



ISSN: 2158-7051

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
RUSSIAN STUDIES

ISSUE NO. 5 (2016/2)

TOLSTOY'S ABC BOOK: A NEW APPROACH TO CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist, was also an excellent educator, teacher and maker of a primer, the ABC Book (Azbuka, 1872). This paper analyzes the ABC Book as the most relevant synthesis of Tolstoy's pedagogy, based on the concept of child development. Rejecting the psychological theories of his time, Tolstoy promoted a didactic scheme of free and global education ("obrazovanye") of pupils, seen as real beings with their own needs, attitudes, and feelings. The author of this paper concentrates mainly on the short stories of the ABC Book, which are the best result of Tolstoy's educational endeavours. In particular, the role of young learners as Tolstoy's interlocutors and active participants in their upbringing process is emphasized; in fact, pupils are both protagonists and narrators of the stories. In this way, Tolstoy encouraged children's spiritual growth, since their moral models were other children, the same little heroes of Tolstoy's tales.

Key Words: Tolstoy, Azbuka, ABC Book, Pedagogy, Children, Children's Literature.

Tolstoy, the Educator: A Pedagogical Adventure

Since the Sixties-Seventies to our days scholars are more and more interested in the pedagogical activities and didactic methods of the Count Leo Tolstoy, as the high number of studies devoted to Tolstoy's educational philosophy shows, especially in terms of the writer's aesthetic views and their connection to children's literature. However, many readers still ignore this side of Tolstoy's life and work, and to them he remains the world-known author of *War and Peace* and

Anna Karenina.

So, it may seem bizarre to us the fact that in many occasions Tolstoy placed his pedagogy above his major literary achievements. Which is not bizarre at all. Indeed, cognitive processes captured Tolstoy's attention and artistic perceptions. Moreover, they often provided material for his masterpieces, being rooted in the same heart of Tolstoy's *Weltanschauung*. The case of *Childhood* (*Detstvo*), *Adolescence* (*Otrochestvo*), and *Youth* (*Yunost'*) (1852-1857) is enlightening: in these pseudo-autobiographical novels, which marked the beginning of Tolstoy's literary career, the narrative focus was on the physical and spiritual growth of a common Russian child of 19th century named Kolya.

The Yasnaya Polyana School

According to Tolstoy, child's inner life, with its freshness, vitality, spontaneity, and creativity was the most important feature and legacy of childhood's condition, and school had to preserve it. During the first period of his educational operation (1849-1851, 1859-1863), the young Tolstoy followed this intuition when teaching peasant children in the free school he had opened in his family's estate at Yasnaya Polyana, not far from Tula.

His school was grounded in the alternative system of self-directed learning and self-discipline in child's upbringing. Pupils, who were village boys and girls from seven to thirteen years old, were not compelled to attend the courses; they could enter and leave at their pleasure, and did not have to do any homework. Lessons were not cathedraic at all, and were conceived as interactions between teachers and children. Tolstoy and the other teachers of Yasnaya Polyana strived to develop pupils' creative impulses and personalities without costriction, in total freedom and independence. That is why learning curricula were multifaceted, wide-ranging, and could be flexible to fit childrens' results, teachers' desires, and parents' expectations. Tolstoy outlined his school method on a humanistic idea of education and respect for child's individuality (Crosby, 1904; Baudouin, 1921; Simmons, 1949, pp. 218-237; Hans, 1963, pp. 86-100; Duane, 1968; Murphy, 1992, pp. 45-63; Egorov, 1994; Blaisdell, 2000, pp. 75-172; Moulin, 2011, pp. 29-39).

Besides working as a teacher, Tolstoy also founded a pedagogical review, the *Yasnaya Polyana*, which was committed to theoretical and practical problems of education.

The significance of Yasnaya Polyana's experience. Tolstoy's experience at Yasnaya Polyana had a short life because of the ostility of tsarist autocracy. After his school was closed in 1863, Tolstoy did not give up with pedagogy. Till the end of his life he would keep on writing letters and essays about educational issues, together with his most famous novels. The child was indeed the pillar of Tolstoy's philosophical and ethical building.

Tolstoy's Educational Theories

In the second half of 19th century, when Tolstoy was experiencing his pedagogical practice, the majority of Russian peasantry was still in a painful condition of illiteracy, which increased their distance from the upper classes of Russian society.

"The need of education lies in every man; people love and seek education as they love and seek air for breathing [...]" – specified Tolstoy in his essay "On Popular Education" ("O narodnom obrazovanii", 1874) (Blaisdell, 2000, p. 174). To Tolstoy, education was conceived as a vital right of human beings and had to be "universal" and accessible to everyone. Besides the statement of

universality of learning, Tolstoy promoted also its “humanisation” and “democratisation”. In Tolstoy’s anti-progressive opinion, capitalistic science and technology should not support the ruling aristocracy, but the simple people’s demand, that of the whole Russian community.

The third, main principle of Tolstoy’s pedagogical thought was free education, a criterium on which Tolstoy had founded his school at Yasnaya Polyana. Knowledge was something hard to impose; on the contrary, it had to be produced by itself, spontaneously, springing from pupils’ own interests, attitudes, passions, and feelings, without constrictions from the part of teachers or authorities (Bunnell, 1955; Goncharov, 1962; Calam, 1963; Hans, 1963; Zweers, 1970; Murphy, 1992: 82-122; Mossman, 1993; Moulin, 2011: 67-136).

“Vospitanye” vs “obrazovanye”

In his article “Training and Education” (“Vospitanye i obrazovanye”, 1862), Tolstoy pointed out the difference between *vospitanye*, or compulsory training, and *obrazovanye*, a Russian concept for *Bildung*, often translated into English as “culture”. *Obrazovanye* referred to voluntary and natural education in all its various aspects, and to the global formation of tomorrow’s adults, which involved each side of their personality and their intellectual, spiritual, ethical, and artistic developing (Tolstoy, 1936, pp. 211-246). Such educational distinction is even more bluntly asserted in the essay “Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us, or Are We to Learn from the Peasant Children?” (“Komu u kogo uchit’sya pisat’, krest’yanskim rebyatam u nas ili nam u krest’yanskich rebyat?”), 1862):

While rearing, educating, developing, or if you like influencing a child in any way, we ought to have – and consciously do have – one aim in mind: to attain the greatest harmony possible in terms of truth, beauty, and goodness. If time stood still, if children did not lead well-rounded lives, we should be able quietly to attain this harmony by adding things where there seems to be a lack, and by reducing where there seems to be too much. But the child is alive: every side of his existence strives to develop itself, tries to outstrip every other side, and for the most part we mistake the progress of individual sides of his being for the true goal, while neglecting the harmony of his development as a whole. In this lies the eternal mistake of pedagogical theories (Blaisdell, 2000, pp. 46-47).

