*Question 3*

*“‘[Politics] was only a side line,’ Sandy said, ‘but it served as an excuse.’” (p. 121) Discuss the novel’s treatment of politics in general and fascism in particular. (For some background on fascism, read the article “Fascist politics and literary criticism” on Toledo).*

In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,* Miss Brodie’s desire to rebel against patriarchal values and traditional systems of education for women is conflated with fascist sentiment that, ultimately, is used “as an excuse” (Spark 121) to help solidify her status as Leader of the rebellion (the Brodie set). In using fascist leaders as representative models for her perceived rebellion, she willingly “shield[s] […] herself from the recognition of fascist violence” (Suh 89) – something that Sandy later contrasts with the fascist sentiment in the Catholic Church.

Miss Brodie who “talked to men as man-to-man” (Spark 38) hopes to instill a level of rebellious individuality in the girls against Miss Mackay and the system she stands for (that is, teaching women how to fit into the political and ideological world of patriarchy). However, Miss Brodie’s approach is not as freeing from patriarchal society as she might imagine. As Suh notes, “Miss Brodie's innovative vision of female community selectively appropriates patriarchal strategies of group formation and power” (94) – in fighting against “school pride” and for individualism, she also instigates an intense level of competition and shaming within the group. Ultimately, Miss Brodie ends up stealing the girls’ agency in violent ways – such as with the death of Joyce Emily and the sexual scenarios Sandy undergoes at her urging – subjecting them to a different kind of control and repression.

Key Passages:

* *They clustered round the open door while she pointed to a large poster pinned with drawing-pins on the opposite wall within the room. It depicted a man’s big face. Underneath were the words “Safety First.”*

*“This is Stanley Baldwin who got in as Prime Minister and got out again ere long,” said Miss Brodie. “Miss Mackay retains him on the wall because she believes in the slogan ‘Safety First.’ But Safety does not come first. Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first. Follow me.” (8)*

* + “Safety First” is the slogan Stanley Baldwin ran under while campaigning for Prime Minister in the mid-1900s. It represented conservative values. Interestingly, the year in which Miss Brodie makes these statements against “Safety First” – the year 1936 – is the same year King Edward VIII abdicated (who had sympathy and loyalty towards fascists movements, such as Hitler). King Edward VIII is often portrayed as someone with too much “individuality” for the throne in that he wanted to marry someone who was a divorcee (something not allowed in the Church of England). Baldwin had just returned in 1935 for his third term as Prime Minister and was instrumental in prohibiting the marriage (which helped lead to the abdication). Miss Brodie, who engages in two extramarital affairs (one with a married man), would possibly be sympathetic towards Edward VIII’s “individuality” and “rebellion” against the crown (without consideration for the violence involved within his fascist sympathies). In addition, the two slogans ultimately juxtapose the different political positions between Miss Mackay and Miss Brodie.
* *They were dark as anything and all marching in the straightest of files, with their hands raised at the same angle, while Mussolini stood on a platform like a gym teacher or a Guides mistress and watched them. […] It occurred to Sandy, there at the end of the Middle Meadow Walk, that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie’s fascisti, not to the naked eye, marching along, but all knit together for her need and in another way, marching along. (28)*
  + Miss Brodie is sympathetic to Mussolini in that she essentially wants to be a Leader of the girls in the same way he unites (and controls) the fascisti (while willfully ignoring the violent ways he often achieved it). Sandy recognizes this right away and points out that they are all “knit together for *her* need.” But Miss Brodie doesn’t see it that way. On one hand, she acknowledges that “impressionable” girls are hers “for life;” on the other hand, she tells them, “[n]ever let it be said that I put ideas into your heads” (Spark 32). This latter statement is further proven untrue when she seemingly convinces a young Joyce Emily to go fight for Franco in Spain (though Joyce Emily comes to the school as being anti-Franco). Miss Brodie attempts to control the girls, often trying to dictate their future’s for them.

Nevertheless, Miss Brodie is not the only one trying to control the girls’ futures. Miss Mackay similarly wants the girls to be prepared for “marriage” and the jobs that are “appropriate” for wives. When speaking with Jenny and Sandy about languages, Miss Mackay says, “What good will Latin and Greek be to you when you get married or take a job? German would be more useful” (Spark 48). As we mentioned in class, German has traditionally been considered a more suitable language for women while Greek and Latin for men. The juxtaposition between Miss Mackay and Miss Brodie show two differing political opinions about how women should participate in society – while Miss Mackay wants to “naturally” prepare the girls for marriage, Miss Brodie essentially commands them to rebel. Both ultimately repress the girls.

* *Miss Brodie was forced to retire at the end of the summer term of nineteen-thirty-nine, on the grounds that she had been teaching Fascism. Sandy, when she heard of it, thought of the marching troops of black shirts in the pictures on the wall. By now she had entered the Catholic Church, in whose ranks she had found quite a number of Fascists much less agreeable than Miss Brodie. (111)*
  + As a nun, Sandy encounters fascism that extends beyond Miss Brodie’s willful mindlessness towards fascist violence. Sandy sees how the Catholic Church – which, historically, was sympathetic to Nazi racism towards Jewish people as well as Franco’s terror – portrays a difference image of fascism than Miss Brodie expressed in the classroom. Miss Brodie used fascism as “an excuse,” to legitimize her political position as a rebel against the school/system (while, as said, willfully ignoring the violence because it doesn’t serve her goals). Nevertheless, Miss Brodie becomes a “dangerous” figure in that she controls the girls without giving them much agency.

Works Cited

* Spark, Muriel. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie.* 1961. Open Road Media, 2012.
* Suh, Judy. “The Familiar Attractions of Fascism in Muriel Spark's ‘The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie.’” *Journal of Modern Literature*, Winter, vol. 30, no. 2, 2007, pp. 86–102.