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## UNIT 3 ANALYSING THE TEXT -1

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit we study different aspects of the author's technique of writing. We look at her style in terms of her treatment of plot and time sequence; we also assess her manner of characterisation.

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### 3.1 SPARK'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

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Technical aspects of the narrative technique are the focus in this section.

#### 3.1.1 The Brevity of Art

Muriel Spark is a writer who greatly values brevity in art. In her writings, therefore, she focuses on a small group of characters who have some shared interest. Though this tendency limits the plot as well as the activities of characters, it is ideal for bringing out "some kind of truth" that Spark believes must emerge out of fiction. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* she portrays a group of six young school girls who interact in very close proximity with their teacher, Miss Brodie. The reader is subtly invited to assess Miss Brodie as a woman in her "prime", and as a person who endeavours to hone her favourite students into the "creme de la creme" of society. From the interaction of the girls with their teacher emerges the inexplicable and fatalistic hold that Miss Brodie exercises over the Brodie set. It is her tendency of swaying young impressionable minds to unethical ends that is put to a stop by one of the more perceptive of her students.

#### 3.1.2 Narrative-within-Narrative

Within the main narrative, two of Miss Brodie's girls, Sandy and Jenny, create another narrative. Theirs is a fictional account of Miss Brodie's love-life and is written in the style of Walter Scott and R.L. Stevenson, whose works the girls have been reading. This pattern of narrative-within-narrative admirably conveys the psychology of young girls exposed to romantic fiction, ignorant and curious about sex and exulting in the melodramatic. First Sandy and Jenny together compile "The Mountain Eyrie", the story of Miss Brodie's jilted lover who holds these two authors to ransom in order to win back the affections of Jean Brodie. After some time they pool together their literary talents and complete a "love correspondence" between Miss Brodie and Mr. Lowther, the singing master. Sandy the more imaginative of the two, often imagines herself in romantic interludes in *Kidnapped* or in *Jane Eyre*.

#### 3.1.3 The Time Sequence

Chronology and the time sequence are consciously rejected by the author. The omniscient narrator, knowing all about the past, present and future of the protagonists, deftly handles the time phases by practicing a kind of *flash forward* technique. This involves a mode of

narration that first describes how the protagonists shape up in their adulthood and the novel, at the very outset, describes how each of the Brodie girls turned out in the future.

Characters in the novel can be understood better if we perceive their future realities through the eyes of the novelist. Spark often resorts to presenting insightful flashes that not only look forward to the future but also help us in better comprehending the present in the novel. The narrative is interspersed with many an account in which the present is understood more clearly through events that materialised in the future.

At the very outset, Spark recounts the highly individualistic temperaments and tendencies of the Brodie set in Senior School. These sixteen year olds, studying in the fourth form, are characterised by attitudes of non-conformity. This trait is symbolised in their determination to wear their school hats in every manner but the proper one. Each of the six has her own area of interest and possesses individual qualities which are acknowledged in later life. Miss Brodie, on the other hand, represents and symbolises progressive education which is not confined to the classroom. She invariably shares her personal experiences with her favourite girls and often exposes them to life's realities by taking them for walks through sections of Edinburgh forbidden by parents or to museums and operas to appreciate art and culture.

It is, thus, made abundantly clear at the beginning that the novel deals with the theme of non-conformity, specifically the breaking away from the traditional methods of education. We, as readers, are prepared to view the Brodie set as a distinct unit, different from the other students, and Miss Brodie, their guide and mentor, as a fiercely independent and individualistic woman.

The denouement of the novel can be understood better if we look at it through the eyes of Sandy, one of the central figures in the story. She is sensitive and perceptive about people and situations and is able to sense, even as a very young girl, Miss Brodie's mesmeric hold over some of her students. Sandy also sees herself liberating them from their teacher's sinister machinations. Her courage, confidence and defiance are apparent when she is successfully able to negate Miss Brodie's carefully laid-out plans. It is she who becomes Mr Lloyd's lover and relegates the beautiful Rose to being a mere painter's model. Her betrayal of Miss Brodie is a vindication of her ability to assess situations and mete out justice.