Here Tolstoy was polemicising with the educators of his time, whom he blamed as ignorant of children’s psychic life, treating pupils not as living beings, but as products of separate psychic functions. “As if it were not enough,” replied Tolstoy, “that the soul of the individual was split, like a compound substance, into memory, intellect, feeling, and so on, they know how many specific exercises are needed for each element.. They had everything figured out in advance; ready-made, unalterable patterns were provided for all aspects of the development of human nature” (Goncharov, 1962, p. 48).

Unlike those educators, Tolstoy saw in the little child a “real” growing self, which the teacher had to know and understand, in order to “upbring” it. On one side, his theories recalled the humanitarian approach to pedagogy, but, on the other side, they were also inscribed in Tolstoyan original and peculiar *Weltanschauung*.

The Sources of Tolstoy’s Pedagogical Views

By shaping his own pedagogy and putting the child and child’s *obrazovanye* at the very centre, Tolstoy looked at the humanitarian approach to children’s education of Democritus, Socrates, Confucius, Hegel, and Kant, who conceived learning processes as a man’s “second birth”, that of his own soul. Humanitarian pedagogy has a peculiar task in opening the child’s spiritual essence. In Russia, this tradition had been cultivated in the 19th-20-th centuries by thinkers like

Ushinsky, Fyodorov, Solov'yov, Florensky, Vernadsky, Dostoevsky, and many others. They all reflected upon educational problems and got to the conclusion that education should develop primarily the metaphysical, immaterial side of individual's personality, the so called "interior man" (*vnutrennij chelovek*).

Tolstoy welcomed the achievements of humanitarian pedagogy, in the way he based his educational theories on child's spiritual growth. In *The Road of Life* (*Put' zhizni*, 1910) he wrote: "But, besides the bodily life [...], we know that in us there is also another life: the spiritual one. [...]. This life is the authentic life" (Tolstoy, 1956, p. 37).

Along with the influence of humanitarian pedagogy, Tolstoy also formed his educational views on the philosophy of Kant and Rousseau, as well as on the pedagogy of Froebel and Pestalozzi. It is interesting to compare their ways of thinking.

Tolstoy and Kant: education and morality. Tolstoy recognized individual self-education and self-improvement as the main aim in life: "Every man's life consists mainly in becoming better and better, day after day, month after month, year after year" (*ibid.*, p. 81). Kant, one of Tolstoy's most beloved philosophers, shared the Russian writer's thought. In his lecture notes "On Pedagogics" (1803), he stated: "Man's duty is to improve himself; to cultivate his mind; and, when he finds himself going astray, to bring the moral law to bear upon himself" (Kant, 2003, p. 11).

From Kant Tolstoy also borrowed the link between education and morality. Kant had placed the moral rectitude, or "moral training", among the main education tasks, meaning with it the capacity to choose "none but good ends" (*ibid.*, p. 20). "Providence has willed," declared Kant, "that man shall bring forth for himself the good that lies hidden in his nature, and has spoken, as it were, thus to man: 'Go forth into the world! I have equipped thee with every tendency towards the good. Thy part let it be to develop those tendencies [...]'" *(ibid.*, p. 11). Like Kant, Tolstoy believed that educational processes had to promote children's "moral character" by directing their natural instincts toward goodness. "Among all the sciences that man must know", he maintained, "the main one is the science about how to live, doing the least evil possible and the most good possible [...]" (Tolstoy, 1984, p. 148).

Finally, both Kant and Tolstoy claimed that education would bring about a general improvement in the whole mankind. The Russian writer knew and cherished Kant's famous motto from the lecture "On Pedagogics": "[...] children ought to be educated, not for the present, but for a possibly improved condition of man in the future; that is, in a manner which is adapted to the *idea of humanity* and the whole destiny of man" (*ibid.*, p. 14). Tolstoy echoed Kant in this passage from *The Road of Life*:

If people had got to perfection [...], the human race would have ceased to exist [...], because people would have become like angels, who do not marry, as it is said in the Gospel. But until people do not get to perfection, they must generate a progeny, so that this progeny, perfecting itself, could get to that perfection which people must get to (Tolstoy, 1956, p. 129).

Tolstoy and Rousseau: child's innate goodness. Tolstoy read Rousseau at the age of fifteen (Gusev, 1927, p. 136). However, the impact on Tolstoy of the Genevan philosopher continued throughout his whole life and marked his pedagogical researches as well. Among the Rousseauian ideas that Tolstoy embraced, the most relevant for his educational perspective was the defense of child's innate goodness. In "Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us" Tolstoy pointed out: "'Man is born perfect' in the great words of Rousseau, words that remain firm and true as stone" (Blaisdell, 2000, p. 47).

Rousseau professed that man was born "free and good", but society could (and certainly

would) destroy this earliest condition:

Coming from the hand of the Author of all things, everything is good; in the hands of man, everything. Man obliges one soil to nourish the productions of another, one tree to bear the fruits of another; he mingles and confounds climates, elements, seasons; he mutilates his dog, his horse, his slave. He overturns everything, disfigures everything; he loves deformity, monsters; he desires that nothing should be as nature made it, not even man himself. To please him, man must be broken in like a horse; man must be adapted to man's own fashion, like a tree in his garden (Rousseau, 1889, p. 11).

To Rousseau, the role of pedagogy was to preserve man's intrinsic goodness and freedom. For this purpose, Rousseau fostered an all-round pupil's development, which should support and, at the same time, improve, child's intellectual and physical potentialities, that is, in Tolstoyan terms, "every side of his existence" (Blaisdell, 2000, p. 46): "Give him constant physical exercise; make his body sound and robust, that you may make him wise and reasonable. Let him be at work doing something; let him run, shout, be always in motion; let him be a man in vigor, and he will the sooner become one in reason" (Rousseau, 1889, p. 87).

Tolstoy agreed with Rousseau as he identified in good education the way to keep safe child's self-perfection. Hence the educators' hard task. Warned Rousseau: "Remember that, before you venture undertaking to form a man, you must have made yourself a man; you must find in yourself the example you ought to offer him" (ibid., p. 59). According to both Rousseau and Tolstoy, teachers, besides their own integrity and virtue, should be provided with sensitivity and tact. In Tolstoy's words, they had to be "good sculptors" to assure a regular, gradual evolution of pupils' abilities and knowledge without killing their primitive harmony (Blaisdell, 2000, p. 47).

Tolstoy and Pestalozzi: child's harmonic development as "fitness for life". In Tolstoy's diaries the pedagogical activities of Pestalozzi and Froebel are harshly criticised. Nonetheless, the influence they both exerted on Tolstoyan pedagogy cannot be denied.

Pestalozzi's concept of education as the enhancement of child's inner resources, along with the acknowledgement of the spiritual character of learning experience, agrees with Tolstoy's humanitarian pedagogy. Wrote Pestalozzi: "A child is a being endowed with all the faculties of human nature, but none of them developed: *a bud not yet opened*. When the bud uncloses, every one of the leaves unfolds, not one remains behind. Such must be the process of education" (Pestalozzi, 1827, p. 7).

