



Peculiarities of the Impact of Fiction on the Upbringing of Students (or Teenagers)

Peculiaridades del impacto de la ficción en la formación educativa de adolescentes

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of the article is to determine the degree of impact that reading fiction makes on the upbringing of a new generation in this day and age. Studies of recent years give evidence of a declining interest in reading among youngsters, and the ensuing decline of upbringing, loss of moral and social benchmarks. Pedagogical observation and a survey helped determine reading preferences of teenagers and the impact books make on their spiritual and moral development. The study showed that in the educational environment of today one can successfully cultivate the personality of school students by exposing them to the reading of the best specimens of Russian classical literature, works of contemporary children's literature, taking Darya Wilke's *Between an Angel and a Wolf* and Ulf Stark's *Dance of the Polar Bears* as examples, as well as contemporary poetry, based on Timur Kibirov's poems about homeland. Thus, upbringing through literature, which is very powerful by its emotional impact, can become the foundation of society's stability and prosperity.

RESUMEN:

El objetivo del artículo es determinar el grado de impacto que tiene la lectura de ficción en la crianza de una nueva generación en la actualidad. Los estudios de los últimos años demuestran una disminución del interés en la lectura entre los jóvenes, y el consiguiente declive de la educación, la pérdida de referencias morales y sociales. La observación pedagógica y una encuesta ayudaron a determinar las preferencias de lectura de los adolescentes y el impacto que los libros tienen en su desarrollo espiritual y moral. El estudio demostró que en el entorno educativo actual se puede cultivar con éxito la personalidad de los estudiantes escolares exponiéndolos a la lectura de los mejores ejemplares de la literatura clásica rusa, obras de literatura infantil contemporánea, tomando entre un ángel y un lobo de Darya Wilke. La Danza de los Osos Polares de Ulf Stark como ejemplos, así como la poesía contemporánea, basada en los poemas de Timur Kibirov sobre la patria. Por lo tanto, la crianza a través de la literatura, que es muy poderosa por su impacto emocional, puede convertirse en la base de la

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estabilidad y la prosperidad de la sociedad.
Palabras clave: Ficción, educación, valores espirituales y morales, literatura infantil contemporánea, poesía rusa contemporánea, Timur Kibirov, posmodernidad.

1. Introduction

In the world today, development of the younger generation takes place in an era of globalization and modernization, amidst a media environment that has undergone fundamental changes, which, naturally, affects the youth (Aristova et al. 2017). The findings of some studies conducted in recent years give evidence of the low level of spiritual needs of young people and, simultaneously, of their growing material exigencies. At the same time, the world has seen emerge a new social stratum of people who permanently live amidst unemployment or subemployment, which was called *precariat* (from the word "precarious" that means "haphazard," "unreliable," "risky"). Guy Standing believes the most common image of precariat is represented by young people who graduated from school and college only to stay in uncertainty (Standing 2014), because the education system trains many more certified specialists than the labor market actually needs. As a result, the principal occupation of today's youngsters is communicating online in social media (4.0 points). At the same time, another indicator, relationship with culture, falls short of 4.0 points (a 5-point system was used) (**Ivanova 2017**). A study of political instability conducted in 84 countries across the globe found out that public disturbance was generally preceded by processes of quick modernization and concurrent growth of material exigencies. A high level of education in a community was a restraining factor in a disturbance. However, education without upbringing "is a false and dangerous thing; as often as not, it creates semi-educated people, conceited and arrogant, vain squabblers, pushy and unscrupulous social climbers [...]" (**Il'in 2001**). Thus, a symbiosis of education and upbringing of the younger generation can and must become the foundation of stability and prosperity of the future

international community. And here the leading role belongs to fiction, because it can produce a very powerful emotional impact. A special formative vector of literature lies in its ability to give a good example, to nurture and assert lofty ideals.

