



**Literary sources in reconstructing school history:  
the case of *Cuore* by Edmondo De Amicis<sup>1</sup>**

As fontes literárias na reconstrução da história da escola:  
o caso de *Cuore*, de Edmondo De Amicis

Las fuentes literarias en la reconstrucción de la historia de la escuela:  
el caso de *Cuore*, de Edmondo De Amicis

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**Abstract**

This contribution aims to reflect on the value of literary sources in educational historiography, with particular reference to the history of schooling. To this end, the novel *Cuore* by Edmondo De Amicis (1886), a milestone of Italian children's literature, is examined, through which the author places at the center of his work the pedagogy of citizenship entrusted to the process of literacy and civil coexistence in the social cohesion of differences. The school depicted by De Amicis acts as an ideological filter and a driver of ethical and civic integration: it represents the engine of the nation's social and political unification and, at the same time, the most suitable instrument for its moral and economic emancipation. The analysis of the novel also proceeds through its peculiar iconographic apparatus, from which one can perceive the transformations in cultural and educational demands over more than a century of Italian history.

**Keywords:** History of Schooling; Children's Literature; *Cuore*; Edmondo De Amicis.

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## Resumo

O artigo busca oferecer uma reflexão sobre o valor das fontes literárias na historiografia educativa, com especial referência à história da escola. Para tal, examina-se o romance *Cuore*, de Edmondo De Amicis (1886), marco da literatura infantil italiana, por meio do qual o autor coloca no centro de sua obra a pedagogia da cidadania, confiada ao processo de alfabetização e à convivência civil na coesão social das diferenças. A escola representada por De Amicis atua, de fato, como filtro ideológico e motor de integração ética e civil: representa o motor da unificação social e política da nação e, ao mesmo tempo, o instrumento mais adequado para sua emancipação moral e econômica. A análise do romance também se desenvolve por meio de seu peculiar aparato iconográfico, a partir do qual é possível perceber as transformações das demandas culturais e educativas ao longo de mais de um século de história italiana.

**Palavras-chave:** História da Escola; Literatura Infantil; *Cuore*; Edmondo De Amicis.

## Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo ofrecer una reflexión sobre el valor de las fuentes literarias en la historiografía educativa, con especial referencia a la historia de la escuela. Con este fin, se examina la novela *Cuore* de Edmondo De Amicis (1886), un hito de la literatura infantil italiana, a través de la cual el autor sitúa en el centro de su obra la pedagogía de la ciudadanía, confiada al proceso de alfabetización y a la convivencia civil en la cohesión social de las diferencias. La escuela representada por De Amicis actúa como filtro ideológico y como motor de integración ética y civil: es el motor de la unificación social y política de la nación y, al mismo tiempo, el instrumento más adecuado para su emancipación moral y económica. El análisis de la novela también se desarrolla mediante su peculiar aparato iconográfico, a través del cual es posible percibir las transformaciones de las demandas culturales y educativas a lo largo de más de un siglo de historia italiana.

**Palabras clave:** Historia de la escolarización; Literatura infantil; *Cuore*; Edmondo De Amicis.

## Introduction

In recent decades, scholars of the history of education have increasingly recognized the importance of literary sources in reconstructing the history of schooling. This paper critically analyzes the role of literary sources in historical reconstruction. It focuses on children's literature as historical testimony and an ideological device. The paper also highlights the limitations and potential of an approach that values narrative as a vehicle for memory and knowledge. Using the famous novel *Cuore* by Edmondo De Amicis as a case study, this paper will examine the textual and iconographic aspects of the work to understand how school is represented as a real and ideal institution. Additionally, it will explore how the illustrations' figurative trajectory contributes to the construction of collective memory by first confirming the author's intended message and then demystifying its meaning through transgressive and parodic iconographic representations.

The goal is to offer an interdisciplinary perspective that brings history, pedagogy, and literature into dialogue to enrich critical reflection on the cultural and pedagogical transformations that shaped the concept of the post-unification school in Italy. Additionally, the aim is to document the changes that emerge from interpreting a great literary classic, which marks its 140th anniversary of publication this year.

### 1. Literary Sources in the History of Education

Literature constitutes an important historical and educational heritage. As such, it is an important starting point for reflecting on the theoretical and methodological aspects of the history of education. This is especially true of children's literature, which has historically been characterized by strong educational value. In this sense, children's literature reflects ways of life, trends, and ideal perspectives, as well as the educational intent of its producers and promoters.

Over time, the use of literature as a historical source has been widely discussed and has found a legitimate place in the revolution promoted by the *Les Annales* school. This revolution represented the starting point for reevaluating the meaning and use of alternative sources to classical documents (Fevbre, 1966). Since then, numerous reflections on the methodology of historiographical research have made it possible to approach this atypical source, which undoubtedly possesses artistic value. When extracting historical information from a work of fiction, it is necessary to consider the complexity of this source, which spans multiple fields of knowledge, including history, linguistics, sociology, psychology, and the history of pedagogy. The content of a work and the information it provides are just two of the most obvious analytical considerations; these are "first-level messages." More useful for historiographical research are pieces of information extracted laterally, beginning with language and moving through structure, form, paratext, and intertextual meanings, which are equally important. These elements weave a dialogic relationship with each other that requires contextualization. Literary communication relies on common, recognized conventions pertinent to other cultural spheres to which literature refers (Salwa, 1985), and these conventions are historically situated. Furthermore,

In the absence of other guidelines, the rules that govern everyday "common-sense thinking" can be applied to literary fiction. Here, too, we observed the presence and necessity of categories that organize the information entering our minds to form a system (p. 192).