Indeed, a good education should not prefer one or another side of child's personality, but all his physical ("arms"), intellectual ("intellect"), and moral-emotional ("heart") competences should be stimulated and harmoniously developed. Pestalozzi claimed: "The faculties of man must be so cultivated that no one shall predominate at the expense of another, but each be excited to the true standard of activity; *and this standard is the spiritual nature of man*" (ibid., p. 18). Thus, child's gradual and harmonic growth was modelled on nature:

The mechanism of Nature as a whole is great and simple. Man! imitate it. Imitate this action of great

Nature, who out of the seed of the largest tree produces a scarcely perceptible shoot; then, just as imperceptibly, daily and hourly by gradual stages, unfolds first the beginnings of the stem, then the bough, then the branch, then the extreme twig on which hangs the perishable leaf (Pestalozzi, 1898, p.321).

Tolstoy could not but endorse such a organicistic understanding of education. He was particularly devoted to Pestalozzi's belief in the interconnection between instruction and the

observation of reality. “[...] Sense-impression of Nature is the only true foundation of human instruction, because it is the only true foundation of human knowledge” (ibid., p. 316) – this motto, which belongs to Pestalozzi’s *Method* (1828), is put into practise by Gertrude, the loving wife and mother of *Leonard and Gertrude* (1781), who “[...] in every occupation of life” teaches her children “an accurate and intelligent observation of common objects and the forces of nature” (Pestalozzi, 1889, p. 131). In fact, Pestalozzi maintained that “[...] the ultimate end of education is not a perfection in the accomplishments of the school, but fitness for life [...]” (Pestalozzi, 1827, p. 85). Tolstoy himself was for a “non-scholastic” education, closer to nature and preparing children to real life, since – as he stated in “On Popular Education” – “every teaching must be only an answer to a question raised by life” (Tolstoy, 1936, p. 13). Tolstoy and Froebel: “divine” and spontaneity in man. Under the suggestion of

Pestalozzi’s pedagogical model, in his major treatise, *The Education of Man* (1826) Froebel elaborated an educational practise which identified in children “all-sided self-developing beings” (Froebel, 1885, p. 5). Like Pestalozzi, Froebel conceived pedagogy in Romantic terms and understood the function of education in leading man to become conscious of his divine nature: “The divine in man, his nature, therefore, is to be and must be developed to consciousness by education; and man must be raised to free, conscious living in accordance with the divine, thus to free representation of the divine which acts within him” (ibid., p. 3).

In 1860 Tolstoy met at Kissingen Julius Froebel, a nephew of the educator, and discussed with him his uncle’s pedagogy (Murphy, 1992, p. 55). Though the writer did not approve Froebel’s educational plays for children, he accepted and shared his approach to education as the “representation of the divine” and as a full, free, and spontaneous development of pupils’ potentialities, out of any constrictions, since “all active, dictatorial, invariable, and forcibly interfering education and instruction must necessarily have a disturbing, checking, and destructive effect upon the action of the divine [...]” (Froebel, 1885, p. 5). Tolstoy showed his closeness to Froebel, as he wrote in *The Road of Life*: “The biggest joy that man can experience, it is the joy of experiencing in himself a free, rational, loving and therefore blessed being, the experience of God in himself” (Tolstoy, 1956, p. 40). As Froebel, Tolstoy was against any violence in education: “People can be taught by disclosing them the truth and showing them an example of goodness, but in no cases by forcing them to do what we want” (ibid., p. 220).

According to Tolstoy and Froebel, the responsibilities of educators in children’s good or bad upbringing were similar. Commented Froebel: “It is certainly a very deep truth [...] that it is mostly the man, often the educator, who first makes the child and the body bad” (Froebel, 1885, p. 76). In Froebel and Tolstoy’s vision, teachers’ work turned into a true vocation, as the education – wrote Froebel – “must perceive and contemplate the divine in the human, and evince the nature of man in God, and strive to represent both in one another in life” (ibid., p. 10). In his article “O metodach obuchenya gramote” (“On Methods of Teaching the Rudiments”, 1862), by analysing the different teaching methods, Tolstoy in this way:

The best teacher is the one who can instantly recognize what is bothering a particular student. This ability in turn gives the teacher a knowledge of the greatest possible number of methods; the ability to invent new methods; and above all – rather than the blind adherence to one method – the conviction that all methods are one-sided, that the best possible method is the one that answers best all the possible difficulties incurred by the student. This is not a method, but an art and talent (Blaisdell, 2000, pp. 186-187).

In conclusion, from Kant, Rousseau, Froebel, and Pestalozzi Tolstoy derived the notion of the

centrality of early childhood for man's growth and entry into adult life, the idea of a global education, the role of teachers as preservers of children's self-perfection and spiritual autonomy.

Tolstoy's pedagogical views found their application in the *ABC Book*, which is the object of this study.

The *ABC Book* and Tolstoy's Humanistic Pedagogy

All Tolstoy's pedagogical experiences and researches of 1850s-1860s gave birth to his *ABC Book* (*Azbuka*), which is the result of a 14-year effort (Nikolaeva, 2010). First drafted in 1868, the *ABC Book* was written in one year and a half, between 1871 and 1872, and it was published in November 1872. A bettered version was edited in 1875 with the title *New ABC Book* (*Novaya Azbuka*), and even introduced into Russian public schools by the Ministry of Education (Zaydenschur, 1974; Babaev, 1989; Putilova, 2006).

The *ABC Book* was a very important project for Tolstoy, to which the writer devoted much time, many efforts and lovely thoughts. In a letter dated March 16, 1872, he confessed to the poet Alexander Fet: "My *ABC Book* gives me no peace and time for any other occupation. [...]. What it will come out of it I don't know; but I have put my whole soul into it" (Tolstoy, 1953, p. 277). Tolstoy had great ambitions for his primer: he hoped that the whole generations of czars' as well as peasants' sons would learn reading from it. The *ABC Book* was for him a kind of testament: "After having completed the *ABC Book*, I can die in peace" – wrote Tolstoy to his great-aunt Aleksandra Tolstoya in a letter dated January 12, 1872 (*ibid.*, p. 269).

But why was Tolstoy so fond of his first primer? And what were the innovations of educational system? Before trying to give an answer to these questions, let us have a look to the structure of the *ABC Book*.

The *ABC Book*'s Structure

Tolstoy's 758-page *ABC Book* was a complex of four books including all the writer thought to be useful to a Russian school-aged child of 19th century, as part of his/her education: a) the alphabet and fundamentals of grammar; b) readings for elementary literacy instruction; c) religious contents; d) scientific notions. "The aim of the book" – revealed the author to the Minister of Education Dmitry Tolstoy in 1872 – "is to guide Russian pupils of all ages and classes in the learning of reading, writing, grammar, slavonic language and arithmetics [...]" (*ibid.*, p. 338).

