

Sukhomlinsky News

No. 67
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Appreciating beauty

Dear readers,

The stories in this month's newsletter have been translated from Ukrainian by Nataliya Bezslova. I would like to thank her for her assistance in bringing Sukhomlinsky's legacy to an English speaking audience.

The rest of the newsletter is devoted to continuing translation of the final chapter in Pavlysh Secondary School, which is on aesthetic education.

In this month's extract, Sukhomlinsky explains his approach to teaching an appreciation of beauty in nature, literature and painting.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Aesthetic education

In this issue we continue our translation of the final chapter of *Pavlysh Secondary School*, which is on aesthetic education.

Aesthetic perception and aesthetic creativity

In aesthetic perception, as a cognitive and emotional process, there is a close connection between concepts, ideas, judgments—thought in general—on the one hand, and feelings and emotions on the other. The success of aesthetic education depends on how deeply a pupil apprehends the nature of the beautiful. But the influence of the beauty of nature, of works of art, of the surrounding environment, on their inner world, depends not only on the objective existence of beauty, but also on the character of the pupil's activity, on the way in which beauty is incorporated into their relationships with those around him. Beauty that enters a person's life as an element of their spiritual world awakens aesthetic feelings.

Every person assimilates the beauty of nature, musical melodies and language. But this assimilation depends on their active participation, by which we mean work and creativity, thought and feeling, perceiving, creating and evaluating beauty. The more objects there are in nature that are humanised by emotional perception, that are experienced as the beauty of the surrounding world, the more beauty a person sees around them, the more beauty excites and moves them, both the beauty that is created by other people, and the beauty that is primordial, not created by human hands. Those children and adolescents for whom constant communion with nature has become an important part of their spiritual lives, are deeply touched and moved by descriptions of nature in literary works, and by the depiction of natural scenes in paintings.

[Continued on the following page]



Aesthetic education (cont.)

We try to ensure that every one of our pupils, from an early age, cherishes and cares for a little tree, for a rose bush, for flowers, for birds, for all things living and beautiful. It is especially important that such care becomes habitual. That is why every student looks after a plant in their class nook of beauty. Each one has their nesting box for starlings or their tree hollow with a nest of tits; each protects a swallow's nest. This area of aesthetic creativity is deeply personal, individual in nature. Without individual, personal feelings, there can be no aesthetic culture.

Aesthetic creativity connected with the appreciation of literature and art is also of great significance.

The aesthetic perception of works of literature, music, and visual arts, also require active participation. This participation consists of aesthetic evaluation, of a deep appreciation of those attributes that are inherent in the object of perception itself. We try to ensure that, from an early age, children appreciate the beauty of the language in a work of literature, that they are excited by the description of nature and by the depiction of the spiritual worlds of the characters. A student who in childhood has experienced the beauty of language many times, strives to express their innermost thoughts in words. Many years of experience has convinced us that the students who try their hand at literature in adolescence and youth, writing poems, short stories and essays, are the ones upon whom the beauty of language in the works of great writers has left a deep impression in childhood.

Children spend some of their free time listening to the expressive reading of works of literature. In the junior classes special lessons are devoted to the reading of favourite works.

At these lessons, each one reads the works they like best: poems, extracts from short stories and novellas. The teacher also reads their favourite work. Of course, a single lesson is not long enough, so sometimes we dedicate a whole morning to reading. Then the morning is devoted to one major work.

In the middle and senior years, students read extracts from works of classical and modern literature, both national and international.

Experience has shown us that appreciating the beauty of paintings (both originals and reproductions) arouses in children an aspiration to express their thoughts and feelings, their attitude to the surrounding world, in colour, line, and the combination of various shades. This is an aspiration that we support and develop. The children have albums for drawing, and many children not only draw various objects, but also seek to express their feelings.

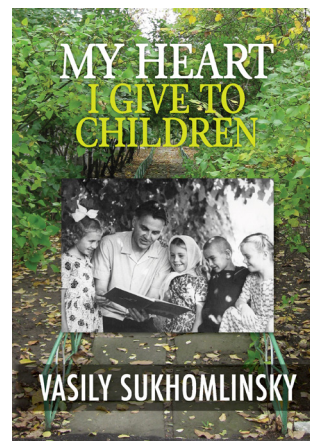
From time to time our school organises children's art exhibitions. For instance, in 1964/65 an exhibition of children's drawings from grades one to four was devoted to the theme 'Our memories of the summer holidays', another to the theme 'Our orchard and vineyard', a third to the theme 'Golden autumn has arrived', a fourth to 'Winter' and a fifth to 'Dreams of space flight'.