Thus, a literary work—the product of an author’s imagination and not necessarily historically reliable—constitutes a cultural product situated within a specific context and, as such, also positions itself within a specific horizon of expectations regarding the contemporary audience’s expectations of conformity or transgression (Jauss, 1989)—can provide information that spans various fields of interest for historical studies. Furthermore, a literary text rarely has historical truth as its object; however, even the presence of a falsification of reality carries a message, as Bloch lucidly stated:

Simply recognizing the error is not enough. One must also uncover its motives. If only, first and foremost, to understand it better. As long as doubt persists regarding its origins, something within it will remain resistant to analysis, and thus, it will remain only half-proven. Above all, a lie, as such, is, in its own way, a testimony (Bloch, 2016, p. 134).

A work of fiction, therefore, can certainly provide interesting insights into certain historical events, which must, however, be supplemented by other sources; but it is above all a testimony to customs, ways of thinking, and sensibilities, as well as a constitutive component of the phenomena that produce culture; furthermore, one must not forget that it simultaneously contributes to the construction of inclinations, fashions, social representations, and systems of thought (Cataluccio, 1986). In this regard, Balzac’s statements of intent in the introduction to his *\*Comédie Humaine\** are illuminating:

French Society would have been the historian; I was to be nothing more than its secretary. By compiling an inventory of vices and virtues, by gathering the major events generated by passions, by sketching out characters, by selecting the Society’s key events, and by creating archetypes from the combination of traits shared by various similar characters, perhaps I might succeed in writing the history forgotten by so many historians—the history of manners (Balzac, 2000, p. 185).

Based on these premises, children’s literature provides a particularly favorable starting point for the reconstruction and co-construction of historical knowledge. Its intrinsic characteristics call for specific reflection that reveals other unique features compared to the rest of literary production; in fact,

Children's literature presents itself as an "apparatus" that is ideologically marked, perhaps even more so than adult literature. The link between literature and society, and between literary texts and sociopolitical ideologies, is most clearly seen in it. In fact, the vision of humanity, society, and culture that every "social power" or "hegemonic class" projects onto literature is revealed more explicitly and therefore more legibly here. Children's books reveal this ideology more explicitly and in its educational form than school or pedagogy itself does (Cambi, 1996, p. 77).

The first specific aspect to consider in children’s literature is the mode of engagement. At an early stage, a child is not an independent reader. The books they come into contact with are always selected and evaluated based on an adult's requirements and ideas—that is, the adult decides what content to present and how to communicate it. Analyzing this aspect diachronically, in relation to the evolution and trends in the publishing market, reveals the

implicit demand for literature. This is true when one acknowledges that the ideologies, fashions, and tastes of a specific era and sociocultural context influence the decision to purchase a cultural product. Second, literature conceived and produced for a reading audience experiencing the world for the first time is literature that "teaches," even when it lacks an explicit didactic intention. In short, it is literature that implicitly conveys the "values" an adult wishes to convey to a child. There is always an attempt at "social, emotional, linguistic, etc., literacy," which aims to explain something that happens in life (Martari, 2011, p. 117), primarily through aesthetic rather than theoretical means. This aspect has historically and clearly defined how adults position themselves in relation to childhood and the concept of children. Indeed, the history of literature reflects a progressive transformation of the concept of childhood (Cambi, 1985) and, in line with the evolution of printing and dissemination media, the role of literary works (Boero & De Luca, 1995).

## 2. Illustrations and *pictorial turn* in the history of education

Reflecting on the historiographical value of children's literature requires considering the value of illustration, which operates on a visual level. Although historical research, particularly historical-educational research, now classifies images as independent sources of study on par with traditional literary sources (Cantatore & Silvestri, 2024), the journey toward scientific legitimacy began relatively recently (Odini, 2025, p. 82).

With his revolutionary and widely debated work, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960), Philippe Ariès inaugurated a new phase of historical research, leading to a turning point in educational historiography and an authentic pictorial turn (Mitchell, 1992). In 1975, with his book *Essai sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, Ariès further expanded the research perspective introduced by the Annales school. He identified the qualities of historical sources produced by human creativity in their aesthetic orientation, such as art and literature. He states:

In reality, a theological idea, an artistic or literary theme—in short, anything that seems to stem from individual inspiration—can only find form and style if it is at once very close to and slightly different from the prevailing sentiment of its time.

If they were less close, they would not even be conceivable to the authors, nor understood by either the elite or the masses. If they were not different in any way, they would go unnoticed and would not cross the threshold of Art. [...] The historian must be able to distinguish between what is close and what is different. Under this condition—risky, it is true—he has the right to seek his material wherever he finds it, within a broad and heterogeneous field, to compare documents of varied nature (Ariès, 1975, p.13).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> « En réalité, une pensée théologique, un thème artistique ou littéraire, bref, tout ce qui semble provenir d'une inspiration individualiste, ne peut trouver forme et style que s'il est à la fois très proche et légèrement différent du sentiment général de son époque. S'ils en étaient trop éloignés, ils ne seraient même pas pensables par les auteurs, ni compris, pas plus par l'élite que par la masse. Pas du tout différents, ils passeraient inaperçus et ne franchiraient pas le seuil de l'art. L'historien doit pouvoir distinguer ce qui est proche et ce qui est différent. À cette condition, périlleuse il est vrai, il a le droit de puiser dans une matière large et hétérogène afin de comparer des documents de nature variée. » Notre traduction.

In this passage, the scholar emphasizes the historical and cultural significance of the iconographic source and cautions against the inherent challenges posed by such elusive and defiant documentary types (Cao, Carrara, & Seligardi, 2023).