In order to drive children in their growing experience, Tolstoy subdivided each book of his *ABC Book* into three (Book II, III and IV) or four sections (Book I), which were intended to offer pupils an essential primary, gradual, multi-sided education, covering various areas of knowledge and fitting children's age and proficiencies.

Thus, the first section of Book I contains the Russian alphabet, syllabication rules, word formation, pronunciation devices. The first step was teaching pupils to recognize, read and write the single letters, which were associated with the images of the ment objects. Then, through a special "syllabic-acoustic method", the teachers would introduce the children into reading syllables and short sentences, first, and simple texts later; texts would progressively become more complex, along with young readers' mental growth.

Indeed, the aim of the second section of Book I is to draw the child's attention to fables and tales, which, in Tolstoy's opinion, facilitate the revision of grammar rules and encourage pupils' oral production by teaching them how to retell a story.

In the third section of Book I children become familiar with religious texts written in slavonic

language, such as the Bible, the Saints' Lives, and others.

The fourth section of Book I considers basic computational algebra.

At the end of Book I Tolstoy gives some helpful general advices to teachers.

From Book II the part on Russian alphabet is no more present. Children are thought to already know literacy and grammar, and just need practice to improve their written, oral, and reasoning skills. As a result, Book II, Book III and Book IV present the very same structure: the first section is devoted to fables, tales, and short stories; the second section contains religious and ethical texts; the third one involves computational abilities. Moreover, each book is provided with a final guide for teachers about how to use the single sections of the *ABC Book*.

Tolstoy's Pedagogy in the *ABC Book*

From what said above, it becomes clear that Tolstoy's *ABC Book* embraced a whole pedagogy. What interested the author was providing an educational input and instruments for the Russian child's spiritual growth. In particular, in his *ABC Book* Tolstoy elaborated an educational theory and practice which was based on three main assumptions, the pillars of both the *ABC Book* and of Tolstoy's pedagogical ideas:

1. The need of children's *global education*. Moving from Pestalozzi and Froebel's belief that education should maximize all the potentials of young pupils, Tolstoy reinterpreted in encyclopedic terms the canonical bipolar composition of *bukvar*, which contained a technical and a practical part (McEneaney, 1997): the *ABC Book* was intended to be a sort of primary and essential key to the world for Russian children and teenagers of the future generations. Here, traditional school notions went together with religious contents and moral messages (Egorov, 1994). Thus, the child was now provided with an all-round *obrazovanye*, and not with the mere traditional *vospitanye*, according to the already recalled Tolstoyan distinction.

Didactic aims were achieved by avoiding abstract concepts in reading materials, which always relied on reality and children's experience. "Self-knowledge [...] is the centre from which all human instruction must start" – maintained Pestalozzi (Pestalozzi, 1898, p. 334), and Tolstoy with him. Moreover, the learning materials of the *ABC Book* were presented in a growing order of complexity, which was ment to follow natural children's cognitive development, in a way that recalls another Pestalozzi's motto: "Learn to make the simple perfect before going on to the complex" (ibid., p. 319).

2. The relevance of an *appropriate teaching approach*. As it has already been said, the first book of Tolstoy's *ABC Book* encloses instructions and suggestions for teachers.

Tolstoy had no doubts that teachers played an important role in children's upbringing. However, in his "General Remarks for the Teacher" ("Obshye zamechanya dlja uchitelya"), he asked the teachers to rethink their position as educators, putting the pupils at the very centre of the educational process. According to Tolstoy, a good teacher just loves his job and pupils, and therefore creates the best learning conditions for them: that is why he gives his lessons in a concise, understandable and captivating way, by removing all the possible sources of anxiety and fear, and, last but not least, by readily listening to their own needs (Tolstoy, 1957, pp. 180-185). These Tolstoyan assertions seem to forego the most modern pedagogic and glottodidactic achievements.

3. The *morality of art* and the ethical role of *reading materials*. This is an authentic Tolstoyan innovation, which is even more remarkable than the previous principles. We will discuss it in the following chapter.

The Role of Reading Materials: The Innovations of Tolstoy's *ABC Book*

Tolstoy's *ABC Book* fully corresponds to the author's defense of child's *obrazovanye*, a

concept that includes intellectual skills, as well as impressions, emotions, and religious feelings. According to Tolstoy's educational practice, which derives from both former and new theories, child's growth is an heuristic and spontaneous act. Nonetheless, if the premises of Tolstoy's pedagogy trace their roots back into the educational systems of Kant, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and others, his learning strategies sound completely Tolstoyan.

To Tolstoy, children's harmonic upbringing should pass through creativity and art. Therefore, the main innovation of Tolstoy's *ABC Book* concerns the moral function of educative reading materials for children. *Education Through Art in the ABC Book's Reading Materials*. As Rousseau and Kant, Tolstoy firmly believes in the moral character of education. In Tolstoy's views, children's global education should be promoted through morally engaged art, and through literature above all. For this purpose, each volume of the *ABC Book* is filled with a high number of fables, proverbs, short stories.

These texts are supposed to stimulate children's emotions, curiosity, and imagination, by catalysing their development towards literacy, literature acquaintance, oral and written production, and also towards ethics, by conveying their moral and religious message.

The ABC Book's Reading Materials as the Quintessence of Tolstoy's Pedagogy. The *ABC Book's* reading materials and, in particular, Tolstoy's fables and short stories, put in evidence that Tolstoy knows how teaching works with young minds. They mirror Tolstoy's idea that education should bestow prime relevance on the development of thought, should arouse the pupil's personal interest, and combine reality with information.

The addressee of these stories is no longer an "abstract child", but the "real child", who is Tolstoy's object of analysis and his interlocutor. All these reasons make the *ABC Book's* reading materials an extraordinary field for Tolstoy's pedagogical findings.

The Short Stories from Tolstoy's *ABC Book* as a Model for Child Development

In his essay "What Is Art?" ("Chto takoye iskusstvo?", 1897-1898), Tolstoy claimed that art must have a moral purpose: it should support people in their path to Good. His devotion to didactic art produced Tolstoy's "aesthetic of austerity". *A Calendar of Wisdom (Krug chtenya, 1906-1908)* adopts a comparison of true art with the faithful wife, who needs no decoration, whereas false art is associated with a overadorned harlot. In Tolstoy's vision, art style should be sober, beautiful but not frivolous and vane (Murphy, 1992, pp. 123-158).

This definition of art was already disclosed in the *ABC Book's* short stories, which Tolstoy created to supply the lack of reading materials for children. Ranging from translations and adaptations of Aesop's fables and of Greek classical writers, to Russian, Indian, Arabian, American, French, German, and Turkish folk tales, and to original Tolstoy's inventions, the reading materials, which occupy every first section of the four books, were the result of Tolstoy's artistic perceptions and pedagogical views.

