

AN INTRODUCTION

TO

LESYA
UKRAYINKA

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On the Centenary of Lesya Ukrayinka's Birth

To Canadian Youth

Author

Lesya Ukrayinka (Larysa Kosach-Kvitka), the greatest Ukrainian poetess, was born in Zvyahel, Volyn, Ukraine, on February 25, 1871. Her father, Petro Kosach, was a judge and her mother, Olha, was a poetess who is known in Ukrainian literature by the pseudonym Olena Pchilka. Both parents were staunch supporters of the Ukrainian cultural movement; their six children received their education from hired teachers at home, rather than at the existing Russified schools.

Already at the age of nine, L. Ukrayinka saw her first poem "Nadiya" (Hope) in print. Her first collection of lyrics "Na krylakh pisen'" (On Wings of Song) was published in 1892, in Lviv, by the poet Ivan Franko.

A general view of L. Ukrayinka's formative years will give us an insight to some of the earliest influences on her literary career. The most important factor in young Lesya's life was that her parents endeavored to instill in their children a passion for fine literature. In her early years Lesya loved to play the piano, to paint (so that she could be like Shevchenko, she would say¹) and, especially, to dramatize heroic episodes from literature, such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.² The heroes which she found in books and dramatized left an indelible imprint on the young child's mind and came to the fore later in her writings. During her days of frolic in the stupendous Volynian forest, fairy forest inhabitants developed in Lesya's mind and these, shortly before her death, she enveloped in her enchanting dramatic poem *Lisova pisnya* (Forest Song) in 1911.³ This drama, her "masterpiece of masterpieces", as appraised by B. Yakubsky,⁴ has been compared to Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and to similar works by Maeterlinck and Hauptmann.⁵

Under her mother's guidance Lesya also began a collection of Ukrainian folklore which she continued throughout her life and which was published by her husband K. Kvitka and by F. Kolessa.⁶ Her knowledge of folklore plays a vital role in all her works. She, furthermore, popularized Ukrainian literature among the peasants⁷ and organized literary evenings in the memory of Shevchenko.⁸ In her earlier poems, Shevchenko's influence appears in her artistic form.⁹ Later, Lesya acquired his "pathos, strength and masculinity"¹⁰ and his symbolism which remained throughout her works.¹¹ To Shevchenko she dedicated the poems "Zhalibny marsh" (The Sad March) (1888); "Na rokovyny Shevchenka" (On Shevchenko's Birthday) (1889); "Legenda" (Legend) (1906) and "Na rokovyny" (On the Birthday) (1911).

Lesya's family was closely associated with the families of the composer M. Lysenko and the playwright M. Starytsky. They spent many an evening together reading and discussing literature. Lesya staged some of Lysenko's children's operas,¹² and the ideas that she treasured from Starytsky's translations of Serbian ballads, she later incorporated into her own poems.¹³

Besides the Ukrainian language, literature and history, L. Ukrayinka studied the languages, literatures, and histories of various peoples. She knew Russian, Polish, German, French, Italian, Bulgarian, Spanish, Greek, and Latin. The knowledge of these languages was, of course, invaluable in her studies of world history and world literature.

In Kyiv, at the age of seventeen, Lesya, with her older brother Mykhaylo (also a writer), organized a literary youth group "Pleyada" (The Pleiades) whose task was to write and to translate works of Russian and European masters into Ukrainian.¹⁴ Lesya translated some works from Russian, Polish, French, Italian, English, ancient Egyptian and Indian, and the Greek Classics. But most extensively, she translated the German poet Heine. In her lyrico-epic poem "Davnya kazka" (The Old Tale) (1893) and in her cycle of lyrics "Melodiyi" (Melodies) (1893-94) the influence of Heine's lyrical style is especially prominent.¹⁵ Lesya regarded Heine as "one of the greatest lyric poets" and "one of the most ardent literary fighters for freedom."¹⁶