Since then, numerous studies have followed this path, including Becchi (1994), which introduced Italian scholars to ideas that had already emerged in the European context. Another influential development was the growth of Visual Culture as a discipline. In particular, the studies by Wagner (1995) and Montandon (1990) from the 1990s contributed to a greater awareness of the complex relationships between text and image. These studies offered methodological tools for reflecting on such relationships. Other research has focused on methods and trends in the visual history of education (Mietzner, Myers, & Peim, 2005) and on the role of iconographic sources (Depaepe & Henkens, 2000; Baschet, 2014). Thus, a distinct field of study has emerged that takes into account all significant aspects of a book. Paul Goldman labeled this field a "new academic discipline" in 2012.

Illustrating a story means much more than simply inserting images, as it involves selecting models, comparing sources, and, above all, composing a new textual body that becomes—even in terms of chapter syntax—a more dynamic entity, thanks to the shot-reverse-shot effects created by the interplay between the final illustrations and the chapter openings (Brogi, 2018, p. 31).

Given the interpretive challenges posed by this type of source—such as those related to the “apparent realism” (Burke, 2001, p. 115) of the images—there is a need to employ specific critical tools. Interpretation cannot disregard historical value, stylistic and technical significance, as well as the original purpose of the work, which, even if it distorts reality, remains a product of it and a testimony to it:

Historians who fail to take into account the variety of intentions held by painters or photographers (not to mention their patrons and clients) may be seriously misled. However, the very process of distortion is itself evidence of the phenomena that many historians wish to study: mentalities, ideologies, and identities. The material or literal image constitutes good evidence of the mental or metaphorical “image” of oneself or others (Burke, 2001, pp. 35–36).

Interpreting iconographic sources requires a multidisciplinary approach. Experts in fields ranging from the history of philosophy and literature to the history of education and art history are needed because these sources evoke passions, feelings, and ideas. They contribute to the creation of lived experiences and interpretations of the world. Thus, one cannot ignore the three elements that constitute an image: its referent, how it is reconstructed in the mind of the observer, and its function in social interactions (Odini, 2025). For historians of education, it is important to consider iconographic sources as mediators of knowledge and how artists represent subjects, which can be as significant as the choice of subject matter (Rabb, 2011).

Images acquire meaning within a socio-relational context (Erll & Rigney, 2012) and can testify to specific cultural and ideological aspects of Italian educational history. This is particularly relevant because, beginning in the late 19th century, artistic production spread widely among the general public, including the lower and middle classes. This reflected a transforming society and demonstrated interest in previously overlooked subjects and issues

(Bossaglia, 2001), which sparked growing interest in the publishing market. Narratives set in school contexts and centered on the lives of characters, for example, became deeply intertwined with the history of children's literature from that point onward and constitute significant heritage (Barsotti, 2019; Campagnaro, 2024). This is evident in the work *Cuore* (De Amicis, 1886), which will be examined in detail in the following paragraphs.

Thus, the school enters historical-educational studies as more than just a legislative object codified by curricula, laws, and educational theories. It also enters as a real context of educational practices and daily life conditions, and as an "ideal school" (Meda, 2024, p. 267). This ideal school is imagined and represented by the cultural industry and is subsequently embedded in the collective imagination (Meda & Viñao, 2017). According to Ray, the reason for this interest lies in the setting offered by the school environment.

Young people are brought together in a single space, where the relationships between older and younger children, among peers, and between children and adults can be explored [...]. Through reading an engaging story, children can "test the waters," learn how people might react in specific situations, and get a glimpse of what lies ahead (2004, p. 467)

As Antoniazzi also writes, the school

whether real or fictional, it is not—and cannot be considered—a neutral place, insofar as it simultaneously represents the realm of dreams to be realized and of negative visions of the future; that is, of utopia and dystopia (2014, p. 10).

Illustrations reveal great potential of interest, not least because reading meant looking for large segments of the population over a long period of time. Literary works represented a "visual phenomenon" above all, even though 20th-century literary criticism was slow to recognize this (Cao, Carrara, & Seligardi, 2023). As Negri (2012, p. 49) argues, "The history of children's literature is the history of the encounter between words and images on the page." In Italy, the 1970s were a turning point in critical reading, leading to an awareness of the blend of words and images, including in children's literature, which had not been widely considered until then. In 1970, Bernardinis wrote, "There are not many studies on the illustration of children's books, nor has the topic been explicitly addressed" (p. 50). Two years later, Faeti (1972) published a comprehensive historical study with a novel methodological approach to identifying and interpreting illustrated sources. This study included an analysis of the work *Cuore*. Faeti devoted unprecedented attention to the history of illustration, conferring artistic dignity upon illustrators. Between the 1970s and 1980s, there was an increased urgency for interdisciplinary critical exchanges and convergences around children's literature. This is evident in the monumental work *Storia dell'illustrazione italiana* (Pallottino, 1988), which demonstrates the contributions that art history can make to an adequate reading of children's texts and their history.

Indeed, images themselves have a history. They are produced, circulated, and consumed in ways that are not always predictable by their creators (Dussel & Priem, 2017). The life of images is shaped by the modalities and practices of production, reproduction, and exhibition as well as the emotional and affective structures implicated in their fate. Images possess an "effective history" and an "affective history" (Edwards, 2015).

They are complex tangles of technologies, social forces, emotional climates, and historical possibilities, produced and mobilized by images that prompt people to act, feel, and think, and that generate nostalgia, pain, anger, revulsion, sympathy, and joy. Furthermore, these contexts are not closed circles that determine what an image is or means. Still, they are in constant flux, shifting and transforming in their interaction with other images, artifacts, and people. The material and social history of the visual, therefore, suggests that images should be analyzed as social objects. This implies, in particular, analyzing the visual from two interconnected research perspectives, focusing on both material and social-relational qualities (Dussel & Priem, 2017, p. 645).