Contents, Formal Aspects and Goals of the *ABC Book's* Short Stories

The secret of the significance of Tolstoy's reading materials lay in the melding of didactic tasks, which were aiming at learners' education to ethical values, with a realistic background originating from peasant child's own life and experiences (Simmons, 1949, pp. 330-331; Lehman, 1984, pp. 69-70).

Tolstoy worked hard on the style of the *ABC Book's* short stories. In his uncompleted essay of 1862 "On the Language of Popular Books" ("O yazyke narodnykh knizhek"), where he faced the

problem of language in children's literature and gave guidelines for authors, Tolstoy stressed how, in books for children, style should be understandable, clear, synthetic, and – the golden rule – “good”, by refusing high-coloured popular expressions and foreign words, and the content should not be “void” (Tolstoy, 1936, pp. 427-431). Therefore, when writing his fables and tales, Tolstoy chose to explain complex ideas to children in a simple form. Stories were inspired to the general plan of the whole *ABC Book*, which was intended to be “fine, short, simple, and, above all, clear” (Tolstoy, 1953, p. 283), and were a masterly example of stylistic clarity, simplicity and brevity.

The fact the stories were composed in common people's better Russian, not only stimulated pupils (who had just begun spelling out words and enjoying funny proverbs and riddles) to get in touch with the literary language (Zajdenshnur, 1974, pp. 30-35), but also encouraged children's emotional involvement. All this made Tolstoy's young readers taking an active part in their education and learning in a fast and easy manner.

Education by Life and Children's Own Self

Certainly the *ABC Book's* short stories had much appeal for children, in the way their protagonists were no-one else than children themselves, being the children the protagonists of their own education.

There is something totally unprecedented and fascinating in Tolstoy's insights into pupils' upbringing. Many times Tolstoy argued that school education, which caused that “school state of mind” so noxious for child's health and serenity, should be replaced with education by life. Thus, Tolstoy was denying any right to teachers, or to anybody for them, to instruct children, as he maintained in “Are the Peasant Children to Learn to Write from Us”.

It's impossible and absurd to teach and educate a child for the simple reason that the child stands closer than I do – and than any grown-up does – to that ideal of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness to which I, in my pride, wish to raise him. The consciousness of this ideal lies more powerfully in him than in me. All he needs of me is the necessary material to fulfill himself, harmoniously and multifariously (Blaisdell, 2000, p. 48).

Teachers had merely to be the mediators of knowledge, but its key was in children's hands and hearts. Education came from the inside, from child's own self.

New Child-Like Models for Russian Society. Fables, tales, and short stories from Tolstoy's *ABC Book* reveal the leading role children were exhorted to play in 19th century's Russian context.

By going through a process of self-education under the non-invasive guide of their teachers, pupils could gain consciousness of those qualities and virtues, already living in them, which would turn them into reliable, kind and generous adults. Schoolboys and schoolgirls were the new moralizers of Russian society, because children represented the highest models for children themselves.

Reading Tolstoy's Short Stories

Such pedagogical discoveries emerge from the short stories of Tolstoy's *ABC Book*, which present a peasant setting and contain Tolstoy's pedagogy in small, simplified forms.

Peasant stories and tales of the *ABC Book* often recall children's joys, desires and fears, by reflecting all the richness of their spiritual world. The narrators and main characters of the stories are, in most cases, children themselves. The contents, language and style of the stories are modelled on the youngest's perspective. It is what happens in the five short stories we are going to examine: “How I Was Taught to Sew”, “How in the Wood I Was Caught by a Storm”, “How I Stopped Being Afraid of Blind Beggars”, “How I Was not Taken to Town”, and “The Life of a Soldier's Wife”.

To write the first three stories, Tolstoy took dictation from his Yasnaya Polyana's pupils, while "How I Was not Taken to Town" and "The Life of a Soldier's Wife" were composed in the 1860s by Vasya Morozov, a Tolstoy's pupil. Later on Tolstoy modified and adapted the style of these stories in order to fit the *ABC Book's* educative moral aims; yet he maintained the original plot as it had been conceived by the children (Gusev, 1963, pp. 68-69).

All these stories have an ethical purpose, which is conveyed (and that is the *ABC Book's* main innovation) by the children themselves. Tolstoy's little readers are educated by their own morality, which the author, like Socrates, draws out from them, thus introducing a new way of conceiving learning practice.

Lesson 1: "How I Was Taught to Sew" and the power of effort. In the *ABC Book's* first volume, among the short stories and tales that look at children for their inspiration, is to be mentioned the pithy story "How I Was Taught to Sew" ("Kak menya vyuchili shit") (Tolstoy, 1957, pp. 75-76), which speaks about the difficult sewing apprenticeship of a six-year-old girl. The story is reported by the very own voice of the girl herself, who is now grown to a woman and has a little daughter.

Когда мне было шесть лет, я просила мать дать мне шить. Она сказала: «Ты еще мала, ты только пальцы наколешь»; а я все приставала. Мать достала из сундука красный лоскут и дала мне; потом вдела в иголку красную нитку и показала мне, как держать. Я стала шить, но не могла делать ровных стежков; один стежок выходил большой, а другой попадал на самый край и прорывался насквозь. Потом я уколола палец и хотела не заплакать, да мать спросила меня: «Что ты?» – я не удержалась и заплакала. Тогда мать велела мне идти играть.

Когда я легла спать, мне все мерещились стежки; я все думала о том, как-бы мне скорее выучиться шить, и мне казалось так трудно, что я никогда не выучусь. А теперь я выросла большая и не помню, как выучилась шить; и когда я учу шить свою девочку, удивляюсь, как она не может держать иголку.

When I was six years old, I asked Mother to let me sew. She said, "You are still too small, you will sting your fingers"; but I bothered her more and more. Mother pulled out from the chest a red piece of cloth and gave it to me; then she put a red string through the eye of a needle and showed me how to hold it. I began to sew, but I couldn't make regular stitches; one stitch would come out big, while another one would fall at the very end of the line and would be torn. Then I stung my finger and didn't want to cry, but Mother asked me, "What's happened?" and I couldn't keep myself from crying. So Mother told me to go and play.

When I went to bed, I kept dreaming of stitches; I kept thinking about how I could learn faster how to sew, and it seemed to me difficult to the point that I would have never learned it. But now I've grown older and don't remember how I learned to sew; and when I teach sewing my little girl, I'm surprised that she can't even hold the needle (ibid.).

