was always there during music lessons and never lost the opportunity to impress upon her pupils that how they were her "vocation", that she had dedicated her prime to them and would even turn down an offer of marriage from a titled man to ensure that they became the elite "creme-de-la-creme".

By 1931, Miss Brodie had selected her favourites and knew she could rely on them in moments of crisis when matters reached a head between her and the Headmistress. More than the Brodie set, Miss Brodie relied on their parents whom "she could trust not to lodge complaints about the more advanced and seditious aspects of her educational policy" (p.30). Her "special girls" were often invited to tea and taken into confidence about her feud with the Headmistress as they "learned what troubles in her career Miss Brodie encountered on their behalf" (p.30). She took them for walks around Edinburgh, especially the older parts of the city and it is through Sandy's memory and vision of one such occasion that one gets to understand that Miss Brodie "understood them as a body with herself for the head...in unified compliance to her destiny, as if God had willed them to birth for that purpose" (p.36). On passing a group of Girl Guides, Miss Brodie scorns them as she considers them a rival group whose sense of loyalty and duty might weaken and cause some of her group to forsake her. The walk exposes the Brodie set to the dismal realities of the poorest suburbs of Edinburgh. They see unshod children playing in the icy winds that sweep the city, witness a man battering his wife, encounter another ravaged by alcohol and unemployment, and all too early in their lives they come to know of harsh realities that their protective home environments tried hard to veil.

In the course of the conversation during the walk, Miss Brodie lets out that she is to have an encounter with Miss Mackay who questions her "methods of instruction" (p.45). She then proceeds to justify her method by defining education as coming from the root "e from *ex*, out, and *duco*, I lead. It means a leading out. To me education is a leading out of what is already there in a pupil's soul" (p.45). She feels that there is a radical difference between her principles of education and those of the other mistresses—"We differ at the root" (p.47). As long as her methods "can be proved to be in any part improper or subversive" (p.48) she does not feel threatened. At the same time, Miss Brodie is confident that her set, so carefully nurtured over months, will never let her down by betraying her to Miss Mackay, the headmistress.

Twenty-eight years later, after Miss Brodie's own death, Jenny, a nurse, tells her husband, a doctor, about the extraordinary hold that Miss Brodie exercised on her set and expresses a desire to lay flowers at her grave when they next visit Edinburgh. Jenny also speaks of Miss Brodie's betrayal to school authorities by one of the Brodie set and the niggling doubts that come to her mind regarding the identity of the betrayer.

Sandy Stranger, who took orders as a nun later in life, remembers how their walks opened the windows of her mind to "other people's Edinburgh, quite different from hers" (p.41), and on being asked about the biggest influence in her life, remembers it as "a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime". Sandy's perception of reality had been jolted by the walks and later, as Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, she had authored an odd psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception called "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace" (p.43). This work had helped Sister Helena earn intellectual eminence and greater freedom from the rigorous mores of the convent.

### 2.3.3 Chapter 3

Miss Brodie was not alone in her views or attitudes to life. "There were legions of her kind during the nineteen-thirties, women from the age of thirty and upward, who crowded their war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion....They were great talkers and feminists...who talked to men as man-to-man". (pp.52-54).

Miss Brodie herself was in "a state of fluctuating development" (p.54) and believed that there was nothing she could not learn in the years of her prime. "Little did she realise that the principles governing the end of her prime would have astonished herself at the beginning of it" (p.55).

Once, when Miss Brodie in her history class flitted from one digression to another, Miss Mackay made an unexpected entry to remind the girls of the qualifying examination that had to be passed before entering senior school. It caused Miss Brodie some anxious moments but as soon as the Headmistress left, she continued as if there had been no interruption, "Qualifying examination or no qualifying examination, you will have the benefit of my experiences in Italy" (p.57). She then proceeded to tell them about her admiration for Mussolini who had "performed feats of magnitude" by abolishing unemployment, talked about the Colosseum in Rome where gladiators fought and slaves were thrown to lions, of the nasal way in which Americans spoke, her brief encounter with an Italian poet and her admiration for Rossetti.

Miss Brodie's working environment was marked by a hostility and resentment that her colleagues felt towards her. There were, however, two exceptions to the general tide of feeling that flowed against her. These were two men—Gordon Lowther, the singing master, and Teddy Lloyd, the art master. Both were a little in love with Miss Brodie and were beginning to compete with each other for her affections. She was unaware of this angle and saw them as her supporters to whom she felt infinitely grateful. The Brodie set looked with greater interest upon Mr. Lloyd, who was better shaped and more sophisticated than Mr Lowther. What added to his charm was the golden lock of hair that fell over his brow and the fact that he had only one arm, the other having been lost in the Great War.