The images and illustrations should therefore be interpreted as “*active ongoing moments*” (Dussel & Priem, 2017, p. 645), which never cease to communicate and evoke a response in the observer—objects to be examined as traces of complex relationships between past and present. This is the case with *Cuore*, which we intend to examine, and with some of its illustrations that have, centuries later, survived in the collective imagination (Barsotti & Lepri, 2024).

### 3. *Cuore*, by De Amicis, and the portrayal of school

*Cuore*, as entire generations have known it, is one of the most successful and widely read classics of Italian children's literature. Destined for immediate success when it was first published on 15 October 1886 by the Treves publishing house in Milan, *Cuore* continues to be reprinted in numerous editions in the children's and young adult collections of Italy's leading publishers.

Set against the backdrop of Piedmontese society, which played a key role in unifying Italy, the events of *Cuore* unfold. This period saw the petty bourgeoisie facing the specter of social decline, the working classes grappling with unemployment and the prospect of widespread impoverishment, and the old dynasties of the landed and financial aristocracy deeply affected by crises in agriculture and the banking system. The Turin newspapers' headlines clearly reveal the atmosphere of this transitional phase, which would not conclude in Piedmontese society until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of large-scale industrial development. The press also reflects the trajectory of the labor movement as it begins to organize politically and through unions, as well as the denunciation and awareness-raising campaign carried out by some intellectuals — including De Amicis himself — in newspapers, periodicals, novels, and treatises, in the name of humanitarian principles of fraternity and social justice. From this perspective, Enrico Bottini's school diary will serve as the basis for *Cuore*.

one of the most powerful instruments of national cultural unification (understood in an anthropological and psychosocial sense) under the banner of the intellectual hegemony of the northern bourgeoisie, at least that part of it which adhered to the ideals of enlightened and prudent progress (Asor Rosa, 1975, p. 928).

This is one of the central themes of De Amicis's text, which aligns with the broader program of civilizing the working classes, grounded in the worldview and values of the progressive bourgeoisie and its productive sectors—the architects and protagonists of the process of national political unification. *Cuore* thus accomplished a fundamental task for Italy: national unification through a literary work whose language and values were accessible

to all. The absolutely original theme of this book is the school: De Amicis, through his text, takes on the pedagogical issue that plagued the unified state and does so by giving voice to its protagonists; in this sense, the school setting and the monthly reports become two ways of narrating Italy's unification dream, bringing together rich and poor, good and bad, repeaters and top students. *Cuore* revolves around this paradigm, and De Amicis thus seeks.

to demonstrate that, even though class differences remained unchanged among the children of that famous third-grade class, as human beings and as Italians, a bond of friendship, love, and mutual respect could still develop (Asor Rosa, 1975, pp. 930–931),

It is the very foundation upon which the Italy of the future could be built. Therefore, at the heart of De Amicis's lesson lies education. There is a pedagogy of citizenship entrusted to literacy and civil coexistence within social cohesion and differences. The school acts as an ideological filter and a driving force for ethical and civic integration. It is the fulcrum of a universal emancipation of peoples, punctuated by chronicles of events involving children and adults. In *Cuore*, De Amicis portrays the school as the engine of the nation's social and political unification and the most suitable instrument for its moral and economic emancipation. Through the voice of Enrico Bottini, De Amicis writes his utopia of the school world, far removed from reality, to outline an ideal model of a school to which one should aspire. Enrico, the narrative voice, is a perfect boy from late-nineteenth-century Turin.

With its French-influenced Italian, exaggerations, overly pronounced instrumental tones, and domestic taste for rhetoric. The school in *Cuore* could be any school in Italy. However, it is set in Turin, as this utopia is an expression of a northern Enlightenment mentality. De Amicis's school is urban, as it must be, because the city functions as a constant educational stimulus. This is evident in the monuments, topography, military parades, king, carnival, All Souls' Day, market, artisan workshops, shops, construction companies, and means of transportation. The city is one of the supporting structures of De Amicis's school (Boero & Genovesi, 2009, p. 16).

The teacher and the family are two other pillars of the De Amicis school. Master Perboni, the author of the monthly reports in which he shares his insights, is a serious man who never laughs or jokes. He is the figure without whom the school could not exist. If the classroom is the continent—Italy itself—then the teacher is the content, a constitutive element of the educational experience. Through school and the shared experience of the classroom—a sort of nation in vitro—one learns that in a civilized country, there must be spaces and contexts in which all disparities can be eliminated. Thus, the teacher becomes the one who levels out differences in the classroom, erasing inequalities in the name of a common goal. The family also plays a fundamental role in *Cuore*. Alberto Bottini, Enrico's father, is the

archetype of the school's pillar of support. He is always present alongside the narrator, Enrico, during the school's most significant events, such as encounters with classmates on the street, at school, or at home; comments on classroom activities; conversations with the principal; visits to various places in the city; and visits to the old teacher (Boero & Genovesi, 2009, p. 16).

To convey his vision of an ideal school, De Amicis employs a narrative structure that stands out as one of the most striking aspects of *\*Cuore\**, built entirely on the harmonious interplay of three elements: Enrico's school diary, the letters from his father, mother, and sister, and the monthly reports by Teacher Perboni. These are three parts that refer to one another and, through their convergence and content coherence, underpin the book itself. It is a procedure that represents a structural constant within which the three accounts evoke one another:

Three texts glide over one another, intertwining and merging fluidly while mutually reinforcing and "invigorating" each other. The text's dynamic structure facilitates reading and corrects the "languors" placed programmatically at the center of the operation (Cambi, 1996, p. 325).