In her youth Lesya continued to educate peasants by reading and writing popular books for them and she encouraged the Pleiades to write the same.¹⁷ She wrote a textbook **Starodavnya istoriya** (Ancient History), the first of its kind in Ukraine, about the primitive societies and the histories of the Hindus, Medes, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, and Israelites.¹⁸

Although the Pleiades existed as a group for only five years, the importance of their activities should not be underestimated. This was not just a school for young writers, or a group which brought world masters into Ukrainian literature. It must be noted that this group made its appearance during a crucial period, in the history of Ukraine, of its culture, language, and literature. After the existence of the Ukrainian language had been denied and after that language had been completely censured by the tsar's ukazes of 1863 and 1876, these young people dared to continue to create in that language and to implement it in the translation of the literary masterpieces of the world. In this way the Pleiades, and particularly L. Ukrayinka, aided in the preservation of a national consciousness.

Early in life, Lesya contracted tuberculosis. An operation failed to halt the disease which eventually spread from her hands and legs to her internal organs. She was then forced to frequent health resorts in Italy, Crimea and the Caucasus, and the sands of Egypt, where she became acquainted with and wrote about various peoples and countrysides. Besides skillfully depicting the Ukrainian countryside – Polilya, Volyn, Kyiv, Odessa, the Black Sea littoral, Bukovyna and Crimea – L. Ukrayinka was the first, in Ukrainian literature, to introduce into poetry the landscapes of Egypt, Italy and Greece.¹⁹ From her lyrics and her letters it is evident that she was especially fascinated with Egypt, with its landscape, nature, people, culture, and history. L. Ukrayinka is known as a lyrical painter of landscapes. But she does not merely portray these. Rather, in her depiction of landscapes, she creates "allegories of great philosophical and artistic depth" and conveys to the reader her concern about the fate and future of her nation,²⁰ as, for example, in the poem "Khvylya" (The Wave) (1908). In describing a wave, the poetess watches it disappear and wonders whether it will submerge to the bottom of the sea to become a humble and eternal slave, never to rise again, or whether it will join the free waves, gain impetus, re-emerge, and finally resurrect. Symbolically, that wave is Ukraine. In the poem "Hostrym polyskom . . ." (With a Sharp Glitter) (1902), looking upon a turbulent sea, the poetess sees an armed revolution. L. Ukrayinka refuses to submit to blind, primordial forces and, with a firm belief in her victory, bids them to combat with her. In "Pisnya. Brioso" (Song. Gaily) (1890), the poetess boldly states that she is not afraid of inclement

weather, that she is gathering "magic" to forge magical weapons and armed songs (which symbolize her poems), against the "menacing dark clouds" (which symbolize Russian despotism).

Although L. Ukrayinka experienced constant physical suffering she was not veiled by pessimism. On the contrary, all her works are filled with bright and optimistic tones. Ivan Franko, who was her teacher, friend and publisher, wrote: "Her own sufferings do not screen from her either the beauty of nature and those splendid images that that beauty suggests . . . or the beauty, peace and happiness of other people . . ." ²¹ ". . . The more her health weakened, the more her spirit strengthened, her word acquired flight and potency, her form became more direct, more penetrating . . ." ²²

Lesya's most influential teacher and critic was her uncle, Professor M. Draho-maniv, a political emigré in Bulgaria. Under his guidance the poetess became the "ray from which shone Western European culture and civilization amongst the young Ukrainians." ²³ He constantly advised her to write, to translate, and to educate the Ukrainian youth and the peasantry. She propagated his radical political views in the hope that "sharper, radical ideals would awaken our drowsy and dejected nation." ²⁴ The Radicals recognized the necessity of independent Ukrainian political organizations and activities, they aspired for national, social, and political freedom and the appurtenance of Ukraine to Europe and the European cultural sphere. ²⁵

In 1894-95 L. Ukrayinka visited Draho-maniv in Sofia, Bulgaria, where she received an intensive education under his direction. After Draho-maniv's death in 1895, in a poem dedicated to his daughter, Lesya bids:

