

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

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## **OF DEATH AND DISCOVERY**

OF DEATH AND DISCOVERY : THE PRIME OF MISS  
JEAN BRODIE ; THE GIRLS OF SLENDER MEANS

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Several of Muriel Spark's novels are linked together by the tightly knit communities they uphold : the pilgrim centre in The Comforters, the island in Robinson, the geriatric ward in Memento Mori, the group belonging to Wider Infinity in The Bachelors. Alan Bold writing about The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie says :

"Nowhere in Spark's output is the microcosmic world-within-a-world scenario more skilfully realized than in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961), arguably her masterpiece." [1]

Placed in Edinburgh, with most of its action restricted to the nineteen-thirties, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie tells the story of a teacher, Jean Brodie: "one of the great character-creations of modern fiction" [2]. Teaching at Marcia Blaine School for Girls, Jean Brodie has her own methods of teachings, and gathers around her a group of students, the "Brodie set" [3], what she calls the "creme de la creme" [4]. She even boasts, "Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life" [5], thus revealing her possessiveness. There is an absurd combination of ideals present in Miss Brodie. She admires Mussolini's fascist Italy yet deplores the team-spirit of the Girl Guides:

"Perhaps the Guides were too much a rival fascisti, and Miss Jean Brodie could not bear it." [6]

She loves anything Mediterranean especially Italian, but fears the Roman Catholic church:

"Her disapproval of the Church of Rome was based on her assertions that it was a church of superstition, and that only people who did not want to think for themselves were Roman Catholics." [7]

She encourages the sense of individuality amongst the girls she teaches but will not allow them to speak their minds:

" 'Who is the greatest Italian painter?'  
'Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie.'  
'That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite.'" [8]

She articulates the doctrine of romantic love but denies herself the love of the romantic artist Teddy Lloyd because he is married with children. Yet she sees nothing wrong in sharing the bed of the dreary Gordon Lowther, the music teacher.

Disliked by her fellow teachers, who resent her advanced methods, Miss Brodie nevertheless encourages her group of schoolgirls to become her surrogates. At the beginning of the book, each of the girls is said to be "famous" [9] for something: Monica Douglas, famous for mathematics; Eunice Gardner, famous for gymnastics and swimming; Jenny Gray, famous for being the prettiest and most graceful of the set; Sandy Stranger, who most resembles Jean Brodie, famous for her vowel sounds and notorious for her small, beady eyes.

Miss Brodie inspires Joyce Emily Hammond, with a record of delinquency, to go to Spain to fight for Franco, where unfortunately she loses her life. She attempts to ease Rose

Stanley into Lloyd's bed but fails in the process. Ultimately it is Sandy who does so, while Miss Brodie is enthusiastically touring Hitler's Germany, in the summer of 1938.

Jean Brodie's world is one of make-believe. Her remark, "Hitler was rather naughty"[10], shows her complete blindness to political and historical realities. Her method of teaching is her own way of revolting against the bourgeois society. In a similar fashion, Sandy Stranger manufactures her own forms of fantasy, for instance, she and Jenny compose a romantic novel about Miss Brodie. But as they mature they discard their fantasies unlike Miss Brodie, who continues to inhabit her own fantasies. She rewrites the story of her first love to fit the circumstances of her subsequent attachments with Lloyd and Lowther.

Soon Sandy begins to understand Miss Brodie's dual personality. According to Trevor Royle :

"The realization that Jean Brodie can be two people, radical teacher with the best interests of her pupils at heart, and immoral leader willing to sacrifice them in her own interests, becomes the novel's main theme, and it is through Sandy that we perceive it." [11]

David Lodge calls Sandy "the principal point-of-view character"[12] and says :

"Not only do we see most of the action through her eyes, but many of the authorial comments are in effect comments upon Sandy and her perceptions." [13]

Sandy, the most reflective of the disciples, realizes that her leader is flawed by fanaticism. She discovers that Miss

Brodie had encouraged Joyce Emily's fatal expedition to Spain. She realizes that she can use her authority, as a member of the set and as the closest confidante of Miss Brodie, for good or for evil. She chooses the path of betrayal to break Miss Brodie. Her rejection of her teacher is personal. She cannot tolerate Miss Brodie's attempt to run the lives of her students. Sandy says to the headmistress, Miss Mackay, who disapproves of the teacher : "I am not really interested in world affairs ... only in putting a stop to Miss Brodie." [14]