The protagonists in this universe are archetypes, either good or bad, that are necessary for the narrative to progress and achieve its goals. School becomes the space in which individual wills converge toward a single goal through constant mutual emulation under the teacher's wise guidance. According to Franco Cambi (1985), the "ideal type" of *Cuore* is constructed around three key characters: Enrico, Garrone, and Franti. The first two are similar and integrated; they symbolize the behavior that should characterize the children and the bourgeoisie, representing solidarity, fraternal understanding, and communication. As direct witnesses of the heart, they are affectionate and generous. They act in favor of equality and fraternity. Enrico has an interclassist and humanitarian perspective, which is constantly reinforced by his parents' letters. Garrone embodies a sense of natural and firm justice, which becomes the guiding principle of his actions. Garrone is always described as good and endowed with a mature sense of justice. He can be considered the emblem of the ideal person conceived by De Amicis: calm, never seditious, responsible, aware of what is just, open to collaboration, and firmly conscious of his identity. Enrico, in turn, becomes the paradigm of the progressive bourgeois conscience that seeks to understand and embrace the people's values and virtues. Above all, he is an ethical symbol.

Franti, on the other hand, is the troublemaker who disrupts the school structure and the entire novel, so carefully crafted by its author. Franti is the rebel and bully who exits the scene too early for one to grasp his true role in the novel's narrative. However, as Umberto Eco observes in his well-known "Elogio di Franti" (2001), Franti, with his laughter and sadistic mockery, illuminates the paternalism of the post-unification school system. Franti is the dystopia, while Garrone is the utopia: the school is a source of negative visions for one and a place of dreams to be realized for the other.

Thus, the idea of Franti as a metaphysical motif in the distorted sociology of *Cuore* begins to take shape. Franti's laughter is destructive and is regarded as evil solely because Enrico equates the Good with the existing order, from which he benefits. But if the Good is merely what a society recognizes as favorable, then Evil is simply that which opposes what that society identifies as Good, and Laughter—the instrument with which the hidden innovator casts doubt on what a society considers Good—will appear with the face of Evil, when, in reality, the one who laughs—or who smiles ironically—is nothing more than the maieutic guide to another possible society (Eco, 2001, p. 362).

Franti is not merely a symbol of banished diversity and a detestable character in Enrico's eyes. As Franco Cambi (1985) suggests, Franti highlights the real tensions in Umbertine society and attests to the presence of a limit in De Amicis's project. Franti reveals the fissure within the "oleographic image of society and childhood" that De Amicis constructs and proposes as a mass deontological scheme (Cambi, 1985, p. 102).

De Amicis's proposal—and one that Franti calls into question—is a school for everyone, presented as a necessary form of emancipation because of its secular nature, focus on teaching, relationships with families, and ability to influence social situations. It is a school founded on affection and sentiment without neglecting instruction, a heartfelt method concerned with the moral dimension of the educational process.

**Figure 1** - E. Nardi, illustration by E. De Amicis, *Cuore*, Milan, Treves, 1886.



#### 4. The Visual Journey of *Cuore*: Illustrations as Metatext

Edmondo De Amicis's novel *Cuore* played a central role in shaping a shared school memory deeply rooted in the Italian collective imagination. This memory coincides largely with the author's pedagogical and moral vision, yet transcends it. The book is "fortunatissimo e contestatissimo" ("extremely successful and highly contested") (Cambi, 1996, p. 338) and has spanned nearly 140 years of publishing history, adapting to profoundly distinct political, cultural, and educational contexts. This longevity allows us to observe how the novel has continued to occupy a prominent position in critical debates about schools, serving as a reference point for reflections on education, the school institution, and its founding values.

From this perspective, *Cuore's* iconographic apparatus takes on decisive importance. The novel's illustrations are not merely decorative elements, but rather a metatext that guides reading, reinforces the educational message, and contributes to the formation of a visual memory of school. A diachronic analysis of the images that accompanied *Cuore* throughout its numerous editions reveals not only the evolution of educational demands in

Italy, but also how the novel influenced the imaginations of generations of readers—children and adults alike—for over a century.

In the nineteenth century, Italian children's and young adult literature was characterized by a close relationship between words and images (Pallottino, 1986, p. 171). Books intended for children have a polyphonic dimension in which text and illustrations work together to create a unified ideological project.

*Cuore* is a paradigmatic example of this: although the first edition of the novel is devoid of images, its subsequent publishing success is closely linked to the development of a rich iconographic apparatus. This collection helped establish an ideological continuity between text and images, creating a relationship of complicity that reinforced the effectiveness of De Amicis's educational and political message for a long time.

