

UNIT 4 ANALYSING THE TEXT -2

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit is, in a sense, a continuation of the last one. It takes up for analysis some more issues that arise out of the text. These include the autobiographical aspects to be found within the novel; and we also look at the concepts of faith, morality and fascism that emerge so strongly within the text.

4.1 THE ELEMENTS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark recounts her days at the James Gillespie High School for Girls in Edinburgh. She begins by describing how prosperous tradesmen from the sixteenth century onwards took a keen interest in founding schools in this city. They actually vied with each other in leaving behind their vast fortunes to these institutions, underlining the Scottish idea that education was a privilege to be denied to none. Her own school was established in 1797 by James Gillespie, a snuff merchant, who donated to it a considerable portion of his wealth. Spark acknowledges her debt to Gillespie whose endowments allowed people like her parents to pay moderate fees and yet receive, in return, educational services far beyond what they were paying for.

The author spent twelve years at the school and it is her experiences there that go into the writing of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. The central figure of Miss Brodie in the novel is based on the personality of Miss Christina Kay, one of Spark's favourite teachers. The name Brodie, however, has been borrowed from a young American woman, Charlotte Brodie, who taught the author to read at the age of three. The fictional character has strong affinities with Miss Kay's exhilarating and impressive personality, yet there is a basic difference between the two.



James Gillespie's Girls School, Junior Class, 1930, Muriel Camberg (Spark), 3rd row, 2nd from right; Miss Christina Kay, Centre

Fascinating aspects of her personality are reflected in Miss Brodie. Miss Kay "entered" the author's imagination through gripping accounts of her travels through Europe and Egypt; her admiration for Italian painters like Leonardo Da Vinci, Botticelli, Giotto and Fra Lippo Lippi; her fascination for the cult of Mussolini's Fascisti; her dramatic method of instruction in which "shapes, sculptures, arithmetical problems, linguistic points moved easily around each other"; and her strong views on education which she believed was a "leading out" of what was there already rather than a "putting in".

The fictional Miss Brodie's ideas about education bear a remarkable similarity to the real Miss Kay's perceptions about the same subject. Miss Kay in the classroom constantly endeavoured to relate experience to education and Spark emphasises this not only in her autobiography but also in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* when she writes about how the Brodie set were "vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorised curriculum"

Miss Kay's interdisciplinary approach is reflected not only in Miss Brodie's classroom methods but also in the attitudes that she is shown trying to build up among the Brodie set. Miss Kay ardently attended lectures at the university of Edinburgh and other institutions on such diverse subjects as theology, art, German poetry, health and beauty care, and most of what she absorbed, was shared with her class. In the novel, Miss Brodie follows a similar method. Miss Kay had a "knack of gaining our entire sympathy, whatever her views" writes Spark in *Curriculum Vitae* and she is successfully able to transpose this ability onto Miss Brodie. Within the novel, this particular knack is Miss Brodie's greatest strength and also her greatest weakness. Its positive impact is seen in the girls' diverse interests and individuality, but its sinister aspect is most strongly reflected in the circumstances of Emily Joyce's death. Miss Kay had taught her girls not to be carried away by "crowd- emotions" and this is reflected in the total lack of team spirit among the Brodie set. Along with her good friend, Frances Niven, Muriel Spark was one of Miss Kay's favourite students. Miss Kay often took these girls to the theatre, concerts, films, modern poetic plays and poetry reading sessions by prominent poets, paying for them out of her own pocket. All this was done, writes Spark in her autobiography, because "Miss Kay realised that our parents' interest in our welfare was only marginal cultural". Miss Brodie's attitude reflects the same concerns as she tries to weave her girls into the world of art and culture. Spark particularly recalls their visit to the Empire Theatre to see Anna Pavlova dancing in the ballet "*The Death of the Swan*" and her experience is reflected in the obsessive interest shown by Sandy in Pavlova, the temperamental artiste.

There are, however, very obvious differences between the real and the fictional character. Spark emphasises this in *Curriculum Vitae* :

In a sense Miss Kay was nothing like Miss Brodie...she was far far above and beyond her Brodie counterpart. If she could have met Miss Brodie, Miss Kay would have put the fictional character firmly in her place (p.81).

Miss Brodie's unconventional love-life in the novel did not in any way reflect aspects in Miss Kay's life. Spark makes this categorically clear in her autobiography but, at the same time, she gives her reasons for portraying Miss Brodie torn between Mr. Lloyd, the art master and Mr. Lowther, the singing master.