Later in an epistle to Miss Brodie (who never learns for certain her betrayer's identity), insists that there was no betrayal : "If you did not betray us it is impossible that you could have been betrayed by us. The word betrayed does not apply." [15] Afterwards talking to Monica, she says :

" 'It's only possible to betray where loyalty is due.'  
'Well, wasn't it due to Miss Brodie?'  
'Only up to a point,' said Sandy." [16]

For Sandy, Miss Brodie's delusion of holding omnipotent sway over other people's destinies is well beyond that point, according to David Lodge. There are some undesirable qualities as a teacher in Miss Brodie. She is extravagantly overbearing and tyrannical. She is also extraordinarily egocentric:

" 'You girls are my vocation...I am dedicated to you in my prime.' "[17]

" 'These are the years of my prime.You are benefiting by my prime.' "[18]

Earlier Miss Brodie had contrasted her own educational theory with that of the headmistress saying that she tried to

lead out the potentialities of her pupils, not to pour stuff into them. Throughout her days in the school, she has to struggle with Miss Mackay's jealousy, yet she is confident of her ability to outwit the headmistress's machinations -- her plot to rid her staff of the progressive and unpliant Jean Brodie. Confidently Miss Brodie tells her girls: " I do not think ever to be betrayed" [19], but later she expresses her puzzlement:

" 'nobody could prove what was between Gordon Lowther and myself. It was never proved. It was not on those grounds that I was betrayed. I should like to know who betrayed me. It is incredible that it should have been one of my own girls.' " [20]

A few weeks before her death, Miss Brodie learns of Sandy's conversion to Roman Catholicism and her entry into a convent. It is only then that she begins to suspect the truth regarding her betrayal :

" 'What a waste. That is not the sort of dedication I meant. Do you think she has done this to annoy me? I begin to wonder if it was not Sandy who betrayed me.' " [21]

In spite of all her failings, Jean Brodie is a charismatic teacher who leaves an indelible mark on her pupils. Mary Macgregor, who had been humiliated by Miss Brodie in school, regards her teacher, years later, with affection. Whenever she thought back to see if she had ever been really happy in her life: "it occurred to her then that the first years with Miss Brodie, sitting listening to all those stories and opinions which had nothing to do with the ordinary world, had been the happiest time of her life." [22]

We are also told about Eunice Gardener who had been reprimanded by Miss Brodie during her schooldays, but who, as a married woman tells her husband that she wishes to go and visit Miss Brodie's grave:

" 'Who was Miss Brodie?'  
'A teacher of mine, she was full of culture. She was an Edinburgh Festival all on her own. She used to give us teas at her flat and tell us about her prime.' "[23]

But of course it is Sandy, the betrayer of Miss Brodie, who has the last words for her teacher. Years after, when Sandy has become a nun, having received the gift of religion from Teddy Lloyd and is famous for her book on psychology, she accepts the fact that Miss Brodie's influence has shaped her life. On being questioned by an admirer of her treatise :

" 'What were the main influences of your school days, Sister Helena? Were they literary or political or personal? Was it Calvinism?'  
Sandy said: 'There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime.'" [24]

Muriel Spark has used many incidents of her own school days at James Gillespie's High School for Girls in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. Her teacher Miss Christina Kay had made a lasting impression on Spark. She had, we are told, fallen into her hands at the tender age of eleven. Of her teacher, Spark says :

"Little did she know, little did I know, that she bore within her the seeds of the future Miss Jean Brodie, the main character in my novel." [25]

In her autobiography, Curriculum Vitae, she writes that though Miss Kay was nothing like Miss Brodie, "yet no pupil of Miss Kay's has failed to recognize her, with joy and great nostal-

gia, in the shape of Miss Jean Brodie in her prime." [26]

Throughout the novel there are instances of flashbacks and flashforwards which make us aware of Miss Brodie's influence on the girls in their adult life simultaneously with their relationship as teacher and pupils. There is no doubt about the fact that Miss Brodie was a stimulating teacher and moments with the girls reveal it very distinctly. To quote Peter Kemp :

"A novel in whose genesis memory has obviously been a potent factor, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is the product of 'an exile in heart and mind - cautious, affectionate, critical': and this equally applies to Mrs Spark's next book, The Girls of Slender Means." [27]

As in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, the storyline of The Girls of Slender Means is one of great simplicity, though "partly a work of lovingly detailed reconstruction" [28]. It also resembles its immediate predecessor in its mainly female character list. The novel begins and ends with the words "Long ago in 1945" [29]. This kind of beginning "establishes a sense of temporal distance from the narrative present." [30]

The action takes place in and near a women's hostel, the May of Teck Club. Most of the characters are girls or older women living there and their "slender means" [31] suggest the nun-like poverty in which they live in a country impoverished by the war. But their spirit is able to transcend the problems of poverty (rationing and official austerity) and the menace of wartime conditions, thus enabling them to create a world of their own.