Like the other stories we are going to analyze, the subject is taken from Tolstoy's pupils' school works, the style of which Tolstoy adjusted later on. In effect, "How I Was Taught to Sew" reminds us of a school composition. Indeed, though the narrator is supposed to be an adult woman, the language used is extremely simple and child-like, being characterized by the prevalence of parataxis ("but I bothered her more and more", *a ya vsjo pristavala*; "and [mother] gave it to me", *i [mat'] dala mne*; "and [she] showed me", *i [ona] pokazala mne*; "but I couldn't make regular stitches", *no [ya] ne mogla delat' rovnym stezhkov*), the employment of direct speeches, the abundance of subjective and objective personal pronouns ("I", "to me", "me"; respectively: *ya, mne, menya*; "she", *ona*; "you", *ty*), a basic, clear vocabulary and frequent repetitions of connecting

words (for example, “then”: “then she put”, *potom [mat'] vdela*; “then I”, *potom ya*) and parallel constructions (“and gave it to me”, “and showed me”). Such stylistic devices are typical of children’s communication, as well as children’s literature.

Also the content of the story echoes children’s way of thinking. The protagonist, probably a woman of humble origins, tells us about an apparently insignificant childhood experience, which yet was for her, as a little girl, a sort of initiation: her sewing apprenticeship. The stress on small details (for instance, she remembers how she stung her finger and started crying, so that her mother told her to go and play) recalls the spontaneous fluidity and naivety of the youngest’s speech.

Tolstoy was here reproducing children’s world and sensitivity to give his little readers a life message and a life model. However, it was a totally new and unprecedented life message and model, since it came from children themselves.

“Everyone knows that, without efforts, you wouldn’t do anything in terms of bodily labour. It must be clear that also in the soul’s life, which is the main issue in life, you wouldn’t do anything without effort” – writes Tolstoy in *The Road of Life* (Tolstoy, 1956, p. 318). The six-year-old girl of “How I Was Taught to Sew” faces lots of difficulties before learning sewing, but does not give up and, as she grows up, she teaches her own daughter what she has learned. The protagonist of Tolstoy’s short story could then be considered by Russian girls of those times a positive model of tenacity and purpose-directed behaviour.

Therefore, children needed, indeed, nothing extraordinary for their education: they already had all the necessary to grow up, that is, themselves. “How I Was Taught to Sew” shows how Tolstoy was putting into practice the ideas of Froebel and Pestalozzi, by building his pedagogy on the principle of child’s autonomy and self-perfection.

Lesson 2: “*How in the Wood I Was Caught by a Storm*”, or a little *disadventure*. If the narrator of “How I Was Taught to Sew” was a grown-up woman, in “How in the Wood I Was Caught by a Storm” (“*Kak menya v lesu zastala groza*”), also from Book I (Tolstoy, 1957, pp. 78-79), it is a grown-up man who tells us about his childhood. In particular, he remembers what happened when, as a little boy, he faced a terrible storm while picking up mushrooms alone in the wood.

Когда я был маленький, меня послали в лес за грибами. Я дошел до лесу, набрал грибов и хотел идти домой. Вдруг стало темно, пошел дождь и загремело. Я испугался и сел под большой дуб. Блеснула молния такая светлая, что мне глазам больно стало и я зажмурился. Над моей головой у меня затрещало и загремело; потом что-то ударило меня в голову. Я упал и лежал до тех пор, пока перестал дождь. Когда я очнулся, по всему лесу капало с деревьев, пели птицы и играло солнышко. Большой дуб сломался и из пня шел дым. Вокруг меня лежали оскретки от дуба. Платье на мне было все мокрое и липло к телу; на голове была шишка и только немножко больно. Я нашел свою шапку, взял грибы и побежал домой. – Дома никого не было; я достал в столе хлеба и влез на печку. Когда я проснулся, я увидел с печки, что грибы мои изжарили, поставили на стол и уже хотят есть. Я закричал: «Что вы без меня едите?» Они говорят: «Что ж ты спишь? Иди скорей, ешь».

When I was little, I was sent to the wood to collect mushrooms. I got to the wood, collected mushrooms and wanted to go home. Suddenly it became dark, it started raining and thundering. I got frightened and sat under a big oak. The lighting shone so bright that I began to feel a pain in my eyes and I winked them. Over my head, near me, it began whishing and thundering; then something hit my head. I fell down and lay until it stopped raining. When I regained consciousness, all the woodtrees were dripping, birds were singing, a little sun was

shining. The big oak had got struck and from its stump smoke came out. Around me lay the oak's scraps. My dress was all wet and stuck to my body; on the head I had a bump and I had a tiny little pain. I found my cap, took the mushrooms and ran back home. At home there was no-one; I took the bread from the table and climbed onto the stove. When I woke up, I saw that my mushrooms had been cooked, put on the table and the others were about to eat them. I cried out, "How can you eat without me?" They replied, "How can you sleep now? Come here and eat."(ibid.).

Here, similarly to the previous text, the storyteller and the protagonist are the same person, who is portrayed in two different periods of his life, as an adult and as a child. However, the narrative perspective is always that of the child. In fact, the "I" who speaks uses the Russian language not in an adult-like way, but in a child-like one. For example, the narrator resorts to diminutive forms of nouns and adverbs, which is a characteristic of children's communication ("the little sun", *solnyshko*, instead of the neutral word "sun", *solnce*; "a tiny little", *nemnozhko*, instead of "a little", *nemnogo*). Moreover, it is not casual that in such a brief narrative personal deictic expressions are repeated twenty times (see in the text "I", *ya* and its occurrences in the various grammatical cases; "my", *moi*, *svoyu*, respectively: possessive adjective for masculine object in the accusative plural and reflexive adjective for feminine object in the accusative singular, both referred to the first person singular).

Besides the language, also the subject of the story is centered on childhood's episodes, feelings, and emotions. The (dis)adventure of the small hero, who collected mushrooms in the wood for his family, until he suddenly ran into a storm, is described with impressionistic tones, given by the scared child's own perceptions. The sky, quickly getting darker and darker; the rain, pelting down; the rumbling thunders and flickering thunderbolts: thanks to these images and sounds we see and hear the storm through the small hero's individual sensitivity and fear. A quite natural event appears to the inexperienced child as a terrible catastrophe, a threat to his life; a crescendo of inchoative verbs gains the effect of emphasising the boy's growing panic and apprehension ("it became dark", *stalo temno*; "it started raining and thundering", *poshyol dozhd' i zagremelo*; "I began to feel a pain in my eyes", *mne glazam bol'no stalo*; "it began whishing and thundering", *zatreshchalo i zagremelo*), and leads to his final fainting under a big oak.

Like the little sewing girl of "How I Was Taught to Sew", the little protagonist of "How in the Wood I Was Caught by a Storm" represents a life model for children. The two heroes show them what growing up means, with its big and small events, joy and fear: a wonderful mystery to be discovered by one's own, by relying on one's own strength and desire to go on, live, and learn.