Wish me the courage and strength
To fulfill that great testament,
Which I take with me to Ukraine . . . ²⁶

The poetry that followed was a part of that fulfillment. In undergoing crystallization, her lyrics acquired unusual courage, potency and revolutionary fervor; it "reached its summit and equalled the greatest examples of Shevchenko's political poems." ²⁷ From this time, her poetry became a defender of her oppressed nation; a formidable avenger against the oppressors; a constant pinprick for her passive and submissive countrymen; and a fervid appeal to them, to rise against tyranny, with an unwavering faith in their own strength and in their ultimate victory. The cycles "Nevil'nychi pisni" (Songs of Slaves) (1895-96), "Nevil'nyts'ki pisni" (Songs of Slavery) (1899-1901), "Rytmy" (Rhythms) and "Legendy" (Legends) (1900-1901) are the most dynamic that the poetess had written at this time. ²⁸ This is why Franko, in his literary review in 1898, wrote that on comparing the works of the contemporary Ukrainian poets with those of L. Ukrayinka, the poetess was "about the only man" in Ukraine. ²⁹ O. Biletsky in his study of L. Ukrayinka and Russian literature of the 1880's and 1890's, states that Franko's phrase could be extended to incorporate also L. Ukrayinka's relationship to the Russian poets or 'Men of the Eighties'. ³⁰ In 1901 Franko ranked L. Ukrayinka as the best poet in the Ukraine. "This talent is strong and masculine throughout," he wrote, "although not devoid of feminine grace and tenderness." ³¹

From lyrical poetry L. Ukrayinka's attention gravitated to the dramatic form – to monologues, dialogues, and dramatic scenes and, after a trial at prose drama **Blakytna troyanda** (The Azure Rose) (1896), the poetess turned to her favorite genre, the dramatic poem. Even though she continued to write lyrical poetry, her dramatic poems excelled her lyrics.

There are twenty plays in L. Ukrayinka's heritage. The main characteristics of her dramatic poems are "dynamism, dialectical power, depth of thought, and the forceful delineation of her heroes. . . ." ³² Her dramas are not so much a conflict between personages, as they are the conflict between ideas. ³³ Each drama illustrates the collision of opposing ideas and develops into an ideological duel with one particular ideology finally reigning supreme, even if the hero or bearer of those ideals should experience a tragic end.

In her dramas Lesya "developed and sought to resolve complex philosophical, moral, psychological, universal problems . . .", ³⁴ problems which were also of particular significance to Ukraine. Her dramatic poems have earned her such titles as "master of problematics," ³⁵ "dramatist of the highest passions," ³⁶ "an original philosopher-innovator," ³⁷ "master in depicting the human soul", and "master of psychological characteristics." ³⁸

Throughout her literary career, L. Ukrayinka drew her inspirations not only from Ukrainian channels but from various historical epochs of various peoples – from classical antiquity, early Christianity, Western and Eastern Middle Ages, the Puritans in America in the seventeenth century, the French Revolution, and the English occupation of Egypt. She drew many inspirations from the Old Testament and from European literature. Under her pen famous literary themes (as Don Juan, Tristan and Izolde, Ophelia, Beatrice, Judas, Cassandra, Iphigenia) received a completely original treatment, thus she "enriched not only Ukrainian literature, but world literature." ³⁹

There was no source, however, that inspired L. Ukrayinka more than did the Bible. After translating Biblical passages for Drahomaniv, she claimed that she could not part with the Book and would continue to translate from it. ⁴⁰ P. Odarchenko, in comparing her translations with those of Kulish (the first to translate the Bible into Ukrainian) wrote that the quality of L. Ukrayinka's translations and of her style is a "witness of the great progress of the Ukrainian literary language in twenty years (1870-90)." ⁴¹