Traditionally, reading fiction has played a major role in forming spiritual culture of people in Russia (Shamchikova 2013). Development of the reader is a continuous process, in which family, school and society are all involved. Selection of literary works proposed by teachers or librarians to children for reading must take into account psychological and pedagogical specificities of a reader's perception peculiar to school students, based on principal types of activities in every age group, and must rely on works of well-known specialists in child psychology. One important criterion in selecting literature texts for studying at school is relevance of literary problematics for today's children and teenagers, generality of literary material with respect to the personal experience of school students in dealing with values, and with respect to the issues in which they are emotionally involved. It is in that case that actualization of cultural meanings begins, and the process of self-identification of a young reader goes on. Moreover, it is through a dialog of literatures that a dialog of communication-cum-upbringing is built — a dialog which is so necessary in present-day society. At the same time, as far back as in 1899, literature scholar and methodologist Mikhail Gershenzon argued in his paper entitled *Fiction and Upbringing* that it was unacceptable to illustrate moral rules with literary fiction (Gershenzon 1899). He insisted that a literary work should serve art, first and foremost.

In the education process of today, it is necessary to find the golden mean between literature and didacticism and to realize the educatory potential of a work of literature. It is all the more important that in contemporary Russian society, like everywhere else in the world, reading is losing ground. "If a teenager in the 1970s read about 40 books a year, today they read about 9. It's a different reader's experience. Today's teenager is a different reader, with a different set of axiological orientations. What they read is basically what is prescribed by the curriculum. They read very little beyond the curriculum. That no incentives for reading are formed is a disaster! Interest in reading, the reading culture, understanding written

texts which are understood only at the level of the narrative and event frame. These are serious socio-cultural issues," (Sobkin 2011) such is an opinion voiced by Acad. V.S. Sobkin, member of the Russian Academy of Education. The popular author Neil Gaiman is convinced that "our future depends on... reading" (Gaiman 2013).

Thus, the issue of reading and socio-cultural development of school students needs to be addressed at all stages of their adolescence and at all stages of reading works of classical and modern literature.

2. Methods

The article was prepared on the basis of methods of social and humanitarian research, including methods of empirical (description, comparison), theoretical (analysis, synthesis, analogy) and metatheoretical (hermeneutic, method of systemic analysis) levels.

3. Findings

The process of observation and research reveals that a young reader needs advice in selecting books for reading. Specialized departments for psychological support of readers and for social and psychological issues of child reading, which were set up at many libraries, help librarians, teachers, social workers, parents and school students themselves find their way in selecting modern literature works. It is in lively debates and discussions, using contemporary children's fiction as example, specialists can conduct research (psychology and pedagogics of child reading and creative pursuits; book therapy), as well as give advice, organize training and corrective lessons aimed at addressing educatory objectives. Specialists involved in school pedagogical practice talk increasingly often about creating special pedagogical conditions, which include work in small groups, flexibility of training, autonomy in education and thinking, providing links between education and real life, work under the guidance of an enthusiastic tutor (Renzulli 1997). The list can be enlarged by adding commitment to project-based training and development of social and emotional imagination (includes empathy, reflective ability, projecting one's future), (Papadopoulos 2016) and opportunities for creative self-fulfillment (Gotlieb et al. 2016).

It does not mean at all that reading fiction at school and at home does not fulfill a formative function. School contributes to forming a qualified reader, who is capable of understanding literary works, of empathizing and of giving their own evaluation of what is going on in them, and, in addition, it develops a habit of reading. As for moral upbringing, it always takes place when a literary work is read, reflected upon and discussed, when teenagers react to the events, actions of characters, and think how they themselves would act in a certain situation.

All that was revealed in a local written survey of teenagers. The first group was comprised of school students aged 10 to 13, and the second of those aged 14 to 16. When compiling the questionnaire, we knowingly refrained from using the words "moral" and "upbringing." We were interested in getting the opinion of young readers on the functionality of literature studies, on the possibility of the existence of ideal literary characters who could be role models, and of their presence in the works of literature familiar to the children.

