

Like other totalitarian dictators, Mussolini tried to control every aspect of life in Italy. Growing up in Siena in the 1930s, Italian writer Arturo Vivante (born 1923) encountered fascism in his school days. In this excerpt from his short story “The Sound of the Cicadas,” Vivante shows how fascism affected every aspect of life. ♦ *As you read, think about how a dictator can use schools to his advantage. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

**Vocabulary** Before you begin reading, find the meaning of these words in a dictionary: ingratiate, indoctrinate, futile, protruding, regime, calisthenics.

## The Sound of the Cicadas

The next school we [my brothers and I] went to—a junior high school—was in Siena. . . . The government was trying to turn Italians into warlike people, and soon military training was added to our education, already burdened by two periods of gymnastics. As though this weren't enough, the authorities tried to ingratiate themselves and at the same time indoctrinate us by getting us out of classes right in the middle of a lesson. We might be translating a passage of Italian into Latin when suddenly the bell would ring, the class would be dismissed, and we would hurriedly assemble in the halls. There the head boys would arrange us in threes and march us out of the school, with the professor of gymnastics, who by now had become very important, in the lead. On three occasions, our priest [the teacher] wouldn't come with us. He seemed almost offended by the interruptions. Hands clasped behind his back and his hat on, he would go off on his own at a quick pace. We never knew where we would be led. If we were lucky, we would just march down the main street, march back, and be disbanded. More often, though, there was some surprise—like a speech broadcast from Rome. Then, in a square in which not just our school but all the schools of Siena had assembled, after a long wait, we would have to listen to a mixture of voice and static carried at an incredible volume over the loudspeakers. Packed so tight we weren't able to sit, we would wait the end with aching feet.

Sometimes a Fascist official would clap his hands in the middle of a phrase, or chuckle as though something funny had been said.

It wasn't easy to leave the formation or to get out of these shows. But one morning—we had started on a march and were heading toward the center of town down a narrow street—I found myself so close to an ice-cream store that I just made a sharp left turn and went inside. There was a woman serving at the counter. “You've got some sense,” she said to me. . . . [Our] gymnastics were a futile thing. A drill. We would have to march in step, stop, about-face, salute. There was no fun. The professor of gymnastics was a small young man with a face that he kept poking at you. When you least expected it, it would be in front of you, so close you could hardly see it, protruding from a . . . long neck. Or he would rush at you on his thick, soft rubber soles as though he wanted to kick you.

“Sometimes I would see myself, one of a crowd, performing like the rest, indistinguishable from them, and be disgusted.”

You cringed instinctively to guard yourself from the blow that didn't come. He wore a big sports coat with padded shoulders and kept a whistle in between his lips. He would blow it with a sudden bloating of his cheeks that was even more striking than the blast it made. He was a true child of the regime.

Sometimes, however, he would drop the whistle, which hung from a little chain around his neck, and replace it with a cigarette; then, leaning against the wall with his weight on one leg, the other crossed or bent, he would talk to

**History Through Literature** *(continued)*

his favorite pupils and seem as though he were a complete sport—the most regular fellow who ever existed. He always looked at me as if I were an oddity. I was the only boy in my class who did not live in the city. . . .

Once, I invited some of my classmates to my home. I was surprised to see how frightened they were of jumping across a ditch or sliding down a haystack. I could do both with ease, and could ride horseback, climb trees, and swim almost indefinitely, but no skill at country sports was of any use in the gymnasium. What was needed there was to be able to march in step, snappily, and to acquire a certain automatism whereby one could be instantly controlled. Because I wasn't snappy enough to suit his taste, and because he thought he could change me, the professor of gymnastics would sometimes let the class rest and make me perform his orders—run twenty paces, come back running, stop, and salute him—over and over, perhaps twenty times. I had the honor of being his worst student.

At the beginning of my third year at the school, the professor of gymnastics, holding a large scroll under his arm, lined us up and told us there was something new in the program—calisthenics. He unrolled the scroll, stretched it out, and showed it to us. From where we were, we saw a series of little stick figures. “An exercise in sixty movements,” he said rather nervously. “You have the whole year to learn it. In June there'll be a big rally, and I want you to know it perfectly by then.” He added that all the schools of Siena would take part in this monster demonstration, and that it would be held, in front of the mayor of Siena and an authority who would come especially from Rome, in the Piazza d'Armi—a huge, unpaved square outside the city walls, a place once used as an animal fair.

After pleading with us not to let him down, he had us try the first few movements. They were so

complicated that even the professor had trouble and had to stop from time to time and consult the master sheet. I found them nearly impossible. I was continually falling a second or two behind the others, comparing my position with theirs and trying to correct it. When I thought I had it right, the professor would come at me and grip my arms to straighten them or flex them, or pull at my ankles to shift my feet. I felt like a marionette. I had always had trouble marching in step. Now these movements were beyond me. I saw no rhythm in them. And yet the constant repetition couldn't help but have its effect on me. By the end of April, I could do the sixty movements in my fashion. I didn't know them well enough to do them alone, but in the middle of the class, with all the others doing them, I could do them, too. I had to watch carefully, though. The moment I looked at the ground or for any reason was distracted—sometimes also if I tried too hard—I lost the sequence. There was a moment of hesitation then before I caught up with the others, during which all I could do was hope that the professor hadn't seen me. As the drill continued into May, my mistakes became less and less frequent. I wasn't proud of this. Sometimes I would see myself, one of a crowd, performing like the rest, indistinguishable from them, and be disgusted. Then I would wish I were out in the fields and had never been sent to school at all. I wished I were illiterate, or at least that, like my country friends, I hadn't gone beyond elementary school. I hated gymnastics also because they spelled Fascism and the Fascists to me. How could I have let them get such a hold on me that they could twist my body this way and that according to their schemes—that the movements of my feet and knees and hands, backward or forward, up or down, should be dictated by them, for the benefit of a Fascist mayor and a noisy official come from Rome?

**Questions to Think About**

1. How did political teachings interrupt the school day?
2. How was Vivante different from the others in his class? Did his background help or hurt in gymnastics?
3. **Determining Relevance** How do Vivante's feelings about fascism carry over into his performance in gymnastics?
4. **Humanities Link** Why do dictatorial governments need to control schools?