For her works, L. Ukrayinka drew from those historical Biblical passages which resembled the history of her own nation, as Israel in Egypt, and especially, Babylonian Captivity. Heroic Biblical figures and prophets recur as exemplaries and as mouthpieces in L. Ukrayinka's appeals to her people. The poetess did not hesitate to criticize Christian doctrines which her profound patriotism would not allow her to accept. For example, in the dramatic poem **Oderzhyma** (The Obsessed One) (1901), which takes place on the eve and on the day of the Crucifixion, Miriam, who loves the Messiah, cannot accept His teaching that one should love

his enemies. In the dramatic poem *V katakombakh* (In the Catacombs) (1905) the neophyte, a Roman slave, cannot accept the archbishop's sermon that we are God's slaves. The Roman hoped that through Christianity he would attain freedom. He protests against the teaching of tolerance and submission to one's enemies:

I shall render honor to the titan Prometheus,
who did not create his people slaves,
who enlightened not by word, but fire,
who fought not in submission, but courageously.⁴²

Out of her twenty plays, seventeen spring from historical sources. Out of these seventeen, only one, *Boyarynya* (The Boyar's Wife) (1910) finds its source in the history of Ukraine. Although this drama skillfully portrays Muscovite-Ukrainian relations during the historical era known as "the Ruin" (1660's and 1670's) the plot, as it affects the heroes, is a social-psychological one, it deals with the tragic conflict between a pacifist and a revolutionary ideology as personified by the two main personages of the drama. *Boyarynya* reveals clearly the genius of L. Ukrayinka. In measuring the play by the standards of dramatic art, it becomes evident that *Boyarynya* possesses the qualities of great drama. It is a tightly constructed play that never falters in its development from beginning to end. It contains a vital theme, memorable characters, and a brilliant plot, and its dynamic dialogue is dramatic poetry of the first rank. It possesses a universality of appeal in space as well as in time, for the drama is pertinent not only to seventeenth century Ukraine which it depicts, but to the Ukraine of the playwright's day, to contemporary Ukraine and, more important, it is pertinent to every subjugated people or subservient individual of the past, present, or future; thus, it presents an everlasting vital universal problem.⁴³

L. Ukrayinka's fairy drama *Lisova pisnya* (The Forest Song) springs from Ukrainian folklore, but here too, the theme, the plot, and the characters are of a universal nature. All of her plays, then, whatever their source, are essentially universal. Herein lies not only the erudition of L. Ukrayinka, but her greatness as a playwright.

By her continuous drawing of material from various sources and epochs L. Ukrayinka was obviously striving to lead Ukrainian literature out of its provincialism. Unfortunately, her endeavors were not appreciated by her contemporaries, but were criticized as ancient, exotic, insignificant to Ukraine. In 1908, H. Khotkevych, for example, praised her prose drama *Blakytna troyanda* (The Azure Rose) (1896) but called her other works "ascetic outlines of her favorites – the Hebrews, Egyptians, and all other kinds of antiquities."⁴⁴ It was not realized that the poetess "was pleading the cause of the oppressed nations of all ages and places and . . . emphasizing the similarity to them of the Ukraine of her own day."⁴⁵ Her contemporaries did not recognize that her Israelites in Egypt, Egyptians and Judaens in Babylonian Captivity, Greeks and neophytes in the Roman Empire, the Scots under the English, and the Egyptians in the British Empire, were pellucid pseudonyms for Ukrainians in the Russian Empire. The

symbolic context is explicit in her poem "I ty kolys' borolas' mov Izrayil'," Ukrayino moya! . ." (And you once fought as Israel, my Ukraine! . .) (1904), which ends with the rhetorical questions:

And how long will our native land be Egypt?
When will the new Babylon die? ⁴⁶

L. Ukrayinka's fame was almost entirely posthumous. Partly, because her writings were not understood, but mostly, because they were subject to continual persecution by the Russian censors. Her revolutionary lyric poetry was published outside the boundaries of the Russian Empire, for the most part in Lviv and Chernivtsi. In 1903 and 1904, when some of her poems passed the tsarist censors, they were almost unrecognizable.⁴⁷ The musical arrangements to her lyrics, composed by Lysenko, Stetsenko, and Stepovy, too, were forbidden.⁴⁸ ". . . I am a poet only abroad," said Lesya, "but in Ukraine – a Russian journalist."⁴⁹ She was referring to her activities (1901-1903) with the newspaper *Zhyzn'* to which she submitted literary reviews and with *Dons'kaya rech* in which her Russian translations of some of Franko's poetry appeared, as well as an essay on Hauptmann's drama *Die Weber*⁵⁰ (The Weavers). Her friend, M. Pavlyk, advised Lesya to "drop all politics" and to move across the border to Halychyna. In a letter to him, March 28, 1903, the poetess explained that she could not "drop all politics" either in literature or in her relations with the metropolis, that not only her convictions and temperament, but her "uncle's testament" would not allow it. "Uncle wanted that my work and my thought would grow and live, that I would not leave either literature, or politics. . . ."⁵¹ she wrote. At this time L. Ukrayinka was participating in the Ukrainian Social-Democratic group, which sought political power for Ukraine.⁵² In the abovementioned letter, the poetess also stated that if she left politics, then she should also cease writing her "sincerest words". "Because to express them and to put them down on paper, in having dropped that deed for which they call others, I would be ashamed."⁵³ After 1903, however, her illness had progressed to such a degree that she was forced to abandon political participation. From this time until her death in Georgia, August 1, 1913, the poetess had lived in Crimea, in Egypt, and in Georgia. Nevertheless, during this period L. Ukrayinka never abandoned her pen. It was at this time that she wrote her best dramatic poems, as *Boyarynya* (The Boyar's Wife) (1910), *Lisova pisnya* (The Forest Song)(1911), *Kaminny Hospodar* (The Stone Host) (1912), *Orgiya* (The Orgy) (1913), and others. While in her lyrics she beckoned that her countrymen accept her thoughts, as she had nothing else to offer.⁵⁴

L. Ukrayinka's heritage includes also her literary articles, letters, and short prose writings. "Her entire literary heritage is filled with profound philosophical and sociological ideals in which resounds the search for a better future, not only for her . . . nation, but also, for all nations, for all mankind."⁵⁵

A review of the literary achievements of L. Ukrayinka clearly shows that Liberty is the basic theme in her writings, it is this theme that resounds throughout all her works. The poetess firmly believes that the basic requirement for Liberty is unity

and appeals for a courageous, pertinacious, uncompromising, and irreconcilable struggle against despotism. She sharply reprimands despondency and pusillanimity, passivity and submissiveness. Her heroes embody lofty principles, they defend the interests of their people, they exhibit unflinching courage and an unwavering faith in the final victory of their ideals. Prometheus is her most beloved heroic image. Spartacus, Orpheus, Robert Bruce, and the gallant knight, and many other famous heroes appear as exemplaries throughout her works.

The role of the poet also is of paramount importance to L. Ukrayinka. The greatness of Milton, she wrote, was that he was a courageous and bold tribune of the English Revolution, "a sincere servant among his people . . . and . . . with them sought Truth and defended it . . . the life of his nation was his life."⁵⁶ This tribute and the tributes that she paid to Shevchenko and Heine may, in turn, be paid to L. Ukrayinka. "He is not a poet, who forgets about his nation's terrible wounds" is the theme that she developed in the lyrico-epic poem "Davnya Kazka" (The Old Tale) (1893)⁵⁷ and the theme that recurs throughout her writings, the theme that she herself, as a poet and individual, never betrayed. L. Ukrayinka often described the great strength of poetry. She believed that poetry contains a magical force that awakens and mobilizes a nation. Again and again she expressed her wish that her poetic words function as effectively as weapons. Besides wanting them to become "bright rays", "tempestuous waves", "swift sparks", "flying stars", and "violent lightning", she wanted them to become "swords".⁵⁸ In the poem "Slovo, chomu ty ne tverdaya krytsya . . ." (Word, why aren't thou tempered steel . . .) (1896), she calls her word her only weapon and bids that it not perish with her, because