When a publisher's wife, visiting the hostel remarks that she loves the May of Teck Club because it reminds her of being back in school, she is not far from truth. The characters are presented in a way which is reminiscent of a story for schoolgirls. The residents are portrayed with charm and arouse the reader's interest. They include Joanna Childe, a rector's daughter, who is training to be a teacher of elocution. We are told that she is passionately fond of poetry; Paulina Fox, a mentally unbalanced girl who puts on a long dress and disappears every evening, returning to say she had been dining with Jack Buchanan, the popular musical comedy star of the period. Jane Wright is a fat but homely girl, who has "intellectual glamour"[32], as the other girls call it. She works for a publisher and also claims that she is engaged in "brainwork"[33]. This largely involves writing letters to famous writers in the name of some invented character who is calculated to appeal to each. Thus Jane makes extra money by eliciting holograph responses from these writers.

There are several others including Selina Redwood, a beauty much preoccupied with her own elegance and poise. One of the few male characters is Nicholas Farrington, a frequent visitor to the club, who is a bisexual poet and anarchist.

Norman Page calls the novel "close knit, tightly written" where "nothing is wasted or superfluous"[34]. He goes on to say:

"Under the intense light shed by this short, scrupulously thrifty narrative, the banal lives of a rather ordinary group of characters at a period of history when life in England was drab and comfortless take on a kind of radiance." [35]

The narrative opens with a description of wartime Kensington and relates how the girls of slender means looked out of their windows from the May of Teck Club, their eyes "giving out an eager-spirited light" [36]. After an account of the climate and personalities in the hostel, we are introduced to Nicholas Farrington. He is considered by Jane to be one of her "more presentable" [37] friends, shy and good-looking, and reputedly writing something. Nicholas's social charm really interests Jane more than his intellectual aspirations. She proudly takes him to meet the girls at the May of Teck. Nicholas is struck especially by the poised and beautiful Selina Redwood and soon Nicholas is having an affair with her. To him, the May of Teck Club, which accommodates the girls, is "a miniature expression of a free society... a community held together by the graceful attributes of a common poverty." [38]

Nicholas has written a book called *The Sabbath Notebooks* which tells us that he has a passionate interest in the fabric of society but that he insists on seeing this fabric in terms of human emotional reactions. In the May of Teck Club he witnesses the existence of people in an institution without power where they are led by their hearts alone. Judy Sproxton comments that though Nicholas's ideas are intense, they are actually "immature": "it will take experience to lead him to an

understanding of his identity."[39] And he gains this experience in the course of his involvement with the girls at the club.

Nicholas has been presented as an idealist : "his austere bed-sitting room"[40] has a monkish quality. He sleeps with Selina "with the aim of converting her soul"[41] as well as willing "the awakening of her social conscience"[42]. But Selina is unworthy of his idealizing love. She is thoroughly materialistic and is more interested in his clothing-coupons than his ideals. She is also callously indifferent to the needs and the existence of others. It is through her that Nicholas is finally made to see his error : on the night of the fire as the hostel is consumed by flames.

When the bomb in the garden explodes near the end of the book, removing a large part of the club, the reaction of the girls inside the club remain lowkeyed. But when a fire starts from the severed gas main and creeps slowly into the house. there is panic. The firemen engage themselves in rescuing the girls from the roof. Nicholas observes the scene as the girls are extracted through the narrow window. But Selina, after emerging safely out of the window, surprisingly turns back and makes her poised way back through trapped friends and companion into the burning house. She obviously goes inside to fetch something or someone. Nicholas erroneously assumes that she has gone back to rescue one of the girls. But it is not so. The

rescue by Selina is not of a human being but of a Schiaparelli dress. Her callous act is regarded by Nicholas as an "action of savagery so extreme"[43]. Thus, remarks Norman Page :

"The explosion of the bomb causes not only the literal destruction of the house but the metaphorical destruction of Nicholas's idealised vision of Selina : his sudden apprehension of her supreme selfishness in returning to the house for the dress, when others are in danger of their lives is an Aristotelian moment of 'discovery'." [44]

