

Readings in Russian Literature – The Nineteenth Century

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Assignment 2

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Introduction

Tolstoi, we have seen, had clear ideas about popular literature. He believed strongly in its didactic function, and wrote it in a style appropriate to this purpose. He used simple, straightforward language, more similar to the spoken register than to the conventions of literary Russian of the time.

Going by the stories in the book provided (*Rasskazy dlya detei*, or “Stories for Children”), he had equally firm ideas about the way children’s stories should be written. Many of the stories share some very striking characteristics. However, the purpose of these stories is not always clear.

Characteristics

The way Tolstoi writes his stories is very distinctive, especially compared to the way children’s stories are written in modern times. The differences can be separated into two main types – the style of language, and attributes of the story itself. We will look at each of these separately.

Language

The most striking thing about all these stories is that they are very short. Each of them takes, on average, less than four pages (including the page-sized illustrations), and the book is printed in a very large font with very large spacing. All this is fairly consistent with the general idea of children’s stories even today – they should not be too long, and should be easy to read.

The style of writing is also very clearly out of the ordinary. It is extremely simple and clear – even more so than his language in works of popular literature. The sentences and paragraphs both tend to be very short.

There in the water we all saw the monster’s fin. [p. 31]

The cannon boomed. We saw the gunner fall beside it and bury his face in his hands. We could not see what had happened to the shark or to the boys, for smoke screened all. [p. 33]

The titles of these stories are similar; they consist of a single noun or noun phrase (“the kitten” or “two liars”), meant to convey the vehicle of the main point of the story.

The beginnings of the stories sometimes follow a fabular formula, but more frequently jump straight into the tale with no preamble.

There were once a brother and a sister named Vasya and Katya . . .
[p. 5]

Our ship was at anchor near the African coast. It was a fine day . . .
[p. 31]

A significant difference from modern children’s stories is the way these tales are concluded. The narration simply, abruptly stops – there is no clear termination, no signposting, and no moralising or counselling (see the next section).

Then she raised her head, got up on her knees, gathered up her mushrooms and ran back to her sister. [p. 11]

A few minutes later the rowboat reached the boys and brought them back to the ship. [p. 33]

A remarkable tendency that Tolstoi has shown in these stories is to show, rather than tell, in most cases. He uses dialogue, expression, and actions, but does not tend to explicitly describe the emotional states of the characters.

“Back! Back! Turn back! It’s a shark!” the gunner shouted. [p. 31]

The elder girl screamed and sobbed. [p. 10]

These five characteristics are the main distinctive features of the language Tolstoi uses for children’s stories.

Plot

Notably, the plot tends to involve animals in some way – sometimes the central character is one, and sometimes it occupies the role of an agent meant to terrorise or accompany the main characters. Two of the stories we are considering – “The Shark” and “The Kitten” fall in the latter category; in fact, in the whole book, there are only two stories that involve no animals at all, and most of them, indeed, have animal names for their titles (see previous section).

Furthermore, as we have briefly noted earlier, the stories are never explicitly moral. This is in stark contrast to modern children’s stories, which typically end with some general advice to children.

For example, the point of “The Kitten” seems to be that children should never take their pets out to the field, not merely that they should be careful when

they do so. One can also draw a moral from Vasya's bravery in the face of the hunting dogs. It is not clear which of these two is the "moral", if there is even one.

"The Girl and the Mushrooms" and "The Shark" are similarly ambiguous. The stories seem to advocate being careful, but both describe such contrived scenarios that it seems strange that that would be the moral.

Purpose

The characteristics we have noted above make it hard to guess at a purpose Tolstoi might have had in mind for these stories. The moralistic explanation, while it is the general *raison d'être* for children's stories today, loses weight in the face of the ambiguity noted in the previous section.

We have observed that, while the language is simple and to the point, Tolstoi uses showing and not telling – both a hallmark of good writing and a contrast to the way some children's stories are written now. This may indicate that Tolstoi intended for this way of writing to be a kind of introduction to literature for children, although this seems unlikely.