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Monica's anger was rising in her face. "It was Mr Lloyd with his one arm round her," she said. "I saw them. I'm sorry I ever told you. Rose is the only one that believes me."

Rose Stanley believed her, but this was because she was indifferent. She was the last of all the Brodie set to be excited by Miss Brodie's love affairs, or by anyone else's sex. And it was always to be the same. Later, when she was famous for sex, her magnificently appealing qualities lay in the fact that she had no curiosity about sex at all, she never reflected upon it. As Miss Brodie was to say, she had instinct.

"Rose is the only one who believes me," said Monica Douglas. When she visited Sandy at the nunnery in the late nineteen-fifties, Monica said, "I really did see Teddy Lloyd kiss Miss Brodie in the art room one day."
"I know you did," said Sandy.

She knew it even before Miss Brodie had told her so one day after the end of the war, when they sat in the Braid Hills Hotel eating sandwiches and drinking tea which Miss Brodie's rations at home would not run to. Miss Brodie sat shrivelled and betrayed in her long-preserved dark musquash coat. She had been retired before time. She said, "I am past my prime."
"It was a good prime," said Sandy.

MURIEL SPARK *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961)

THE SIMPLEST WAY to tell a story, equally favoured by tribal bards and parents at bedtime, is to begin at the beginning, and go on until you reach the end, or your audience falls asleep. But even in antiquity, storytellers perceived the interesting effects that could

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be obtained by deviating from chronological order. The classical epic began *in medias res*, in the midst of the story. For example, the narrative of the *Odyssey* begins halfway through the hero's hazardous voyage home from the Trojan War, loops back to describe his earlier adventures, then follows the story to its conclusion in Ithaca.

Through time-shift, narrative avoids presenting life as just one damn thing after another, and allows us to make connections of causality and irony between widely separated events. A shift of narrative focus back in time may change our interpretation of something which happened much later in the chronology of the story, but which we have already experienced as readers of the text. This is a familiar device of cinema, the flashback. Film has more difficulty in accommodating the effect of "flashforward" — the anticipatory glimpse of what is going to happen in the future of the narrative, known to classical rhetoricians as "prolepsis". This is because such information implies the existence of a narrator who knows the whole story, and films do not normally have narrators. It is significant that in this respect the film of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was much less complex and innovative than the novel on which it was based. The film told the story in straightforward chronological order, whereas the novel is remarkable for its fluid handling of time, ranging rapidly back and forward over the span of the action.

The story concerns Jean Brodie, an eccentric and charismatic teacher at an Edinburgh girls' school between the Wars, and a group of pupils who were under her spell, including Monica who was famous for her skill in maths, Rose who was famous for sex, and Sandy Stranger, who was famous for her vowel sounds and "merely notorious for her small, almost non-existent eyes." These eyes, however, miss nothing and Sandy is the main point-of-view character of the novel. It begins when the girls are Seniors, quickly moves back to describe their time as Juniors when Miss Brodie's influence was at its most potent, and frequently jumps forward to give glimpses of them as adult women, still teased and haunted by memories of their extraordinary teacher.

In Junior School they speculate obsessively about Miss Brodie's sexual life, particularly whether she is having an affair with Mr

Lloyd, the handsome art-master who "had lost the contents" of one of his sleeves in the Great War. Monica claims to have seen them embracing in the art room, and is vexed that only Rose believes her. Her remarks to Sandy years later implies that this incredulity still rankles. Sandy, who has in the meantime become a nun in an enclosed order, acknowledges that Monica was right. She knew this, says the narrator, even before Miss Brodie told her one day soon after the end of the war.

In this short passage the reader is whisked backwards and forwards with breathtaking rapidity between a great many different points in time. There is the time of the main narrative, probably the late 1920s, when the Junior schoolgirls are discussing Miss Brodie's amorous life. There is the time in Senior School, in the 1930s, when Rose became famous for sex. There is the time, in the late 1950s, when Monica visits Sandy in her convent. There is the time in the late 1940s when Sandy had tea with the compulsorily retired Miss Brodie. And there is the unspecified time when Sandy discovered that Miss Brodie had indeed been kissed by Mr Lloyd in the art room.