The dull, clumsy and incompetent Mary Macgregor dies tragically in a hotel fire as she can only run from one end of a smoky corridor to another. Her helpless, vapid mind, which is always at a loss during crises, lets her down not only in death but also in life. At school, Mary can only scream helplessly while the rest of the class completes an experiment with magnesium flares. Her terror while others work symbolically foreshadows her death. We are able to understand Mary, the schoolgirl, better by encountering her first as an adult blindly retracing her steps in the corridor rather than opening nearby doors to seek escape. By creating a parallel situation in this manner, Spark is able to highlight the character of Mary as well as to create an extra dimension in the narrative texture.

The novel opens with the Brodie set as sixteen-year-olds, chatting self-consciously with some school boys. It then describes the special aptitudes of each of the girls before plunging back to their past, six years before, when they had first been put in the charge of Miss Brodie. From then on there is a constant flux in terms of the time sequence as the narrative flits between the protagonists' immediate past and their distant futures. By first presenting the future and then interconnecting it to the past, Muriel Spark gives us a clearer picture of character and situation, helping us to formulate our comprehension and response to the story.

Like most of Muriel Spark's works, this novel is written in the third person and focuses on the views held by the central figures, Miss Brodie and Sandy. Through them the author accentuates the contradictions and, later, the conflicts that arise when both perceive differently the role that a teacher should and does play in the moulding of pupils. Both represent different versions of similar experience and the unresolved conflict that results, gives the novel shades of the *nouveau roman*. Miss Brodie derives pleasure, power and boundless confidence from the fact that her favourite students were "hers for life" while Sandy revels in weakening and finally shattering the egocentricism of her teacher. This clash between their two divergent ideologies results in Sandy exposing Miss Brodie's fascistic tendencies to the Headmistress.

The plot revolves round a small group of characters comprising Miss Brodie, her special set of girls, Mr Lloyd, the art master, and Mr. Lowther, the singing teacher. The action within the novel is limited and restricted to the intermingling of these few characters. The central thematic concern, around which the action takes place, has to do with the identification of fraud and humbug that Miss Brodie exercises. We, as readers, are lured into the world of Marcia Blaine School which has one teacher, Miss Brodie, standing apart from the rest of the staff. It is the story of Miss Brodie and her brood that Muriel Spark chooses to describe. Out of all the girls in her class, Miss Brodie is shown to share special affinities with six of them. She grooms them in her own special way, which is radically different from the orthodox formal education imparted in the classroom. Miss Brodie has the unusual tendency of portraying herself in the role of a martyr who, despite the staff's hostility, has dedicated the best years of her life to the experiential enrichment of her students. By constantly harping upon her undeclared war with Miss Mackay, the Headmistress, over her unconventional methods of teaching, Miss Brodie wins the sympathy and the unwavering loyalty of her set. They look upon her as an unusual adult who delights in breaking conventions by describing to them her traumatic love-life, her sensitivity to art and music, her defiance of social norms and her glorious dreams of moulding their destinies in the future. As time passes, the girls build a protective halo around her and Miss Brodie exults in the knowledge that her girls will never let her down by reporting her bohemian lifestyle to the school authorities.

She does, however, practice a measure of caution when she falls in love with Mr.Lloyd. Though seen being kissed by him, she never acknowledges the true nature of her feelings for him till as long as her girls are in school. In fact, to camouflage her feelings, she takes to living with Mr.Lowther and faces the ignominy of him jilting her and marrying Miss Lockhart, the science teacher. Much later in life, when Miss Brodie had been forcibly retired and was terminally ill, did she acknowledge to the now adult Brodie set the true nature of her feelings for Mr.Lloyd.

Out of all her proteges, it is the ugly Sandy who is able to perceive hidden aspects of Miss Brodie's personality. It is she who looks through Mr.Lloyd's portraits and identifies striking similarities in all of them. No matter who the model, all his portraits end up in faces that bear a remarkable resemblance to Miss Brodie. This discovery reinforces her suspicions regarding the true nature of her teacher's affection and establishes the fraud and humbug that Miss Brodie indulges in. Sandy understands that all along, the Brodie set had been deceived into believing Miss Brodie's grand passion for Mr.Lowther and that it was Mr.Lloyd who really had her heart.