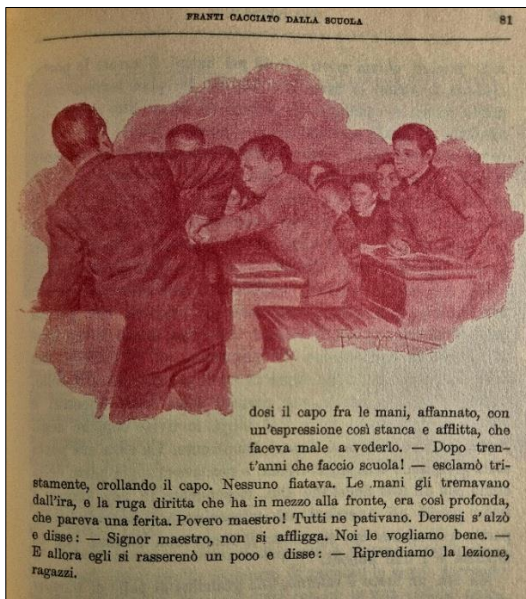
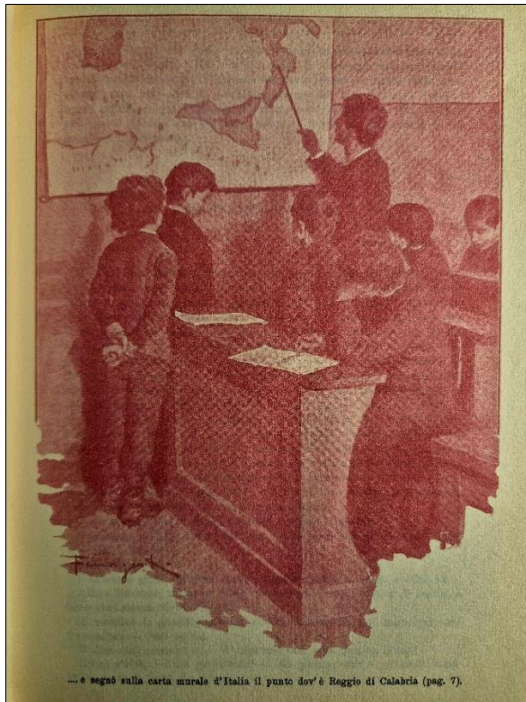
The visual history of *Cuore* is particularly significant in the history of Italian illustration. In 1891, just five years after its initial publication, the Milanese publisher Treves released the 126th edition of the novel. This edition was enriched with two hundred engravings entrusted to "three masters of the art," who illustrated every page "word for word," creating "the most beautiful, most realistic, most interesting, and most wisely patriotic book ever placed in the hands of youth" (Pallottino, 1986, p. 173).

The artists are Arnaldo Ferraguti, Enrico Nardi, and Giulio Aristide Sartorio. They were already well-known in the world of illustration. Although they aligned with De Amicis's message and the publisher's guidelines, they offered different interpretations informed by their respective artistic sensibilities. Ferraguti was drawn to themes of social protest, Nardi had an ironic and lighthearted style, and Sartorio was an established painter in the Italian art scene. Each artist contributed to the complex representation of school and childhood, making the novel's key interpretive elements tangible and expanding its meanings.

According to Faeti, Ferraguti's work reveals an intention to depict the masses clearly. However, he does so without fully shedding ambivalent attitudes marked by fear and mistrust toward the lower classes (Faeti, 2011, p. 114).

Of the three, however, Ferraguti leaves the most lasting mark on the school imagery associated with *Cuore*. His illustrations of the classroom, featuring a map of a united Italy, desks, and students, as well as images of the expulsion of Franti and other iconic scenes from the novel, have become visual archetypes imprinted on the imaginations of young Italian readers for decades. These significant images highlight class contrasts, marginalized groups, manual labor, emigration, and the schooling process. These elements reflect the social upheavals of post-unification Italy. At the same time, these illustrations accentuate the emotional and sentimental tones that characterize the work, contributing to its moral and pedagogical interpretation.

Figures 2 and 3 - A. Ferraguti, illustrations by E. De Amicis, *Cuore*, Milan, Treves, 1886<sup>3</sup>.



The iconographic interpretation proposed by Ferraguti, Nardi, and Sartorio remained largely unchanged until the mid-20th century, constituting the dominant representation of the De Amicis school.

Even when some variations emerged in the 1920s, such as Luigi Rossi's color plates and the later Garzanti editions with illustrations by Bruno Angoletta and Giorgio Tabet, the collection remained tied to earlier models.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the illustration, see Chiara Lepri, ...and marked on the wall map of Italy the spot where Reggio Calabria is located, in "Database of School Illustrations," DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53166/2034>, published on: 12/30/2022 (last accessed: 01/25/2026), <https://www.memoriascolastica.it/memoria-collettiva/illustrazioni/e-segno-sulla-carta-murale-ditalia-il-punto-dove-reggio-calabria>.

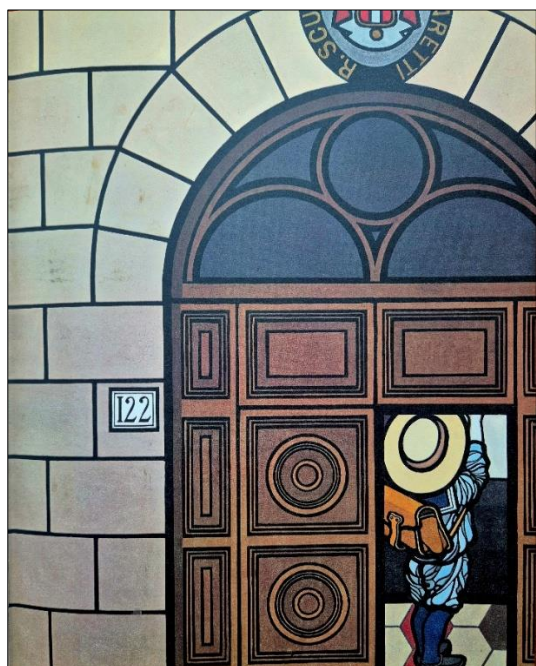
This resulted in strong iconographic continuity, contributing to the consolidation of visual stereotypes and the reinforcement of a substantially unchanging school memory. This memory persisted into the Fascist era, during which time motifs and stylistic elements were emphasized to evoke emotion.

From the postwar period onward, despite the proliferation of editions and illustrators, a persistent adherence to established clichés is evident. This trend is particularly significant when considered in relation to the profound transformations affecting the Italian school system during those same years, as it progressively became a mass school (Galfrè, 2017). However, the iconographic representations of *Cuore* continue to convey a traditional image of school as an institution—a place where the past, present, and future confront and frequently clash.