This trivial act of Selina apparently fills Nicholas with horror and leads to his instinctively making the sign of the cross, "an entirely unaccustomed gesture"[45], to his conversion, and ultimately to his martyrdom. He dies making the hopeless gesture of attempting to convert the Haitians. Alan Bold considers these gestures significant :

"Gestures are crucial to The Girls of Slender Means, for Nicholas ... is altered by them." [46]

Joanna Childe is an important character as she is a counter-figure to Selina. "Joanna's disinterestedness, her ability, a gift, to forget herself and her personality"[47] are her chief characteristics. Peter Kemp observes that Muriel Spark's "most admirable characters are never the self-confident, but the self-mocking, the self-questioning, or self-forgetting." [48]

When the fire blazes through the building, the heavy-boned Joanna knows that for some of them escape through the narrow window is an impossibility. Her strong moral qualities are highlighted when, surrounded by the anxious girls, Joanna

begins to chant the evening's prayers, the verses and responses coming from her lips as the smoke and noise of demolition fill the air. She dies when the house collapses around her. Nicholas watches as unselfishness fall to the flames while selfishness escapes.

Norman Page calls Joanna one of Muriel Spark's "truthtellers"[49], like Jean Taylor in Memento Mori and Ronald Bridges in The Bachelors. The poems that Joanna recites have "a prophetic quality, that endows, her with the role of a commentator or chorus." [50]

When she recites lines from Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner describing the Devil, they have a relevance to Selina's later diabolical act. The closing lines of Coleridge's Kubla Khan seem to have a bearing on Nicholas's subsequent fate. Her recitation of Wordsworth's lines on Chatterton also seem to relate to her own early death. And finally, Hopkins's The Wreck of the Deutschland which echoes throughout the book also has a significance. Like the fate of the nun in that poem, Joanna's fate too is linked to a disaster, though of a different kind - she becomes a piece of wreckage when the Kensington house is wrecked by a German bomb.

Nicholas had written in The Sabbath Notebooks that an evil act can have a positive effect. His conversion and subsequently his martyrdom signify that effect. Selina's inhumanity

and lack of compassion during the fire had given Nicholas an insight into an evil. The polarities of good and evil had been strikingly brought home to him. Karl Malkoff writes about the novel :

"In The Girls of Slender Means (1963), the close relationship of good and evil ... becomes the book's moral center." [51]

Apart from the fundamental seriousness, memories of the past pulsate through the novel. Several references to great global issues are made : VE Day - the Allied victory over Germany, The A Bomb - the explosion of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima, VJ Night - the Allied victory over Japan as well as popular songs and personalities of the period. Against such a background unfolds the story of the girls of slender means who inhabit a world within a world, that is, within the small world of Kensington is the even smaller world of the May of Teck Club. Nicholas's notion of the club as a kind of Eden bears only a limited relation to the truth : there is pettiness, envy, selfishness and even madness within its walls. The "delightful", the "nice" and the "movingly lovely" [52] qualities that are attributed to the girls are only what we see on the surface. They do not exclude the "savage" [53] aspects of human life. It is the savagery hinted at in the first chapter of the novel that emerges in the final tragedy when the May of Teck sinks into its centre, "a high heap of rubble" [54], taking Joanna with it. Violence is an undercurrent too, in the VJ celebrations with which the novel ends, including a stabbing

and a fight between British and American servicemen and the "general pandemonium"[55] that follows.

Thus as the climax of the novel demonstrates, the May of Teck club is not as safe as it seems to be: "Nowhere's safe,"[56] Nicholas says, meaning that nowhere in the world are we safe from wickedness, from the evil from where we pray to be delivered. Yet Muriel Spark gives the world a chance through Jane who exemplifies the power of survival, of resilience which Spark always admires. Nicholas towards the end sees Jane, standing "sturdy and bare-legged on the dark grass"[57], pinning up her hair. He marvels at her stamina and preserves this image of her until his death: "as if this was an image of all the May of Teck establishment in its meek, unselfconscious attitudes of poverty, long ago in 1945." [58]

Peter Kemp asserts that Nicholas plays a crucial role in the narration besides performing some of the author's work for her:

"Through him, Mrs Spark isolates and illustrates that most constant factor of her fictional technique: the turning of a very small community into an image." [59]

Although deceived by Selina, Nicholas recognises the spirit of humanity amongst the girls in that enduring image of Jane - the most genuine perception of moral worth.

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