

Russian Literature - Assignment 2

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Every piece of literature has its target audience. Without one, prose would be rather aimless and may feel a little pointless to the reader, considering the reader could be anyone on Earth. Having a target audience serves many purposes — from grounding a story in a relatable setting and perspective to writing in a particular style of language and vocabulary.

народная литература (popular literature), as it became to be known, was a category of writing produced by Russian authors that had an intended audience comprising of *the masses*: The common folk, peasants, salarymen. Anyone who wouldn't be seen as a high-class, aristocrat was considered when writing popular literature.

Lev Tolstoi, had a well-documented interest in popular literature and was rather critical of it. He writes to his editor V. G. Chertkov that the literature for the people being produced was not good, served no purpose, and was sometimes detrimental (85:30) ¹. He wanted popular literature to be of a higher artistic quality and for the language to be more deliberate and apt for its purposes (25:524) ¹. The general purpose of some of the popular literature around then was to be didactic, to teach the people to be "better". Tolstoi shared the belief that popular literature was an apt vehicle to for this purpose as we'll see.

Given the background of general popular literature and Tolstoi's intentions with the genre, this essay's intention is to analyse the provided *children's* literature.

The edifying nature of the stories are immediately visible. with the contents of *The Liar* and *The Plum Pit*. Both stories demonstrate well that honesty is expected of oneself and that should one not follow this policy, then bad consequences are sure to follow. The message is clear and rather obvious, especially due to it being intended for children. Despite the complexities of the reality should one be honest *all the time*, the stories gives a clear black-and-white argument that being dishonest is certainly not preferred. Tolstoi clearly would like to impart these values to the children's generation in this very aggressive binary so as to really push the point across.

Being didactic, and universal, there's a certain attraction in making these tales timeless. Tolstoi believes these are values that transcend the way society evolves and thus that these are values and morals that remains valid regardless of time. Most of the stories do their best to not root themselves in a dated setting. There are many stories that feature only animal characters, an easy way to make sure that the stories can't be dated. The remaining stories also employ this technique, popular among writers of these didactic tales — they make sure not to mention any details, thus making sure no real setting can be assigned to the prose.

I'd argue that there's no real reason to be doing such a thing. The morals conveyed here indubitably remain valuable regardless of the state of humankind even eons into the future. But consider that the language and things that children (or any human, in fact) might hold correct and valuable change. The language certainly sounds dated in comparison to today's literature and the idea of a boy going to herd a flock of sheep as in *The Liar* is nearly unheard of in urban settings these days. Removal of most, if not all, of the relatability simply as a function of the passing of time renders the need to prevent an exact root of the story in a setting moot.

The values displayed also are starkly Christian values as is almost standard with most of Tolstoi's writing. There's reason to believe that Tolstoi takes great inspiration from the way Jesus Christ's parables were conveyed. Namely, there's no real explicit moral conveyed. The entities present in the plot would be assigned to, perhaps, Christian figures.

The *exemplum* also shows itself within these writings. A story that metaphorically shows the exact *lesson for today*. Easy comparisons can be drawn between one's own life and one can easily put themselves into the shoes of the protagonist or any of the characters. A sermon could conceivably have one of these stories appearing in them followed by a short explanation by the priest that provided it. The function served by the priest should ideally be served by the parent that delivers the story.

The language is extremely concise, direct and to-the-point. At no point is there any ambiguity as to what is happening and what the characters are feeling.

■ *Then everyone laughed, but Vanya burst into tears. (pg. 13)*

The consequences of Vanya's actions of stealing the plum are on full display. She is sad. There aren't any grandiloquent words used and no complex syntax employed. There's a clear linear show of the plot as well.

Dialogue is sparse throughout the stories. Consider the *The Sparrow and The Swallows*. It contains no dialogue, in fact. Granted, the only characters are birds, but the way the story is expressed without the use of any dialogue shows the extent to which Tolstoi wants children's literature to be simple.

As a result of all this, most of the stories as a whole are rather short in length. These stories aren't meant to be read in more than one sitting. If a child were to read them, there's only a smaller amount of attention a child can give. Having the story end within one sitting allows for the full message to be received with maximal attention.

Tolstoi's intentions with these stories are clear — to teach. Despite his criticism of the condescension of writers of popular literature, he continues to be condescending but only in certain different ways. All in all, these stories are effective in their intention. Children's literature has clearly taken inspiration Tolstoi's works and continue to go about their writing in similar ways to his. Tolstoi has certainly made his mark on this genre.

Bibliography

Jahn, Gary R. "Tolstoy and Popular Literature." Accessed April 24, 2023. [link](#).

1. Tolstoi, Lev. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Edited by V. G. Chertkov et al. Moscow: GIKhL, 1928-1958. [↗](#) [↗](#)