One element stands out as a key point of comparison across the various illustrated editions of *Cuore*: the figure of Franti. Franti is a student who was expelled for being degenerate. He is a symbol of an endemic evil that must be eradicated. With his sardonic laugh, he constitutes a fundamental symbolic core around which the most contrasting interpretations of the novel converge. In the 1960s, a climate of cultural and pedagogical renewal emerged in Italy with the establishment of the unified middle school and the adoption of new educational models. This produced a strong critical reaction against *Cuore*. It is in this context that semiologist Umberto Eco published *L'elogio di Franti* (1962), an essay intended to mark a turning point in the work's reception history. The essay highlights the work's rhetorical, paternalistic, classist, and conformist aspects. In this celebrated essay, Eco rehabilitates Franti's mocking laughter. Franti is the only character capable of exposing the authoritarian and repressive nature of the school represented by De Amicis. Therefore, Franti is not "bad," but rather incompatible with a system that tolerates no deviations or transgressions.

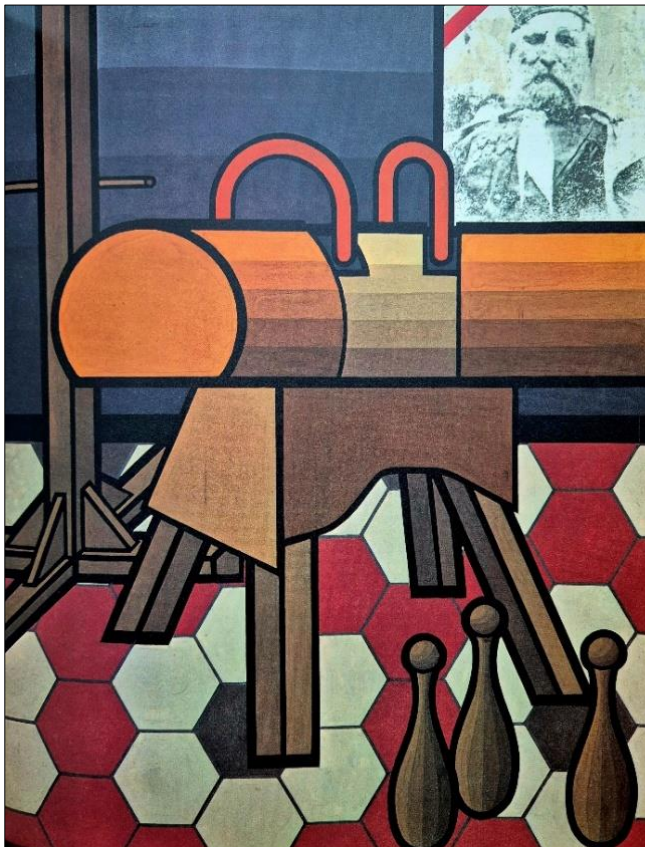
Despite the "peak of rejection" provoked by the novel (Cambi, 1985, p. 82), *Cuore*'s iconography largely reproduces outdated situations and sentiments, often limiting itself to stylistic modernization rather than substantive conceptual revision. A significant exception to this trend is the 1977 edition illustrated by Flavio Costantini and published as a gift by Olivetti.

**Figure 4** - F. Costantini, illustration by E. De Amicis, *Cuore*, Ivrea, Olivetti, 1977.



Against a national backdrop marked by the abolition of class distinctions and the establishment of the mass school system, Costantini offers a radically critical interpretation of the school as an institution, providing an “*iconographic counterpart*” to *L’Elogio di Franti*. His illustrations, dominated by imposing buildings, contorted human figures, and unsettling symbols, portray the school as a place of invisible violence and the denial of childhood.

**Figures 5 and 6** - F. Costantini, illustrations by E. De Amicis, *Cuore*, Ivrea, Olivetti, 1977.



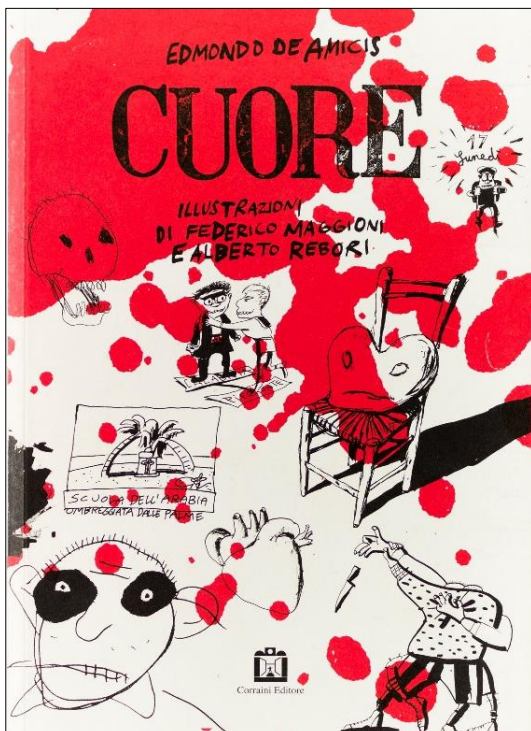
The figure of Franti, portrayed as an outcast and marginalized automaton, becomes an emblem of a claustrophobic system, indirectly evoking reflections on disciplinary and control mechanisms advanced two years earlier by Michel Foucault in *\*Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison\** (1975).