Lesson 3: "How I Stopped Being Afraid of Blind Beggars" as the triumph of pity over fear. Similarly to the already analyzed stories about children's initiation into life, the short story from Book I called "How I Stopped Being Afraid of Blind Beggars" ("Kak ya perestal boyat'sya slepych nisshich") (ibid., p. 85) is the picture of a child's maturation, whose reactions towards blind beggars evolve from an unjustified, puerile fear to a wise Christian compassion.

Когда я был маленький, меня пугали слепыми нищими и я боялся их. Один раз я пришел домой, а на крыльце сидело двое слепых нищих. Я не знал, что мне делать; я боялся бежать назад и боялся пройти мимо их: я думал, что они схватят меня. Вдруг один из них (у него были белые, как молоко, глаза) поднялся, взял меня за руку и сказал: «Паренек! Что же милостыньку?» Я вырвался от него и прибежал к матери. Она выслала со мною денег и хлеба. Нищие обрадовались хлебу, стали креститься и есть. Потом нищий с белыми глазами сказал: «Хлеб твой хороший – спаси Бог». И он

опять взял меня за руку и ощупал ее. Мне его стало жалко и с тех пор я перестал бояться слепых нищих.

When I was little, people made me afraid of blind beggars and, therefore, I actually was afraid of them. Once I came back home and two blind beggars were sitting in the front entry deck. I didn't know what to do; I was afraid of running back and I was afraid of going by them: I thought they would grasp me. Suddenly one of them (he had eyes as white as milk) stood up, took my arm and said, "Young boy! Please help" I wriggled away from him and ran up to Mother. She sent me back with money and bread. The beggars expressed joy for the bread, crossed themselves and started eating. Then the beggar with white eyes said, "Your bread is good – God save you." And he took again my arm and fingered it. I felt pity of him and from that moment I stopped being afraid of blind beggars (ibid.).

The story is told from the little boy-protagonist's point of view. We can easily verify it by paying attention to the subjective child-like perspective held by the first-person narrator, who relates the facts as a child would: for instance, his use of high-coloured comparisons (one of the two beggars is said to have "eyes as white as milk", *belye, kak moloko, glaza*) can be brought back to children's speech.

"How I Stopped Being Afraid of Blind Beggars" illustrates, once more, how the children's world is made of insecurity and fear, but also of the desire to overcome them, grow up, and become adults. In Tolstoy's opinion, this would happen thanks to the child's own efforts, and not to anyone else. The writer intensively believes in children's self-education and self-moralization.

We know that the young boy from "How I Stopped Being Afraid of Blind Beggars" is obsessively phobic of blind beggars. However, after meeting two of them by the doorway and giving them some bread and money, he has a sudden revelation: he is not afraid of them anymore; he feels rather a strong sense of pity for their condition. Thus, a negative feeling unexpectedly turns into a positive one, passivity and panic turn into activity and participation in other people's destiny. "Good life begins exactly when man makes an effort to be good" – this is one of Tolstoy's main precepts (Tolstoy, 1956, p. 323).

Although it is the boy's mother who sends the son to the beggars with a handout, the protagonist's maturation takes place in the very same boy, through the discovery of charity and Christian compassion. As for the latter, Tolstoy asserts: "The more pity is in man, the best is for his soul" (ibid., p. 52). The little hero of this story stands therefore as an example of the importance of good moral conduct and morality itself, whose spring lies in the very heart of children.

Lesson 4: "How I Was not Taken to Town" and Christian patience. Another Christian value, that of patience, is the focus of Vasya Morozov's short story from Book I entitled "How I Was not Taken to Town" ("Kak menya ne vzyali v gorod") (Tolstoy, 1957, pp. 77-78). Like the stories we have analyzed before, here Tolstoy explores a peasant child's life episod through the child's own narration, in order to give his readers some moral directives.

The rural child-narrator of "How I Was not Taken to Town" wishes his father would take him to town, which does not occur. The boy becomes sad, but, after his father returns, he is again of good cheer, especially when he eats the white bread (*kalach*) his father bought for him in town.

Собрался батюшка в город. А я ему говорю: «Батя, возьми меня с собой». А он говорит: «Ты там замерзнешь; куда тебя». Я повернулся, заплакал и пошел в чулан. Плакал-плакал и заснул. И вижу я во сне, будто от нашей деревни небольшая дорожка к границе; и вижу я – по этой дорожке идет батя. Я догнал его и мы пошли с ним вместе в город. Иду я и вижу – впереди топится печка. Я говорю: «Батя, это город?» А он говорит: «Он самый». Потом мы дошли до печки и вижу я – так пекут калачи. Я

говорю: «Купи мне калачика». Он купил и дал мне. Тут я проснулся, встал, обулся, взял рукавицы и пошел на улицу. На улице ребята катаются на ледянках, на салазках и на скамейках. Я стал с ними кататься и катался до тех пор, пока не иззяб. Только я вернулся и влез на печку, слышу – батя вернулся из города. Я обрадовался, вскочил и говорю: «Батя, что – купил мне калачика?» Он говорит: «Купил». И дал мне калач. Я скочил на лавку и стал плясать с радости.

Papa was about to go to town. I said to him, “Pa, take me with you.” But he said, “You will freeze, it’s not the case.” I turned away, started crying and went to the lumber-room. I cried, cried and fell asleep. And in my dreams I saw a small path going from our village towards the border; and I saw Papa walking on that path. I joined him and we went together to town. While walking, I saw a burning oven ahead. I said, “Pa, is this the town?” And he said, “Yes, it is”. Then we got to the oven and I saw kalachi being baked there. I said, “Buy me a kalachik.” He bought it and gave it to me. At that point I woke up, stood up, put on my shoes, took the mittens and went out. Guys were ice-boating and sledding. I began to play with them and played till I got frozen. As soon as I came back and climbed onto the stove, I heard how Papa came back from town. This made me happy, I jumped out and said, “Pa, did you buy me a kalachik?” He said, “I did”. And gave me the kalach. I jumped onto the bench and began dancing of joy (ibid.).

To the peasant child of this story, the town represents the magic world of *kalach*, a Russian twisted white bread he is very fond of. So, when his father decides he would go to town alone, fearing that the son would get cold, the boy nearly falls into despair. In Tolstoy’s vision, his reaction is a natural child’s, but not an ethical right one. The boy seems not to understand that patience is the ultimate virtue for any Christian to practise. Only at the end of the story, when the father comes back and brings him the *kalach* he has even dreamt of, he realizes it.

By reading “How I Was not Taken to Town”, Tolstoy’s pupils were driven to empathize with the protagonist and to reflect upon the morality or immorality of their own acts. The little boy of the story taught them the uselessness of being naughty; children, instead, had to be patient and, in so doing, they would certainly get what they wished. Vasya Morozov and Tolstoy’s character was also advising the youngest readers to enjoy their life as it was and not to ask for more, since “the least needs you have, the happiest is your life [...]” (Tolstoy, 1956, p. 104). Thus, the story proves to be a Tolstoyan lesson of Christian patience and capacity to be satisfied with just a little. Such wisdom, again, comes from a child’s own voice and experience.