There would have been no question of a love-affair with the art master, or a sex-affair with the singing master, as in Miss Brodie's life. But children are quick to perceive possibilities, potentialities: in remark, perhaps in some remote context; in a glance, a smile. No, Miss Kay was not literally Miss Brodie, but I think Miss Kay had it in her, unrealised, to be the character I invented.

Spark only saw in Miss Kay latent potentialities of sexual love which she then made so obviously clear in the fictional personality of Miss Brodie. Miss Kay was about fifty years old in 1929 when she taught Spark and the author suggests there had been a man in her teacher's earlier life. The terrible carnage of the war had claimed him and Miss Kay "was of the generation of clever, academically trained women who had lost their sweethearts in the 1914-1918 war". Spark gives her teacher one of the first accolades by quoting John Steinbeck's tribute to great teachers—"a great teacher is a great artist.. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the

medium is the human mind and spirit". By moulding the Brodie set's minds and spirits, the author has succeeded in immortalising her own teacher.

Some other prominent characters within the novel are based on people that the author was acquainted with. Mr. Wishart, Spark's singing master, and Mr. Gordon, the history master, serve as the inspiration and models for the creation of Mr. Lowther. Mr. Lowther's playing with Jenny's curls reflects a trait that he shares with Mr. Gordon, who indulged in a similar practice in class by stroking the young Spark's hair. The author's handsome art master, Arthur Couling, finds his fictional counterpart in Mr. Lloyd. In class, Mr. Couling had smashed a saucer to the ground in order to stop the girls chattering in class and in the novel, Mr. Lloyd is shown resorting to this in order to draw the girls' attention to the subject under discussion.

Spark learnt about the rudiments of sex through her brief friendship with Daphne Porter and the longlasting one with Francis Niven. In the novel, it is in the Sandy-Jenny association that this is reflected. The close rapport of the fictional characters reveals the exceptionally warm friendship that Spark shared with Frances. Their holiday at Crail, a seaside resort, where they completed and buried a jointly written story, is incorporated into the novel when Sandy and Jenny complete an imaginative account of one of Miss Brodie's liaisons and then bury this literary venture in a sandy cave.

The Edinburgh of the 1930s is sketched with sensitivity. When Miss Brodie takes her girls for walks through the city, they are exposed to the harsher realities of life which lie beyond their protective secure homes. The economic depression of the times are reflected in the slums of Old Town, with its long lines of unemployed people waiting for their dole, the rampant alcoholism, the violence and the general air of poverty reflected in the unshod children playing in the cold winds. More than any of the others it is Sandy who sees and responds to these realities that lie outside the ambit of middle-class existence. In later life, she acknowledges the horror she experienced at the squalor she saw on that occasion when she stood before an Edinburgh she had not seen before. As a young girl she had sought escape from the unpleasant experience by going home but later, as a nun, she could respond sensitively to others who came from these impoverished backgrounds.

In *Curriculum Vitae* Muriel Spark is able to recreate the atmosphere and the people she interacted with, especially those at the James Gillespie High School for Girls. After reading her autobiography we can say that much of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is a fictional account of teachers and friends of Spark's childhood. The sense of nostalgia and indebtedness that characters express in the novel is also reiterated in her autobiography where Spark talks about the intelligent men and women who taught her in the prime of their lives and gave her "the benefit of a parallel home life".

4.2 PERSPECTIVES ON FAITH

Politics faded from fiction written during and after the first World War. It was replaced by a greater concentration on some religious and moral issues. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* touches upon both and in Miss Brodie and Sandy are reflected diverse threads of Christianity. The teacher's attitude is related to Calvinism while the student's ideology is steeped in Roman Catholicism. To understand these divergent beliefs we shall look briefly at the doctrines expounded by Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox and understand how their views differ from the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

According to ancient tradition, St. Peter, the chief apostle of Christ founded the Christian Church at Rome. The Bishops of Rome since then have claimed for their office a direct succession from St. Peter and have come to be called Popes. The Pope is the head of the Roman Catholic Church and he resides in the Vatican City in Rome. The Church believes that in matters of faith and morals, the teachings of the church are infallible. This means that they are free from all possibility of error. It thereby follows that when the Pope, speaking in his apostolic capacity, makes a pronouncement in matters of faith and morals, his teaching is also infallible.