Perhaps in the hands of unknown brothers
You shall be a better sword for our hangmen.⁵⁹

Her word did serve its function, as evident from its treatment by the tsarist censors. Nor did it perish, for it suffers falsification in the Soviet Union today. In the 1920's her works were interpreted along party lines, in the 1930's they were confiscated, during World War II and in 1946 (when Ukrainian literary research was somewhat liberalized), her works were treated with relative justice, but in 1947 the researchers were forced to review their conceptions.⁶⁰ Today, Soviet research is biased. There is a deliberate selection of L. Ukrayinka's biography, letters, and translations in order to underestimate the Western influences upon her works and to overemphasize Russian influence. In analyses, her writings often suffer distortion and mutilation in the Soviet endeavor to fit her works into the Procrustean bed of Marxist-Leninism.⁶¹

L. Ukrayinka's writings are a "union of profound idealism and perfected artistic form."⁶² The greatest genius of this poet-playwright reveals itself in her mastery of the word, in her art of language.⁶³ All her works are fervently impassioned, deeply lyrical, and exquisitely melodious. It is this that lends them their vivacity, their dynamism. L. Ukrayinka is known, too, as a genius in the art of prosody.⁶⁴ She enriched Ukrainian literature not only with new themes but also by her diversity in versification and meter. She introduced new versification and metrical skills from European literature and, furthermore, was an innovator in this field. There are twenty different stanzaic forms in her lyrics, most of

which are written in various trisyllabic feet that render the verse its melodiousness. About one-third of her poems are in iamb, which lends solemnity, dynamism and virility to her poetic word. Nor was the poetess less meticulous in her search for new rhyming schemes.⁶⁵ It should be noted, too, that L. Ukrayinka also constitutes an important stage in the history of the Ukrainian language. She not only served in the development of the conversational, folkloric, and literary language,⁶⁶ but introduced a new vocabulary and phraseology from the spheres of politics, philosophy, psychology, history, mythology, culture, and art.⁶⁷

Contemporary literary criticism reveals that L. Ukrayinka has had an influence upon such outstanding contemporary writers as P. Tychna, M. Rylsky, M. Bazhan, V. Sosyura, A. Malyshko, L. Pervomaysky, and others.⁶⁸ In modern Ukrainian literature L. Ukrayinka's name stands beside the most outstanding masters: Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko.

It is unfortunate, then, that the translation of L. Ukrayinka's works into other languages has only been recent. Some translations do appear in English, Russian, German, Georgian, Czech, Slovak, and Belorussian,⁶⁹ but these are insufficient. Without any doubts, this poet-playwright is worthy of further research and of further translation not only because of the many forementioned facets of her genius, but also because she speaks to you and to all peoples, everywhere. The problems that she raises and resolves are as much of today as they were of yesterday; they are eternal problems and problems which possess a universality of appeal. Indeed, there is still much research to be done on L. Ukrayinka's writings. The last word has not yet been written. Far from it. In fact, L. Ukrayinka studies are only in their embryonic stage. Each of her dramas, for example, is in great need of meticulous dramaturgical analysis. It would be especially worthwhile to investigate thoroughly the components that make this writer's works, works of art. Furthermore, studies of her prose and epistolography are almost nonexistent. The possibilities in this field are boundless. It is hoped, therefore, that the Canadian youth of today will take it upon themselves to popularize this writer on the Canadian scene and, perhaps, on the eve of the 125th anniversary of Lesya Ukrayinka's birth there will grow to be a sizeable Canadian library of new and vital research and excellent translations in English as well as in French.

FOOTNOTES

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