From then onwards, Sandy decides that she will not always fall in line with Miss Brodie's future plans regarding the girls. She begins by overturning Miss Brodie's cherished dreams of inducing Rose to be Mr.Lloyd's lover and Sandy, with her insight, to be her informant on the affair. As it turned out, it was Sandy who became the art master's lover and Rose who carried back the information about the affair. Sandy's interest in Miss Brodie's personality continues unabated after this. She begins to see Brodie in a negative light, as a being who equates herself with God and Providence and views herself as a deity that presides over the lives of others.

Shortly afterwards Miss Brodie mentions in passing that she regretted urging Joyce Emily, another of her students, to go and fight for General Franco in the Spanish Civil War. This conversation is the moment of revelation for Sandy as she realises that Miss Brodie is morally responsible for bringing about the death of Emily Joyce. By arousing the passion of revolutionary zeal in a young inexperienced schoolgirl, Miss Brodie had, as usual, allowed her ideology to overrule any pragmatism. She had encouraged Emily Joyce to join in a war but the young girl died in a train crash on the way to the battlefield. Sandy, on hearing this information decides that now Miss Brodie was too dangerous to be allowed to continue as a teacher moulding young minds.

Sandy is the only one who sees in Miss Brodie's revolutionary methods and ideology a deliberate attempt to legitimise the immoral and fraudulent. Determined to put a stop to this, Sandy betrays Miss Brodie by informing Miss Mackay about her fascination for fascism. In

an era where seeds were being planted for the second World War and Mussolini and Hitler were being perceived as essential evils, Sandy's charge sticks and Miss Brodie is forced to retire. Till the end of her life, Miss Brodie is left to ruminate over the identity of her betrayer whom she realises must be one of the Brodie set. Sandy, thus, completes her role as the agent who first perceives and then puts a stop to misleading propaganda wrought upon innocent minds. Miss Brodie's negative impulses and the abuse of power brings about her ultimate downfall.

Miss Brodie embodies the central concern of Murial Spark's early fiction which always takes up some form of conflict. In the novel it can be discerned in the tension between conventional doctrines and progressive methods of education. The resolution of the conflict emerges at the climax when a character's moral awakening helps him/her in evaluating the authenticity of the conflicting perspectives provided by the other characters.

### 3.1.5 Characterisation

As her early novels seek to portray psychological and moral growth, Spark's characters, we find, are interiorised. This means that they are involved in a search for a self that accommodates both personal fulfillment and political or social claims. These characters are usually guided by personal obsessions that turn their lives into channels of self-righteous imagination and bring about their destruction.

Miss Brodie is one such character. As an eccentric spinster and school teacher, she has made a fine art out of private judgement of character and specialises in organising the lives of the Brodie set according to her own insights. She negates and scoffs at any inculcation of the team spirit which, in her eyes, contravenes individual freedom. She thinks that as far as her proteges are concerned, she is "Providence" who can see their "beginning and end." Her indomitable personality resists all those who question her unorthodox methods. This impression of her power is also carried by her pupils who are unquestioning and uncritical, absorbing all that she says. In fact they go to the extent of being hostile to all who intrude in the classroom and seem to challenge the ways of Miss Brodie.

She derives her power from two sources. One emanates from those parents who could be trusted "not to lodge complaints about the more advanced and seditious aspects of her educational policy." The other was the personal equation that she shares with the Brodie set. Where their parents hesitated to take them, Miss Brodie was a willing escort. She initiated them into the world of art by telling them of the feats of Italian Renaissance painters. They learnt to appreciate not only operas but also understood the temperament of devoted artists like Anna Pavlova and Sybil Thorndike. By inviting them for meals and walks, Miss Brodie inculcated in the girls a sense of indebtedness which she used to her advantage whenever there was a confrontation with school authorities. In moments of crisis, she counted on their moral support and her clique becomes her greatest source of self-protection.