The Reformation or birth of Protestantism mark the breakaway from the Roman Catholic Church. This took place in Europe during the sixteenth century. It began in Germany where Martin Luther, a miner's son who had become a priest, preached against the granting of

indulgences by the Pope. Indulgences are pardons given in exchange for money. He drew attention by nailing a protest to the Church door in Wittenberg. He was condemned as a heretic and excommunicated by the Church in Rome. Luther realised he could not reform the existing Catholic Church and he formulated, in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, the basis of a new doctrine that broke away from Roman Catholicism. In England the Reformation started when Henry VIII, in 1534, threw off the authority of the Pope and declared himself Head of the Church. The Reformation became firmly established in England during the reign of Elizabeth I.

John Calvin was a Swiss religious reformer who was greatly influenced by Luther's doctrines. One of the controversial aspects of his teaching was the code of simplicity and austerity which he urged people to follow in both everyday life and church ritual. Calvinism denies the individual free will and sees all events as predestined or predetermined.

John Knox, a Scottish reformer and preacher, furthered the Calvinistic form of Protestantism. His triumph was achieved in 1560 when, by the Treaty of Edinburgh, Papal authority was abolished in Scotland and replaced by the Calvinistic confession of faith drawn up by Knox and his colleagues.

Miss Brodie's religious leanings are distinctly Calvinistic. There is her disapproval of the Church of Rome which she considers to be the "church of superstition" and believes that "only people who did not think for themselves were Roman Catholics". As a thinking individual she distances herself from the Roman Catholic Church and becomes, as Sandy says, "the God of Calvin...who sees the beginning and the end". Imbued with this sense of omnipotence, she sets about ordering her own life and also that of others. Her total lack of guilt in assuming this blurs her moral perceptions. "She was not," writes Spark, "in any doubt, she let everyone know she was in no doubt, that God was on her side whatever her course and so she experienced no difficulty or sense of hypocrisy in worship while at the same time she went to bed with the singing master". The sense of isolation and alienation that she encountered at the end of her life was brought on by a weakened sense of morality which she continues to justify for too long in her life.

Miss Brodie's attitudes to education are also related to Calvinism. She is like Calvin's God, holding sway over the Brodie set and expecting each of them to fulfil her expectations at each step of their lives. She begins in an incongruous manner by adopting a psychological approach. To her students she portrays herself as a victim of the system that thwarts her high ideals by questioning the methods of her teaching. She then seeks to assure them of an "academic" salvation by promising to turn them into the "creme de la creme" among their peers if only they would follow her advice in letter and spirit. Once, having gained the confidence of her six girls, she sets about planning and organising their futures for them. She especially undertakes to run the lives of Rose and Sandy in whom she sees the potential of fulfilling her personal dreams. "It was plain," writes Spark in the novel, "that Miss Brodie wanted Rose with her instinct to start preparing to be Teddy Lloyd's lover, and Sandy with her insight to act as informant on the affair. It was to this end that Rose and Sandy had been chosen as the creme de la creme". Her dreams, however, are rudely shattered when just the opposite happens.

Miss Brodie lives by personal insight and experience rather than by any theory and doctrine and Spark suggests that the Catholic Church was a suitable channel for normalising her. If Miss Brodie had lived within the parameters of doctrine and community, she might have avoided the pitfalls of personal judgement. Her vital personal energy could have been channelised in better directions rather than in planting explosive ideas in the minds of her naive followers. When Sandy perceives the devastating effect of Miss Brodie's imposition of personal ideology and enthusiasm, she understands the suffocating potential of her teacher. She is alarmed by the images on Lloyd's canvases where all girls resemble Miss Brodie, and is especially perturbed to hear of the circumstances of Emily Joyce's death. Sandy senses that Miss Brodie "has elected herself to grace" and saw her as a symbol of power that ruled the lives of lesser beings. Miss Brodie's self-righteousness and lack of humility irritate Sandy who sees "an excessive lack of guilt" in her teacher. In later years, when Sandy read John Calvin, she found it hard to reconcile to his doctrine in which the human soul was blindly enslaved to sin and gave people "an enormous sense of joy and salvation" so that "their surprise at the end might be nastier". Calvinism's deterministic streak is rejected by Sandy in favour of the more redemptive Roman Catholicism. She visualises Miss Brodie as a Calvinistic presence designing and determining the future of innocent minds and vows to put

a stop to it. She achieves this end but at the cost of personal guilt that flays her constantly and makes her uneasy as a nun. The author's sympathies, however, lie with Sandy. When Sandy recovers from her place of moral righteousness and looks back, she realises that Miss Brodie's defective sense of self-righteousness had not been without its beneficent and enlarging aspects.

Like Sandy, Muriel Spark personally rejects the determinism of Calvin and Knox in favour of the inclusiveness that she finds in orthodox Catholicism. Spark values seeing the truth and that too without sentimentality. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, humbug and falsehood become targets of her denunciation.