**Figure 7** - F. Costantini, illustration from E. De Amicis, *Cuore*, Ivrea, Olivetti, 1977.

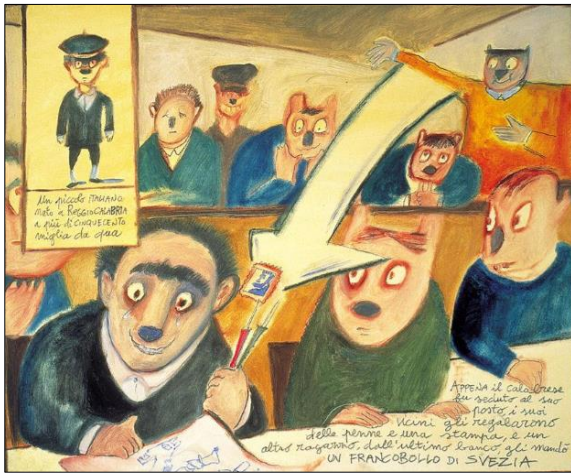


However, Costantini's vision remained isolated for a long time. In the 1980s, the iconography of *Cuore* underwent a new regression, returning to a sentimental and comforting representation, partly due to the influence of television adaptations. It wasn't until 2001, with the illustrations by Alberto Rebori and Federico Maggioni, that a disruptive, openly parodic reinterpretation of the novel emerged. Through systematic visual deconstruction, the two artists offer irreverent portrayals of the characters and events, highlighting the work's anachronistic nature while reaffirming its value as an indispensable historiographical source.

**Figure 8** - Cover by Edmondo De Amicis, *Cuore* (Corraini Edizioni 2000)

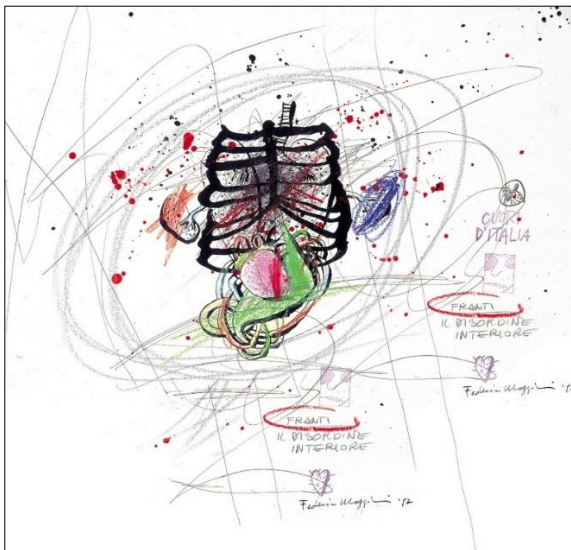


**Figure 9** - A. Rebori, ilustração de Edmondo De Amicis, *Cuore* (Corraini Edizioni 2000). 2000 Alberto Rebori. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini s.r.l.<sup>4</sup>



In fact, faced with the immutability of the original text—as if looking into a distorting mirror—the two artists engage in a provocative, systematic process of visual deconstruction, satirizing the paternalistic tones of *\*Cuore\** and exposing its limitations: in particular, it falls to Maggioni to illustrate Franti, who initially appears confused, almost the scribble of a man sentenced to life imprisonment, and later as a set of organs emerging from a ribcage (*Franti il disordine interiore: “Franti the inner disorder,”* we read in the caption). The two illustrators ultimately highlight a changed cultural climate and a vision of school—that of our own day—which, despite its difficulties, embraces new educational demands and takes responsibility for the “Frantis” who have always inhabited it: *Viva la diversità* (“Long live diversity”) is, in this regard, a heartfelt exclamation evident in an eloquent illustration by Maggioni.

**Figure 10** - F. Maggioni, illustrations of Edmondo De Amicis, *Cuore* (Corraini Edizioni 2000). 2000 Federico Maggioni. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini s.r.l.



<sup>4</sup> For more information on the illustration, see Chiara Lepri, *A Swedish Stamp*, in “Database of Illustrations on Education,” DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53166/1231>, published on: January 31, 2022 (last accessed: January 25, 2026), <https://www.memoriascolastica.it/memoria-collettiva/illustrazioni/un-francobollo-di-svezia>.

Rebori and Maggioni's iconographic work proposes a reexamination of a myth by engaging with the visual imagery it continues to fuel. Illustration thus becomes a critical tool for reviewing and analyzing the most celebrated and enduring Italian literary work on schooling. This work does indeed call for historicization but continues to provoke reflection on the school's imagery, educational models, and the relationship between past and present, establishing itself as a restless classic, open to continuous reinterpretation.

**Figure 11** - F. Maggioni, illustrations of Edmondo De Amicis, *Cuore* (Corraini Edizioni 2000). 2000 Federico Maggioni. All rights reserved to Maurizio Corraini s.r.l.



## Conclusions

When properly contextualized and integrated with other types of documents, the use of literary sources in educational historiography can contribute significantly to reconstructing the school's history. This approach fosters a more human and participatory understanding of the educational past. A hermeneutic analysis of Edmondo De Amicis's novel *Cuore* revealed the richness and complexity of this investigative approach. Literature reveals itself as more than just a testimony to an era; it is also a space for the elaboration and transmission of values, emotions, and educational practices that elude official sources and institutional documents. By analyzing the school events narrated by De Amicis, we could capture the pedagogical climate of post-unification Italy, its social tensions, and the processes of inclusion and formation that helped define national identity.

However, the book *Cuore* also serves as a bridge between the past and the present. Iconographic interpretations of the novel that have emerged over time allow us to highlight the transformations of the school's imaginary across various cultural contexts. Our methodology, which integrates literary study with historical and pedagogical analysis, reveals that, while literature cannot replace traditional historical sources, it is a valuable complement to understanding educational processes, offering new and stimulating perspectives. Ultimately, literary sources seem to contribute to the history of schooling by fostering a deep, participatory understanding of the past. This understanding sheds light on educational and social dynamics that still influence the school environment today. For this reason, we hope that future research will continue to explore this area, fostering a fruitful dialogue between history, pedagogy, and literature to promote a deep understanding of our past and the educational and social dynamics that shape the world of schooling from yesterday to today.

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