She discovered it, we learn much later in the book, in Senior School. The occasion is a conversation in which Miss Brodie declares that Rose will be Mr Lloyd's mistress as surrogate for herself, because she has dedicated herself to her girls. Sandy decides that there is something dangerous as well as exhilarating about her teacher's rampant egotism. "She thinks she is Providence, thought Sandy, she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end." Of course novelists also see the beginning and the end of their stories, but there is a difference, Muriel Spark implies, between useful fictions and dangerous delusions — also, perhaps, between the Catholic God who allows for free will and the Calvinistic one who doesn't. There is a telling description elsewhere in the novel of Calvin's doctrine of predestination, the belief that "God had planned for practically everybody before they were born a nasty surprise when they died."

Sandy falsifies Miss Brodie's prediction, and thus challenges her claim to control the destinies of others, by becoming Lloyd's mistress herself. Later she shops Miss Brodie to the school

authorities for sending another pupil off on a fatal adventure in fascist Spain. That is why Miss Brodie is described as "betrayed" in this extract, and Sandy never seems to be free from guilt on this account, in spite of her religious vocation. Miss Brodie is described as "shrivelled" because she is dying of cancer, so it's a sad scene. But it is placed less than halfway through the novel, and its pathos is countered by many still to come of Miss Brodie in her prime.

Time-shift is a very common effect in modern fiction, but usually it is "naturalized" as the operation of memory, either in the representation of a character's stream of consciousness (Molly Bloom's interior monologue is constantly shifting from one phase of her life to another, like a gramophone pickup skating backwards and forwards between tracks on an LP disc) or, more formally, as the memoir or reminiscence of a character-narrator (for instance, Dowell in Ford's *The Good Soldier*). Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (1951) is a virtuoso performance of this latter type. The narrator is a professional writer, Bendrix, who at the beginning of his narrative meets Henry, the husband of Sarah, with whom Bendrix had an affair years before, which Sarah broke off abruptly. Bendrix, who presumed that she had found another lover, is still bitter and jealous, and, when Henry confides his own suspicions of Sarah's infidelity, Bendrix perversely hires a detective to discover her secret. What the detective discovers is a journal kept by Sarah, which describes the affair with Bendrix from her point of view, revealing a completely unexpected motive for her breaking it off, and an unsuspected religious conversion. These developments are the more plausible and dramatic for being narrated out of their proper chronological place.

Muriel Spark's combination of frequent time-shift with authorial third-person narrative is a typical postmodernist strategy, calling attention to the artificial construction of the text, and preventing us from "losing ourselves" in the temporal continuum of the fictional story or in the psychological depth of the central character. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) is another striking example. The author tells us at the outset that the story of his hero, Billy Pilgrim, is a fiction based on his own real experience of being a

prisoner of war in Dresden when it was destroyed by Allied bombers in 1945, one of the most horrific air-raids of World War II. The story proper begins: "*Listen, Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time*" and it shifts frequently and abruptly between various episodes in Billy's civilian life as an optometrist, husband and father in the American midwest, and episodes of his war-service culminating in the horror of Dresden. This is more than just the operation of memory. Billy is "time-tripping". With other traumatized veterans he seeks to escape the intolerable facts of modern history by means of the science-fiction myth of effortless travel through time and intergalactic space (which is measured in time—"light-years"). He claims to have been abducted for a period to the planet Tralfamadore, which is inhabited by little creatures who look like plumber's friends with an eye on top. These passages are both amusingly parodic of science fiction and philosophically serious. To the Tralfamadoreans, all times are simultaneously present, and one can choose where to locate oneself. It is the inexorable, unidirectional movement of time that makes life tragic in our human perspective, unless one believes in an eternity in which time is redeemed, and its effects reversed. *Slaughterhouse Five* is a wistful, thought-provoking meditation on these matters, post-Christian as well as postmodernist. One of its most striking and poignant images is of a war-film which Billy Pilgrim watches in reverse:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

Martin Amis has (with due acknowledgment to Vonnegut) recently developed this conceit into a whole book, *Time's Arrow*, narrating the life of a Nazi war criminal backwards from the moment of his death to his birth, with an effect that is comically grotesque at first, and then increasingly disturbed and disturbing as the story

approaches the horrors of the Holocaust. It is possible to interpret the story as a kind of purgatory in which the central character's soul is compelled to relive his appalling past, and as a myth of cancelled evil whose impossibility is all too evident. Most examples of radical experiment with narrative chronology that come to mind seem to be concerned with crimes, misdemeanours and sins.