Mikhail Sholokhov's story *The fate of a man* made a tremendous impression on our senior students. Before reading the story, they had already learnt about an unknown hero, who had performed a heroic deed in our village during the Nazi occupation.

After one of their punitive expeditions, the Nazis gathered the population of our village and triumphantly announced that all the partisans had been killed. The last of them, taken alive, would

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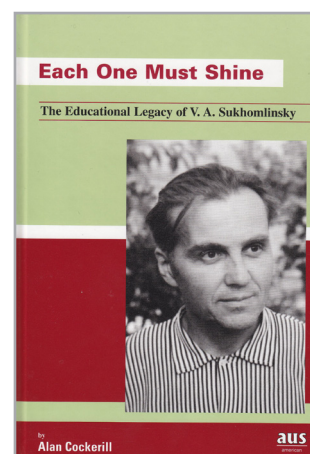
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confirm this. Indeed, there was a traitor prepared to say what the enemy wanted. Hundreds of village folk stood there, crushed by this news. But just then a young man emerged from the crowd, approached the German officers, and requested permission to say a few words to the villagers. They gave permission. The young man said, 'Don't believe the Nazis. I am a partisan. There are thousands of us. We are still fighting and will keep fighting. I came here to certain death, but my death is a necessary sacrifice. You must believe that as long as our people live, those who fight for our people, the partisans, are also alive.'

The stunned Nazis took a while to come to their senses. The young man was seized and shot on the spot. But his words breathed new strength into those to whom they were addressed.

For our senior students, the picture portrayed by Sholokhov shed new light on the heroic deed of an unknown youth, that had taken place in our village a quarter of a century earlier.

Little children, grade three students, often cry when the teacher reads them *Yanko the musician*, a story by the Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz. It is as if they are directly witnessing the events described by the writer. The grief of which he writes becomes their own grief. They realise that in the past they have often not paid attention to the small events of their daily lives. They mentally place themselves in the place of the boy in the story and try to decide what they would have done in his place. Of course, Soviet children cannot imagine the living conditions in a society long gone. They mentally transfer their moral and aesthetic criteria into that terrible world. They speak with indignation of the exploitative landowner. Each one declares that they and their friends would definitely punish the cruel landowner...

Lyric poetry particularly

enriches our vision of the world. For our senior students, reading Pushkin's poem 'Whether I walk the noisy streets' always conjures up a picture of eternal, immortal life, and brings on thoughts about the succession of the generations. The students are sad at the thought that human beings are mortal, that young people become old and decrepit, but this sadness casts into even greater relief the beauty of life and its joys. The young men and women experience an urge to live more fully, and to know more deeply everything that is connected to creation, to the immortal life of nature, and the eternal human aspiration for happiness. The poetic words awaken noble impulses of the soul. On one occasion, after the reading of this poem, one of the young men said, 'Let's plant an oak that will live for a thousand years.' We planted an acorn from which a young oak grew, and now it is ten years old. It has barely reached the height of a human being, but we already refer to it as 'the thousand-year oak'. Thus, from generation to generation, our school community will hand on the baton, and dream of the immortality of eternal life.

We attach great significance to the viewing of paintings. In the junior classes, we do this during reading lessons, in the middle and senior years, during literature lessons. Sometimes the same painting is studied several times, during the junior, middle and senior years. The first viewing is usually not accompanied by extensive explanations regarding the details of the painting. The students view the painting usually at the conclusion of a discussion, during which they develop a certain attitude towards a particular phenomenon of nature or of social life, or sometimes after direct contact with nature.

For example, while out walking with the children, we stop to rest in a sunny clearing in the middle of a birch grove. The children

cannot help feeling the beauty of the white trunks against the deep green background, of the play of light and shade. The graceful trees, the blue sky, the bright sunshine, the river sparkling in the distance, the green grass, the humming of the bees: all of these enter their consciousness as personified objects. After returning to the classroom, we show the children a reproduction of Levitan's *Birch grove*, and it makes a very strong impression on the children, even though this viewing is not accompanied by any commentary. It is as if the children discover themselves in the artist's masterpiece. It reawakens the feelings they have just experienced when communing with nature, but now these feelings arise as a memory of the past, as a desire to reconnect with nature again and again, to feel and experience its beauty.