School students identified three functions of literature: developing, formative and entertaining. Characteristically, readers from the first group identified to an equal extent the developing and formative functions of literature. They shared their recollections about cases in their lives where a book helped them solve some complicated situation, or where they felt their superiority in development compared to their peers owing to the experience they got from reading books. In their opinion, "when we read, we learn many new words, it develops speaking skills."

Virtually everybody talked about books forming moral virtues: being kind-hearted, brave, fair, honest, helping those in distress, "loving nature and all living things," one's homeland. Here are a few opinions expressed by the teenagers: "when you read a story, you involuntarily borrow for yourself all the best from it, you learn how to behave," "reading a book, you become wiser," "the reader sees a good character act and will behave the same

way in a similar situation," etc.

In the first group, 15% of the teenagers read books exclusively for entertainment, and argue that following a story unfold, "getting the feel of" a character's image, empathizing with them in various situations is the best kind of leisure and entertainment, especially relevant in case of adventure or sci-fi literature and detective stories or novels.

It does not mean all students were unanimous: 2% of those polled in that age group noted that reading works of fiction did not give them any pleasure, "did not affect their life in any way." Hopefully, they will discover the magical world of literature one day!

Readers from the second group, who already have a certain reading experience, believe that above all literature nurtures the reader, then develops, and only 3% read books for pleasure. They are already familiar with the terms "moral choice" and "moral upbringing," so they use them in their answers. Here are some examples: "fiction, it seems to me, nurtures morality in people, because it teaches readers how to do right," "literature is an adviser, an assistant and a teacher, in books one can find answers to all essential questions that matter in life"; "in my life, reading fiction helps me a lot when I'm faced with a moral choice"; "literature develops in me qualities, such as love for people, kindness, mercy, I want to be a strong and noble person, like heroes in books"; "reading books helps me improve myself, become better, every book produces a moral impact on the reader"; "fiction nurtures in the reader compassion, sympathy for people, fortitude, ability to overcome life's troubles, and other virtues of human soul."

Reflections of high school students can be generalized: fiction develops its reader morally, first of all, and, as it turned out, not by showing an ideal hero worthy of imitating.

In the first group, 70% of school students are convinced that most literary characters they know about can be role models. However, it turned out that a character's perfection depends on how students perceive being perfect: if a reader personally lacks courage or quick wit, then a literary character endowed with those qualities immediately seems to be worthy of imitating. Among the literary characters named in the poll, Vladimir Dubrovsky from Pushkin's novel *Dubrovsky*, Seryozha from Alexander Kuprin's story *The White Poodle*, Vasya from Vladimir Korolenko's long story *In a Bad Company* were at the top of the list.

In the second group, 60% of the readers, denying presence of ideal characters in fiction, spoke of a character who was "nearly perfect." 40% of teenagers said there could not be a perfect hero, because works of literature concentrate mainly on representing people, and there are no ideal people.

Here is one opinion expressed by a teenager: "Every person can err, so a literary character must err. Any character, even one worthy of imitating, has bad qualities. In Russian literature, there are no purely good characters. It would not be interesting to read about such characters, and why should anyone write about them? Maybe, Masha Mironova (Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter*) and Tatyana Larina (Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*) approach the ideal."

4. Discussion

School reading is controlled by the teacher, and so works of literature included in the curriculum are absorbed by students to varying degrees. However, the mission to engage school students in reading, upbringing a literate reader remains partially unsolved. And here leisurely reading of young people plays an important part. Today, modern children's literature offers a wide array of works for junior children and teenagers. Those books treat issues in which school students can be emotionally involved: emotional stress about the parents' divorce, death of someone close, domestic violence, a child's painful adaptation to the school environment, developmental disorders, sickness, complicated relations with classmates, parents, teachers, etc.

Between an Angel and a Wolf, a long story of the modern author Darya Wilke, dwells upon domestic violence, upbringing, and understanding between parents and children, between an adult and a child, between a teacher and a student. As he lives with his widowed mother after his father's death, Wolfie finds a school notebook in the attic, and he learns from that

book that he has an elder brother. The child has a natural wish — to find his brother. But his desire meets with violent aggression on the part of his mother. Child abuse in Austria is a real problem that teachers and psychologists try to understand and handle. Many specialists believe it is related to the fact that there was no denazification in Austria, unlike Germany, and the country has not fully realized its role in World War II. It means that lack of understanding, falsehood, aggression and all other things sank into the family, and until now it has repercussions on the upbringing of the younger generation.