Mr.Lloyd's practical analysis and appreciation of Botticelli's masterpiece 'Primavera', resulted in suppressed laughter heard around the class. Each time his pointer traced the nude outlines of the women in the painting, a collective sound of mirth could be heard around the room and aroused Miss Brodie's wrath. Mary, out of all the girls, was found giggling "like a dirty-minded child of an uncultured home" and Miss Brodie's retribution was swift. Mary was propelled out of the room and this violent action restored sobriety among the rest of the class.

Then came the news one day that after school Mr. Lloyd had kissed Miss Brodie in the art room. Monica Douglas reported it to the Brodie set as an eye-witness account and initially there was a reaction of disbelief among the girls. It was Sandy who closely questioned Monica about the details before accepting the veracity of the story. This incident, which occupied the Brodie set's imagination for many months to come, was kept a secret and shared only among her favoured students. It began to be noticed that a subtle change had overcome Miss Brodie who took to wearing new clothes and jewellery.

Then Miss Brodie was away from school for two weeks with an ailment and her leave coincided with Mr.Lowther's leave of absence for ostensibly the same reasons. This set tongues wagging and it was Miss Gaunt, temporarily replacing Miss Brodie in class, who slyly suggested a connection between the two. When Miss Brodie returned after her vacation, she played for and occasionally sang along with Mr. Lowther during practice for the annual concert. Sandy could not help deducing that a strange love triangle, involving Miss Brodie, Mr. Lloyd and Mr. Lowther, had come into existence. The irony of the situation was that the singing master loved Miss Brodie who, in turn, loved the drawing master. Despite Sandy's fertile imagination, it "was impossible to imagine her (Brodie) in a sexual context at all, and yet it was impossible not to suspect that such things were so" (p.49).

Jenny, walking alone, was one day accosted by a man in an isolated spot. He first caught her attention and then proceeded to expose his genitalia to the innocent girl. After the initial shock, Jenny escaped unpursued and unscathed and the matter was reported to the police. A policewoman even came to question Jenny. She mentioned this episode only to Sandy, her best friend. Sandy's curiosity, however, became obsessive and she made Jenny narrate her experience over and over again. She got a perverse pleasure out of the repetition of events and took to loathing the idea of sex after imagining what Jenny had gone through. This was a secret which only Jenny and Sandy shared; even Miss Brodie was not allowed to get a whiff of it. Gradually the man who accosted Jenny was forgotten and all that Sandy remembered and admired was the unknown policewoman who became a heroic figure in her eyes.

In this chapter the focus is on sexual interpretations of the simplest of things like the shuttles of sewing machines going up and down, and Sandy and Jenny completing a fictitious and highly romantic love correspondence between Miss Brodie and Mr. Lowther which ended in sexual intimacy but, as Miss Brodie was dedicated to her girls in her prime, she

declined marriage. She, however, admitted that her true affection was for Teddy Lloyd who "was married to another" (p.95).

Much later, when Miss Brodie had been forcibly retired and was terminally ill, she confessed to Sandy her feelings for Teddy Lloyd and how she camouflaged her affections by entering into a relationship with Mr. Lowther. She died believing that it was her personal life which made one of her favoured pupils betray her to the authorities.

### **2.3.4 Chapter 4**

The Brodie set are now in senior school and Miss Brodie is no longer the deity presiding over them. The senior school teachers are immersed in their fields of specialisation and show no interest in the personalities of their pupils. The most fascinating place is the science room where lessons are called "experiments" and the girls have the sneaking suspicion that even the teacher, Miss Lockhart, does not know the result of these experiments. This sense of sinister suspense that marks the science classes comes to the fore when Mary Macgregor takes fright during an experiment that involves magnesium flares and runs panic-stricken between benches, only to be met by tongues of flame wherever she goes. It takes Miss Lockhart, the science mistress, quite some time and patience to calm down the petrified girl.

Miss Mackay, the Headmistress, was particularly pleased that, in senior school, the Brodie set did not have Miss Brodie around any more to give them directions. She laid a scheme to finally disperse this group and rid the school of Miss Brodie. She started by allowing the dull Mary to take Latin as a subject and hoped that this favour would induce the girl to reveal some unsavoury yet concrete evidence of Miss Brodie's personal life about which Miss Mackay had only vague suspicions. Mary, however, was too dumb to understand her probing questions; in fact she did not take them to be questions at all. For her they were statements which she accepted meekly. Miss Mackay's plot had backfired.