4.3 THE ISSUE OF MORALITY

Moral disturbance and degeneracy characterise Spark's vision in the novel. Moral disarray is conveyed through the presentation of Miss Brodie. She tries to wield moral or psychological power and control over the destinies of others but her religious sensibility fails to provide her with a clear moral perspective. By believing that "God was on her side", Brodie gives herself a false metaphysical aura and justifies the excesses in her life. Her success lies in influencing her girls to such an extent that she begins to see her actions lying "outside the context of right and wrong" and her blurred moral perspectives are thus transferred to the girls. It takes the sensitivity of Sandy to expose us to the dangerously destructive aspect of her psychological power over people.

At one point the author intervenes openly to state that only the Roman Catholic Church could accommodate Miss Brodie's extreme temperament. "It could have embraced, even while it disciplined, her soaring and diving spirit, and it even "might have normalised her". Miss Brodie, however, is never freed from her illusion that her own judgement would provide her with an absolute truth and this belief epitomises her stunted ethical outlook. This narrowness of view is highlighted through the attitudes of Sandy and Jenny, who after being freed from her influence, understand and are overcome by the boundless possibilities of life. When Jenny is attracted by a man in Rome, "the concise happening filled her with astonishment whenever it came to mind in later days ... the sense of the hidden possibilities in all things". When Sandy becomes a Catholic, her mind is as "full of religion as a night sky is full of things visible and invisible". The girls' feelings not only negate Miss Brodie's egocentric ideas of herself but also emphasise the difference between Miss Brodie and Sandy. The latter emerges as the most imaginative and most moral of the Brodie set, repeatedly envisaging life around herself in terms of fiction and romance. Her literary pursuits in documenting Miss Brodie's love life is an illustration of this. Sandy is torn between ethics and imagination and resolves this internal conflict by giving weightage to ethics. Her moral leanings are further highlighted through her psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception called "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace."

Though seeming to represent diverse moral positions, Miss Brodie and Sandy are ironically, involved in a common pursuit—the personal transfiguration of the commonplace. Miss Brodie is involved in shaping the lives of her set while Sandy is preoccupied with art and imagination. Through these characters, Spark is involved not only in examining the relations between moral responsibility and the transforming imagination but is also reiterating the connections between art, freedom and destiny.

4.4 THE ISSUE OF FASCISM

Spark's scrutiny of moral concerns brings to the fore the struggle between good and evil. Evil is shown to be the attempt to take over human beings and we see it in Brodie's exercise of moral and psychological power. Sandy's imaginative way of thinking makes her perceive that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie's "fascisti ... all knit together for her need". She is able to understand why Miss Brodie disapproves of the Girl Guides who she imagines are a threat to her hold over the Brodie set. Brodie sees them as a rival fascisti whom she cannot tolerate. Sandy's perceptions do not result in aversion for Miss Brodie when she is young. This impression, however, remains in her subconscious and surfaces before her decision to betray her teacher.

Miss Brodie's concept of education is ostensibly "a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul" but she dominates the girls rather than responding to their innate gifts. The falsehood of her claims is revealed in their documented fantasies and in their minds which are filled with her preoccupations. She believes in enriching the lives of her students but, paradoxically, is resentful of their forming any attachment with other mistresses in school. This possessive attitude, along with her scorn for girls opting for the modern side (rather than the classical) in Senior School, show her in a negative light. Like Adolf Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels, Miss Brodie fires the imagination rather than the intellect. She manages to mystify rather than inform. Her admiration for figures like Mussolini and Hitler further supplement her image as an ideologue of fascism. We cannot help comparing her to these men with whom she shares a sinisterly powerful influence. Her betrayal and defeat at the end, therefore, becomes inevitable. It symbolises the origin of evil within human beings, especially its inherent presence within civilised and educated people, and its close link with the individual will. The defeat of fascism and Miss Brodie go together, placing *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* within the historical space that it seeks to portray.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

This Unit, along with the previous one, examines a number of issues that arise from the text. After going through both the Units, we are in a position to identify and appreciate the different issues that lie hidden within the narrative.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. In what respects can *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* be called an autobiographical novel?
2. Write a note on the perspectives that the novel offers on faith and morality.
3. Discuss how Miss Brodie symbolises Fascism in the novel.

4.7 SUGGESTED READING

1. James Acheson (ed.), *The British and Irish Novel since 1960*, New York : St. Martin's Press, 1991