The author is against separating good adults from bad ones. Adults depicted by Wilke are unhappy themselves as much as anything, because they are ridden with baggage from the past, which cannot be thrown away overnight; among them, there is a mother who “preventively” beats her son, and a chaplain who beats students for minor digressions, and an uncle who comes at weekends to enforce punishment. But all of them are unhappy people, each in their own way, people who need love and understanding. And a teenaged reader together with Wolfie has to cover a long way of approaching his near and dear ones, walking like a rope dancer, balancing between an angel and a wolf, a child and an adult, grievances and an ability to forgive.

Ulf Stark, a well-known Swedish author who is much loved by teenagers worldwide, has said that most of his books are about friendship, about children who communicate and address their problems together. In his books, Stark is not afraid of speaking frankly with young readers, he does not avoid difficult topics, he honestly and with great humor insists on a dialog of generations. Ulf Stark’s long story *Dance of the Polar Bears* speaks about the most important matter: how difficult it is to find yourself and your place in life.

Lasse, the main character, is an ordinary Swedish teenager: he is not a very good student, he wears frayed pants, listens to Elvis Presley’s music and engages in boyish escapades so natural at his age. He loves his parents and always waits for the miracle of New Year holidays spent with his family. But one day everything changes. When their parents separate, children are not always asked who they want to live with. Lasse would like to live with his father, but he can’t: his father, upset and unhappy, lets him go and live with his mother. His stepfather tries to get along with Lasse, helps him with his studies. And here we see the eternal loser and simpleton Lasse suddenly blossom from someone’s attention, become a well-performing student and an uninhibited communicator. But all that has the downside: his former friends begin to consider him a social climber and avoid him. Lasse involuntarily starts to think about his preferences: a teacher’s praise or socializing with his teenaged friends? Who is he and what is he in reality? The teenager suddenly discovers that he is faced with a choice between the new image of an exemplary boy with brilliant prospects and a former Lasse, who looked like his father, “good for nothing” and sulky like a bear. The story has an open ending, but the desire to reconcile the two contradicting worlds and to find one’s own way in life is significant.

Traditionally, love for homeland has always been nurtured at Russian school in the process of reading and studying Russian poetry classics. But, with one’s homeland being the most important value for every human being, modern Russian poets approach eternal values in a very peculiar way in their poetry.

One of the most influential Russian poets today is Timur Kibirov (born in 1956), whose poems have been translated into many languages: English, Italian, French, and others. Kibirov began his career in Russian poetry as a postmodernist and conceptualist, and in his early poems he treated traditional Soviet values with irony.

Kibirov’s first poetic works appeared on the Russian literary horizon in the late 1980s and drew attention by the fact that the poet organically incorporated in his poems obvious and hidden quotes from Russian and international literature classics, thus generating a dialog between his position as an author and those poets and writers who were revealed to the keen reader in more or less recognizable quotes. Today, the name of Timur Kibirov is mentioned among other names of Russian poets of the late 20th and early 21st century included in the curriculum of Russian schools. Using Timur Kibirov’s poems about Russia for instilling patriotism in school students will be successful if they are shown the evolution of the theme of homeland in his creative legacy. For instance, in the introduction to Kibirov’s

early poem *Through Farewell Tears* (1988) “the readers have before their eyes a broad and comprehensive picture of the Soviet world, which is composed, like a mosaic, from precise details-recitations” (Agenosov et al. 2006).

In chapter 1 of the poem, the image of Russia is filled by Kibirov with hidden quotes from Soviet songs and verses of famous Russian poets, for instance, “a dream with no end and boundary” from Alexander Blok’s poem *Oh spring, with no end and boundary...* or “We were thrown on the Kronstadt ice,” which is a rehash of Eduard Bagritsky’s poem *The Death of a Pioneer Girl*, canonical for the Russian reader. Naturally, those reminiscences can be discovered by school students with the teacher’s help, but, when working with texts full of allusions, turning to online search engines for the sake of comment could be worthwhile.