Even the system of dividing the senior girls into "houses", or groups for extra-curricular activities and competitions, did not arouse a sense of team spirit within the Brodie set. The girls still maintained their loyalty to Miss Brodie and kept her well-informed about all that happened in class. Miss Brodie, on the other hand, related to them the domestic crisis that Mr Lowther, the music teacher, was going through. His housekeeper had deserted him and the Misses Ellen and Allison Kerr, the junior school sewing mistresses, had taken on the temporary task of running Mr. Lowther's household. Miss Brodie looked on those two women with suspicion as she found them too vapid and liable to be easily dominated by the likes of the formidable Miss Gaunt. The latter, in fact, encouraged the Kerrs to make this arrangement with Mr. Lowther a permanent one so that a stern eye could be kept on the singing master's private life.

Though Miss Brodie was concerned about her girls becoming attached to senior school mistresses, she never voiced these concerns before them. Miss Brodie's pattern of life was well set now. Every Sunday would be spent at Mr. Lowther's house, and more often than not, even the night. Her heart was with Mr. Lloyd, the art teacher, but she gave herself to the singing master on the rebound, out of a sense of duty and martyrdom. She knew she could never openly flaunt her affection for the married Mr. Lloyd as this sort of a relationship would be frowned upon severely by society. She lost weight but her true passion remained hidden from prying eyes.

Then came a time when Miss Brodie perceived a similar loss of weight in Mr. Lowther and decided that the Kerrs were not doing their job. She could not allow them to continue in their domestic capacity at Mr. Lowther's if they could not feed him properly. She justified their dismissal by claiming descent from Will Brodie, "a man of substance, a cabinet maker and designer of gibbets, a member of the Town Council of Edinburgh and a keeper of two mistresses who bore him five children between them", who was caught stealing not for money but "for the danger in it", and who "died cheerfully on a gibbet of his own devising in seventeen-eighty-eight" (p.117). The now forty-three year old Miss Brodie cast social niceties to the winds and moved in with Mr. Lowther. To her girls, though, she gave the impression that she went back to her own lodgings each night.

The Brodie set came to visit her there each weekend, two at a time. After exchanging news, Miss Brodie would show a subtle interest in the preoccupations of Mr Lloyd and

Sandy, having divined the true nature of her affections, would relate news about him. It was she who described the warm unconventional atmosphere in his house, his six children, his Roman Catholic faith, his wife Deidre, and gave the surprising news that Rose Stanley modelled for his portraits. All the girls, when they visited, would vouch for information about Mr. Lloyd and when the summer holidays came Miss Brodie informed them of her decision to go to Germany, rather than Italy, and leave Mr. Lowther, for the period, in the hands of the Misses Kerr once again.

### 2.3.5 Chapter 5

Miss Brodie's passion for Mr. Lloyd is not one-sided. His response and reaction to her is conveyed through his art. No matter who the model and what the scene, Lloyd's portraits have a peculiar propensity—they all portray Miss Brodie whose features he is able to transpose on the face of anyone who might actually sit for him. Sandy, with her keen insight, can perceive the transference of Lloyd's hidden affection for Miss Brodie to his creative works. When told by Mr. Lloyd that he intended to paint the entire Brodie set together, Sandy remarks "We'd look like one big Miss Brodie, I suppose" (p. 136) and looks at him "with near-blackmailing insolence of her knowledge" (p. 136). Mr. Lloyd, understanding her meaning, kisses her passionately. Much later he embarks on a brief affair with Sandy, contravening Miss Brodie's plans for the future of Sandy and Rose. She had mistakenly imagined that she would preside over Mr. Lloyd's liaison with Rose and Sandy would serve as her informant on the affair. It turns out to be the other way round. From here begins her downfall that culminates in her betrayal.

Mr. Lowther, after two years of Miss Brodie's companionship, chooses to forsake her and marries Miss Lockhart, the science teacher. The news comes as a shock to Jean Brodie who, till then, was convinced that he would never be able to muster enough courage to push her out of his life. The irony of it is brought out with greater emphasis when the evening before the announcement of the engagement, Miss Brodie confidently tells Sandy "If I wished I could marry him tomorrow" (p. 157). Sandy understands that Lowther was the proxy through whom Miss Brodie satisfied her sexual yearnings and it is then that she sees the hypocrisy of the figure whose mores the Brodie set wrongly admired and tried to emulate all these many years. Though Miss Brodie contributed to the China tea set presented by the school staff to the couple, her demeanour at the presentation symbolised her sense of sadness and betrayal.

### 2.3.6 Chapter 6

Miss Brodie seems past her prime as far as her teaching goes. Miss Mackay, while talking to the Brodie set, voices her concern about the fate of Miss Brodie's class which she doubts will clear the qualifying examination for senior school. The Brodie set continue to admire Jean Brodie as an exciting woman whose personality still draws admiring looks from the now-married Mr. Lowther.

Miss Brodie takes a new girl, Joyce Emily Hammond, under her wing. Joyce Emily, a congenital rebel and troublemaker, has a history of school expulsions behind her. At Marcia Blaine, too, it is the duration of her stay more than anything else that evokes interest in her. When she disappears without a trace and enquiries are made about her absence from school, it is revealed that she had run away from home to fight in the Spanish Civil War but had been killed when the train in which she had been travelling had been attacked.