For students in the middle and senior years, we conduct evening and morning sessions, devoted to particular paintings. After briefly describing the life and work of the artist, we concentrate mainly on the images in the painting, trying to convey the content of the painting in vivid, expressive language, and to explain the brushwork that characterises the artist's work.

In order to explain the beauty of a painting to students, the teachers must undertake the necessary preparation, and constantly improve their knowledge in this area of aesthetic culture. Each of our teachers keeps adding to their personal album of reproductions of pictures by eminent artists. Our staff conduct activities devoted to the visual arts. Over a number of years, we have developed a program of discussing paintings. This program incorporates discussions of a single painting (sometimes two or three paintings) by an eminent artist: Russian, Soviet or international.

[To be continued next month.]



Stories

What a musician!

In some tall green millet lives a cricket. During the day, he hides from the sun. As soon as the sun goes down, the cricket climbs onto the tallest stalk and sits on a green leaf. The millet spreads out before him like a forest. He sits and tunes his fiddle, for the cricket is an incredible musician! He has a singing fiddle. The cricket touches the fiddle with his bow, and divine, enchanting music rings out. The trees and flowers listen to his music. Little hares and mice listen to his music. The whole steppe listens.

The gentle breeze and the cold wind

In a deep ravine, in a dark forest, two winds were sleeping. The gentle one was a lad with blue eyes. The cold one was an old man with a prickly beard. Winter came. The sun no longer rose high in the sky. The fields were covered with white snow. The treetops whispered anxiously to each other. In the deep ravine, the old man woke. He rose and strode out of the forest. A blizzard wailed. The cold wind stalked the earth, rivers froze, and a blizzard howled.

At long last the sun began to rise higher in the sky. The old man's back began to ache. He dragged his feet to the deep ravine and fell asleep.

The gentle breeze woke up and danced out of the forest. The sun smiled, streams of water broke free from their icy prison, flowers began to bloom, and the grass whispered of the spring.

How snowflakes ring

It was a dark winter evening. The sun was hiding below the horizon, lending a rosy glow to the carpet of snow. Stillness was in the air, and only the stars were twinkling in the sky.

Suddenly, a black cloud appeared in the north. The carpet of snow turned dark. Snowflakes fell to the ground. They quietly covered the field, forest,

and road. I listened to the quiet snowfall and heard a gentle ringing. It sounded as if somebody far, far away was touching a crystal bowl with a tiny silver hammer.

What was ringing? I walked toward the sound, listening attentively. The ringing was coming from a little fir tree that was growing in the school yard. I was stunned: the tiny snowflakes were ringing! They were hanging on the branches of the little fir tree, touching each other and ringing, ringing like little silver bells. Even the moon was listening.

The boy and the snowflake

A snowflake fell from the sky. It was fluffy, soft, light, crystal clear, and as beautiful as a star.

A boy was standing on the ground. He was watching the snowflake fall and was thinking to himself, 'It is going to fall under somebody's feet and will be trampled'... No, it must not fall to the ground! It cannot be trampled underfoot!

The boy raised his hand. He wanted to caress the snowflake! But it fell onto his gentle, warm palm and melted. Almost crying, the boy gazed at his palm, and the drop of water sparkled like a teardrop.

The acacia and the bee

Early in the morning, a bee flew out of her beehive. She remembered that yesterday she had taken nectar from the buckwheat. The field of buckwheat was far away. What if started raining? She could fly to the buckwheat to get a drop of nectar and get soaked in the rain? The Bee thought about this, buzzing to herself, and came to a decision.

'I'll ask Acacia. She knows. When it's going to rain, she has lots of nectar. When it is going to be dry, she has none.'

The bee flew to the acacia and asked, 'Is it going to rain today?'

'Take a look in my little nectar cups and you will see.'

The Bee looked inside the little nectar cups and they were full, so it was going to rain.

She should not fly far from her home. And why would she, when Acacia was treating her with sweet nectar!