Metatextuality, a characteristic trait of Kibirov’s lyrical poetry, is also revealed in his works about Russia, which are linked to world literature via an internal dialog. It is important to show to school students that, reflecting on Russia in the poem *Chesterton did well – he lived in England...*, the poet compares his homeland with England. Kibirov opposes historical and cultural realia of English literature (“Jingle bells”, Dingley Dell, Mr. Pickwick, Sam Weller, Lancelot), which are associated by the poet with joy and merrymaking, to the characteristic images of Russian literature (steppe, snow, road) and concealed allusions to Alexander Pushkin’s novel *The Captain’s Daughter* (Petrusha’s cart, the guide), which are associated with difficulties both of the geographic situation and historical ways of Russia.

Indeed, in the early 21st century, we see increasingly less irony in Kibirov’s poems, and irony is created by an unusual juxtaposition of quotes familiar to the Russian reader. The poet is no longer just a mocking-bird who rejects slogans of Soviet ideology. A philosophical subtext emerges in his poems, and the poet starts to re-think his own axiological system according to eternal values and traditions of Russian mentality. For instance, in the poetic collection *On the Margins of “A Shropshire Lad”* (2007), he turned to the creative legacy of the 19th-century English poet Alfred Edward Housman. Kibirov does not translate his poems literally; instead, he rehashes them in his own manner, as though writing them down on the margins of his predecessor’s book. It is advisable and interesting to give those parallel texts to school students, showing to them that there are values which are important to people of different ethnic origins and convictions.

An Ossetian by birth, Kibirov has professed his love for the country many times in other poems about Russia, from which he does not want to leave anywhere:

- “And as for love... **yes, I do love, stop bugging me”** (*I You Only Were Smaller...*);
- “**And Russian or not Russian – I don’t know, / But I’m going to die here”** (*The Russian Song*);
- “It’s Homeland. It / Is ours indeed” (*Returning from Shilkov to Konkovo. Pedagogical Poem*).

Timur Kibirov’s patriotic stance is clear: homeland is meant to be loved, no matter what.

5. Conclusion

Reading books is inseparably linked to the upbringing of a “morally developed, tenacious, nationally aware individual” (**Peremilovskij** 1929). High-school students also think that fiction develops the reader morally, above all, and, as it turned out, not at all by representing an ideal hero worthy of imitating. So, when organizing school reading, it is necessary to pay more attention to books aimed at nurturing spiritual and moral values, contributing to a more quiet and civilized settlement of any (social, personal, ethnic) conflicts. A work of literature is interesting to the young reader not by the presence of an ideal hero who can be a role model, but, on the contrary, by the presence of a character who is evolving, who makes mistakes, such as Grigory Pechorin from Mikhail Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* or Hamlet from William Shakespeare’s namesake tragedy. A character like that, by whose side one can go through trials and tribulations, fight for the good side, justice, acquire personal experience, nurtures the best human qualities both in himself and in the reader.

A beginner in reading is interested in himself or herself, above all. So, most works of modern literature speak about moving into adulthood and about family relations. They also describe how a stubborn teenager who challenges everything learns to understand people who are so unlike him, how he or she changes, when he or she becomes happy. In the process of reading, through emotional response and reflections, a person develops independence, personal responsibility, creative abilities and qualities that allow them to study, act and feel in harmony with themselves and with society.

Poetry is meant to teach young people to address their own antagonisms. For instance, reading Kibirov's poems on Russia must bring school students to the conclusion that his works are gradually losing the ironic attitude, so peculiar to modernism, towards notions important to Russian citizens. "In the mature period of his creative career, **Kibirov began to assert traditional values for Russian classics: believing in God, love for homeland, friends, for the near and dear**" (Davydova et al. 2007).

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