The devastating aspect of Miss Brodie's hold over the girls is seen in her machinations and manipulations regarding the future of especially two girls—Rose and Sandy. She oversteps the limits when she is seen manipulating situations in order to make Rose Mr. Lloyd's lover. She identifies Rose's "instinct" as the quality that would particularly appeal to the art master. Then she tries to convince Sandy that, with her insight, Sandy would be the ideal informant on the Lloyd-Rose liaison. It is Sandy who refuses to oblige and thwarts the teacher's plan.

Miss Brodie's relationship with Mr. Lowther also cannot stand the test of time. It starts on a note of deceit and fraud as Mr. Lowther is only a smokescreen to camouflage Miss Brodie's passion for Mr. Lloyd. She has her girls believe that she is only interested in restoring him back to the pink of health after going through a domestic upheaval that began with the departure of his housekeeper and the continued inefficiency by her replacement, the Kerr sisters. She keeps Mr. Lowther on tenterhooks and then begins to treat him with indifference, believing all the while that she could marry him whenever she pleased. And when he gets engaged to Miss Lockhart, the science mistress, there is a great sense of shock and humiliation.

Miss Brodie's ideology also lets her down at a time when war clouds are gathering over Europe for a second time. Her admiration for fascism's symbols like Mussolini and Hitler

strike a discordant and false note about her in people's minds. It is these beliefs that make it easy for Sandy to betray her.

Miss Brodie's own fascistic leanings can be seen in her endeavour to cultivate and thrust her own passions on the minds of her special girls. She looks upon the Girl Guides as a rival group out to disband the Brodie set and makes clear her dislike and suspicion of them. She fails to understand that she is indulging herself at the expense of the freedom of others. She commits the error of playing God, assuming that everyone she chooses will fall under her control. This is the threatening aspect of her personality which sums up her abuse of power. Ultimately she is reduced to a pathetic creature who loses her power and cannot understand why those very individuals whom she had nurtured so carefully, let her down. She herself becomes the most damaged victim of her misplaced confidence. The pathos of her downfall and the importance of her defeat is conveyed through a description of her sitting "shrivelled and betrayed in her long preserved dark musquash coat and her blind groping for the real identity of her betrayer".

Another character who exhibits propensities of psychological and moral growth is Sandy. She, like, Miss Brodie, is involved in a search for self which leads her through many diverse experiences and culminates in her taking the vows of a nun. Sandy, is, however, the foil created by Spark to offset Brodie. She is seen to undertake a personal mission that initially questions, then defies, and ultimately betrays Miss Brodie for what she is. From the very outset, Sandy begins to investigate Miss Brodie's possible weak points and she relies on her experience, images and conscience to help her in this quest. From the very beginning she only tentatively assents to Miss Brodie's ideology and doctrine. She initially disrupts class by getting the dull Mary to give an incorrect answer; walks with her head bent back looking at the ceiling and telling Miss Brodie that she is imitating the great actress Sybil Thorndike; and deliberately chooses to stay away from Miss Brodie's tea party after a walk through the Edinburgh slums. All this is done to gauge Miss Brodie's reactions to subtle forms of defiance and Sandy is often told that one day she "will go too far" by exceeding the limits given by the teacher to her girls. With the passage of time, Sandy's experience of Miss Brodie's domination over the girls is supplemented by images that reinforce her opinion. When Jenny reports seeing Miss Brodie being kissed by Mr. Lloyd in the art room after school, Sandy begins to see the sexual aspect of Miss Brodie's love life. What until then had been confined to the romanticised tales that she and Jenny wrote, is confirmed in Sandy's mind. Proof of it comes later when she is the only one in the Brodie set who is able to identify the image of the teacher in any figure that Mr. Lloyd claims to paint. Sandy, thus, understands that Miss Brodie's passion and sexual yearning for the married art teacher could never be fulfilled. It was, as a result, transferred to Mr. Lowther with whom she only played a charade of love.