Lesson 5: “The Life of a Soldier’s Wife” as a mirror of everyone’s life. The short story called “The Life of a Soldier’s Wife” (“Soldatkinо zhit’yo”), which belongs to Book III (Tolstoy, 1957, pp. 24-30), is intended to teach children that “all we call evil, every grief [...] makes our soul better” (Tolstoy, 1956, p. 435).

Like “How I Was not Taken to Town”, the story was written by Tolstoy’s pupil Vasya Morozov. Tolstoy published it in his *ABC Book* with relevant stylistic changes.

“The Life of a Soldier’s Wife” encompasses a peasant young boy’s fictional and yet very likely autobiography, together with the sketch of childhood’s inner dimension. The main character, the little Fed’ka, lives in a small village with his mother, sister, and grandmother. The father is a drunkard who has been sent off to the army; the boy has never met him. The family is so humble that eats just water and bread everyday; Fed’ka has to sleep with a lamb in the courtyard.

The child’s life portrait is given, as usually, by the child himself. In fact, the story is narrated by its protagonist, Fed’ka, and, moreover, from Fed’ka’s perspective with an estrangement effect. As an example, he describes his grandmother’s hat as “a sort of old rag” (*kakaya-to vetoshka*) and

talks about her double chin as a “little sack” (*meshochek*) (Tolstoy, 1957, p. 24).

All the events that Fed’ka experiences and tells us – his little brother’s christening, his sister’s marriage, and so on – are subjectivized and are seen through the child’s eyes and felt through his own heart. For instance, his mother getting pregnant is explained by him, who is ignorant of sexual matters, as a strange illness: “I remember how Mother became ill and then a baby was born from her” (*Pomnyu ya – mat’ stala bol’nee i potom rodilsya u nej mal’chil*) (ibid.). Similarly, the scene of the christening of Fed’ka’s brother is inscribed in the mindset of a child who had never seen a christening before and even worries that the priest would drown the newborn baby: “Then they drew out the baby and the priest took him and let him fall into the water. I got afraid and cried out: ‘Give me the baby back!’” (*Potom vynuli mal’chika i svyashchennik vzyal ego i opustil v vodu. Ya ispugalsya i zakrichal: «Daj ma’lchika syuda!»*) (ibid., p. 25).

The marriage of Fed’ka’s sister brings some light into the family’s hard life, which is though struck by two sad accidents: the suddenly death of Fed’ka’s newborn brother and, soon thereafter, that of his grandmother. Meanwhile, their economic conditions have got worse and worse. Till the father’s return.

At the end of the story, Fed’ka’s father comes back home after a long absence. Originally, he hides his own identity and introduces himself to Fed’ka as his father’s messenger, bringing a letter from him.

Солдат пошел со мной, да так скоро, что я бегом за ним не поспевал. Вот пришли мы в свой дом. Солдат помолился Богу и говорит: «Здравствуйте!» Потом разделся, сел на конник и стал оглядывать избу и говорит: «Что ж, у вас семьи только-то?» Мать оробела и ничего не говорит, только смотрит на солдата. Он и говорит: «Где ж матушка?» — а сам заплакал. Тут мать подбежала к отцу и стала его целовать. И я тоже влез к нему на колени и стал его обшаривать руками. А он перестал плакать и стал смеяться.

The soldier went with me, so fast that even running I couldn’t keep in step with him. Finally we got to house. The soldier prayed to God and said, “Hello!” Then he took off his coat, sat on the bench and began to look around and said, “Well, is this all the family?” Mother got shy, she said nothing and just looked to the soldier. He said, “Where is my mother?” and started crying. Mother ran up to Father and started to kiss him. I climbed onto his knees and started to search him through. He stopped crying and began laughing (ibid., p. 28).

The father discloses the family that he has advanced his military career, gaining a tidy sum of money, and has even left his bad habits (in the past, he used to drink). With the father’s help, everything will now change for the better.

“The Life of a Soldier’s Wife” can be read as a true mirror of what life has in store for everyone of us. Many of Tolstoy’s little readers, and especially those of lower classes, could find in this short story their own biographies, full of joy, sorrow, unexpected events.

The happy end of Fed’ka’s vicissitudes showed them that they ought to feel confident in life’s beauty: in effect, whatever pain may come, it would always be balanced by something good and wonderful. By including Vasya Morozov’s “The Life of a Soldier’s Wife” in his *ABC Book*, Tolstoy hoped to provide children with a model of Christian behaviour. Like the little Fed’ka of the story, children should love life as a God’s gift; to Tolstoy, “life, whatever it is, is a good higher than anything else” (Tolstoy, 1956, p. 480). Here it is Tolstoy’s Christianity speaking and, along with the other *ABC Book*’s short stories, this story powerfully conveys his religious message.

Child’s Presence in the *ABC Book*

Reading some short stories of Tolstoy’s *ABC Book*, we have seen how children are their

protagonists and at the same time their narrators. Which suggests that Tolstoy's young readers were supposed to identify themselves with the little heroes of the ABC Book's stories, who speak in fact in a child-like language like them.

To the Russian writer, children had to become the educators of themselves. The moral and religious messages Tolstoy devoted to his stories were given through children's own world and words, feelings, experiences. This was a totally new manner of conceiving learning processes.

A New Concept of Learning. Stories were meant to excite children's interest, curiosity, and imagination. In this way, learning met reality, since Tolstoy's stories for little joined simplicity and intelligibility of style and contents together with captivating strongness and effectiveness, school together with life: the premises of an operative *obrazovanye*, which Tolstoy enucleated in his instructions to teachers at the end of Book I, had been honored.

And the "sense of happiness" experienced by children during the reading of the *ABC Book* (Babaev, 1989) was an evidence of the fact that Tolstoy's love for teaching and pupils had worked its effects.

The ABC Book's Didactic Legacy

Tolstoy was trying to fill the gap between the world of peasants and the Russian literary heritage. His anthology of texts for primary education, the *ABC Book*, exemplifies this attempt, and also explains the impact of his pedagogy on Russian educational system.

Tolstoy's methods of teaching how to read reconciled different non-dogmatic approaches, by insisting on the individuality and uniqueness of pupils, on their need of a free, self-oriented learning, on moral and religious formation, and on the ethical responsibilities of educators, which shows similarities with the didactic theories of Kant, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Ushinsky, and others.

However, the *ABC Book* by Count Tolstoy deserved a special place in modern pedagogy for its fostering a full development of learners which was thought to start from children themselves. This perfect harmonisation of knowledge, spontaneous feelings, and creative potentials made pupils' challenging journey to adulthood possible, by sealing children as the pillars of Tolstoy's ethic and aesthetic.

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