The Brodie set had, by now, developed "outside interests" (p. 156). Eunice practiced swimming and diving with a boyfriend. Monica and Mary had taken to community service and went to the slums with groceries. Jenny, discovering her dramatic talent, rehearsed incessantly for the school dramatic society. Rose continued to model for Mr. Lloyd and was occasionally accompanied there by Sandy.

Before finishing school, Mary became a shorthand typist and Jenny joined a school of dramatics. The four others finished school and then went their different ways. Eunice began to learn modern languages but finally became a nurse, Monica took science, Sandy preferred psychology and Rose, who was much sought after by boys, got married soon after.

Sandy's interest in psychology had to do with the chief preoccupation of her life at this stage. She had become highly interested in the painter's mind of Teddy Lloyd and the scheming

mind of Miss Brodie. The latter still revelled in knowing that Lloyd's portraits carried the unmistakable stamp of her appearance but was magnanimous enough to suggest to Sandy that she wanted Rose to take her (Brodie's) place in the artist's heart. It was with shocked surprise that she learnt of the reversal of roles that she had envisaged for Sandy and Rose. It was Sandy who had become Lloyd's lover and it was Rose who was her informant about it.

Sandy was driven by an obsession to understand Lloyd's mind. To do this, she had undertaken to understand his faith in Roman Catholicism. She "extracted his religion as a pith from a husk. Her mind was as full of his religion as a night sky is full of things visible and invisible. She left the man and took his religion and became a nun in the course of time" (p. 165).

Soon after, Sandy learnt from Miss Brodie that the latter regretted having inspired the young Joyce Emily to go to Spain and join the Civil War on the side of General Franco. That Emily was killed before she could complete this mission compounded, in Sandy's eyes, the grim tragedy of the situation and brought about a complete reversal in the high regard that the girl had for Miss Brodie. Understanding that her teacher had overstepped the demands of objectivity and used her influence on an unsuspecting mind, Sandy determined that Miss Brodie no longer deserved to continue teaching at Marcia Blaine. She got down to the self-assigned task of having Miss Brodie dismissed from the school. Through Miss Mackay, the girl put her plan into action. In her perceptive and methodical way, Sandy was able to convince Miss Mackay that Miss Brodie could never be pinned down for her sexual indiscretions. She could, however, be hauled up for her political affiliations that were so clearly fascist.

When Miss Mackay expressed delight at the possibility of her finally ensnaring Miss Brodie, Sandy said she was only interested "in putting a stop to Miss Brodie" (p. 167). Sandy achieved what she wanted. Miss Brodie was forced to retire in 1939 on the grounds that she had been teaching fascism. When occasionally invited by her former students, she would broach the circumstances of her retirement and then try to imagine the identity of her betrayer. Rejected and isolated, Miss Brodie died just after the Second World War, never knowing with certainty the true identity of her betrayer. Sandy, later to become Sister Helena, analyses Brodie's ultimate downfall as the consequence of her political ideology rather than a punishment for her unconventional love life.

In a conversation with Monica, Sister Helena reveals the true object of Miss Brodie's affection and how she never got sexual gratification in her concealed love for Teddy Lloyd. Jenny, during another conversation with Sister Helena, confesses that only Miss Brodie would understand the strange eroticism that filled her being on seeing a stranger in Rome. Eunice, after putting flowers on Miss Brodie's grave, reminisces about their teacher who had been betrayed and forcibly made to retire. Apart from Sandy, who understood and put a stop to the sinister machinations of Brodie, the rest of the Brodie set continued to admire their teacher much after her death.

While acknowledging that Miss Jean Brodie had been the main influence in her life, Sister Helena remarks that "it's only possible to betray where loyalty is due" and asserts that for Miss Brodie loyalty was due and justified "only up to a point" (p. 170). Betrayal came when the teacher was seen by Sandy to have crossed this point.

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## **2.4 LET US SUM UP**

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This is a fairly long Unit in which we get a bird's eye view of Spark's life, her works and a summarised version of the novel. These aspects combine to bring to the fore a number of issues that are discussed in the two Units that follow. You must remember that a summary is not a substitute for the original text, a reading of which is absolutely essential.

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## **2.5 QUESTIONS**

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1. Comment on Spark's prolific diversity as a writer.
2. What arguments would you give in favour of the contention that Miss Brodie is a symbol of non-conformity?

3. What perspectives does the novel offer on education and art? Give illustrations from the text to support your arguments.

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## 2.6 Suggested Reading

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1. Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, London : Constable, 1992.
2. Janet Todd (ed.), *Dictionary of British Women Writers*, London : Routledge, 1989.