With Emily Joyce's tragic death while the girl was on the way to fight for General Franco in the Spanish Civil War, Sandy's conscience is jolted into action. Her tentative assent to Miss Brodie's doctrine is transformed to dissent. She reveals Brodie's fascist views to Miss Mackay and her action constitutes authorial agreement with the character's appraisal. Spark allies herself in some aspects with Sandy, who then enters a convent and publishes a psychological treatise called *The Transfiguration of The Commonplace*. Though Sandy is seen to have meted out justice, she herself is not a figure totally redeemed. In too many ways she bears an interior resemblance to Miss Brodie and we are made to see her anxieties as a nun. Her sense of personal guilt and revenge hound her, and are reflected in her picture as Sister Helena, clutching the bars of the convent enclosure and looking out at a world that seems to have passed her by.

At the fag end of their lives, both Miss Brodie and Sandy are figures of isolation. Miss Brodie is not burdened by the guilt of betrayal; she is only shaken by the knowledge that she has been betrayed and she dies never knowing the true reasons for her downfall. Sandy, as Sister Helena, lives and achieves fame but is always aware of cruelly betraying a woman to whom she could never recount the past. Both women simultaneously arouse our compassion and outrage. They stand out as figures who dared to defy conventions in personal and public life. Their weakness lies in them being unable to perceive and counter their destructive capabilities.

In contrast to the centrality of Miss Brodie and Sandy, the other characters are peripheral. They only serve to highlight the interaction between the two main protagonists. The girls in the Brodie set—Monica Douglas, Rose Stanley, Eunice Gardiner, Jenny Gray and Mary

Macgregor— symbolically emphasise the strength of Miss Brodie's personality. They are figures who represent flexibility and conformity to Miss Brodie's visions of them in the future. They do have resilience or the spirit to challenge her and remain her docile admirers even in adulthood. Like their mentor, they can only speculate about the identity of the person who betrayed Miss Brodie and brought about her embarrassing displacement from the school.

Mr. Lloyd the art master and Mr. Lowther, the singing teacher, are the only two males that we encounter directly in the text. They are shown to be the satellites of Miss Brodie who only serve to fulfill her emotional and physical needs. She begins by interacting with them as man-to-man. Her attitude, however, is not taken in the same light by them. They look upon her first as a woman and then as anything else. This naturally arouses a rivalry between them and it is to Mr. Lloyd that she is inclined. Being a married man, Mr. Lloyd can only indulge in clandestine meetings, one of which is witnessed by Sandy and Jenny. Till the end, Miss Brodie and Lloyd nurture their affection but are never open about it. It is only Sandy who perceives it in Mr. Lloyd's portraits and in Miss Brodie's questions whenever Sandy visits the Lloyd household. Mr. Lowther serves to camouflage Miss Brodie's true affection and slowly recedes out of Miss Brodie's life. In her personal life as well she is thwarted by social concerns. She can never publicly display her true affections which would be seen in an adulterous light. Her intimacy with Mr. Lowther is known but as there is never any material evidence, Miss Brodie only escapes with social censure.

Contrasted with the central figures, the other personalities seem insipid and uninspiring. They are deliberately portrayed in this manner to highlight the strength, and, thereby, the weaknesses of Miss Brodie and Sandy. This technique also serves to highlight the inherent clash of perceptions that builds up between the two. Spark's manner of characterisation is both witty and sardonic, and it conveys the author's capacity to observe and analyse different levels of human relationships.

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### 3.2 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit we have discussed the technical aspects of Spark's novel. We notice how she successfully restricts the plot and introduces an unusual framework of time. We also read about the plot construction and her mode of characterisation.

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### 3.3 QUESTIONS

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1. Critically assess the technical proficiency of Muriel Spark with reference to her handling of the narrative-within-narrative, the mixing up of time sequence, versions of shared experience and brevity.
2. Write a note on how Spark conceives the plot in order to present the central concern of the novel.
3. The major characters in the novel reflect different aspects of moral and psychological growth. Illustrate with examples from the text.

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### 3.4 SUGGESTED READING

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1. Judy Sproxton, *The Women of Muriel Spark*, London : Constable, 1992.
2. Thomas F. Staley (ed.), *Twentieth Century Women Novelists*, Macmillan, 1992.
3. Robert E. Hosmer (ed.), *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies*, Macmillan, 1993.