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## Section:

## WORD AND TIME

### DRAMATURGY OF LESIA UKRAINKA AND EUROPEAN MODERN DRAMA: TEXT, CONTEXT

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find in world literature an artistic phenomenon similar to the work of Lesya Ukrainka. For as long as a century scientists have been trying their best to highlight and explain this versatile astonishing national phenomenon: the phenomenon of the artist, human, woman. It is definitely not accidental that, avoiding analogies, Ivan Franko called Lesya Ukrainka nearly the only man "all across the whole of modern Ukraine" for her spirit strength and true Prometheus obsession, while Mykhailo Hrushevsky named her the "Ukrainian Shakespeare". According to Mykola Zerov, these similarities are clearly pronounced not in poetry (social lyrics, intimate lyrics), but primarily in her drama, which, in fact, makes up a unique modern world of ideas and images not only for national but also for the Western European literature.

#### 2. GENERALIZATION OF THE MAIN STATEMENT

There is no doubt that Lesya Ukrainka was closely familiar with the dramatic works of her predecessors - Marko Kropyvnytsky, Mykhailo Starytsky, Ivan Karpenko-Kary, she personally met and was pen-friends with such directors and artists contemporaries as Maria Zankovetska, Mykola Sadovsky, Panas Saksagansky and other representatives of the "Theater of Coryphaei". However, Lesya Ukrainka chose her own way and did not write for their theater, completely ignoring and denying such hopeless phenomena as "Ukrainian domestic theater" or "ethnographic-peasant drama." This fact proves the genius of the writer as a playwright.

She did not focus too much on the Russian theatrical tradition either, because it was perhaps drama that was the weakest point in the Russian literature. It is worth pointing out that Lesya Ukrainka's "Blue Rose", the first drama of the new Ukrainian theater, and Anton Chekhov's "Seagull", which publication marked the beginning of the Russian theater of the Silver Age, were written at the same time, both in 1896. It is easy to assume that if she had not been a Ukrainian writer, but a Russian one, then, probably, it would have been she, not Chekhov, to be respected and valued around the world as a creator of modern drama. This would have been the case Russian government officials would have undoubtedly taken care of. In any case, "The Blue Rose" made its author equal to such writers as Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, Oscar Wilde, Gergart Hauptmann, or Gabriel d'Annunzio. The plot of her "Don Juan" provides the grounds for comparison of Lesya Ukrainka with such representatives of the Spanish drama as Tirso de Molina, Antonio de Samorra, Jose Sorrilla, as well as non-Spaniards Moliere and Merimee, Carlo Goldoni, Richard Strauss, and Alexander

Pushkin. The similar effect has the plot of the dramatic poem "Isolde Lily-handed" which connects our poetess with the Celtic epic works, French authors Chrétien de Troyes, Gottfried from Strasbourg; while "Forest Song" unites its author with Gerhart Hauptmann, Maurice Maeterlinck and others.

There are many more examples to be provided. Without this Western European background it hard to understand or correctly evaluate the world level of drama created by Lesia Ukrainka.

Moreover, instead of exploring ethnographic-domestic and national-romantic themes, Lesia Ukrainka created a modern drama of great philosophical generalizations and assumptions, which revolved around the conflict of the worldviews ("Obsessed", "Cassandra", "Forest Song", "Orgy", etc.). This approach also revealed her innovation as a playwright, along with the fact that she consciously chose the action of her dramas to happen in the mythical world – be it biblical, ancient, Christian world, or the world of ancient legends and tell-tales that existed in her poetic and artistic vision since childhood. It was with their help that she explored human spirituality in its manifestations and studied various actions motives. Relying on the well-known plots from the ancient history and stories (ancient Egypt, the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, the siege of Troy, the early Christianity era, as well as the Baroque Spain, the 17th-century America, the French Revolution, etc.), Lesia Ukrainka quite consciously and even deliberately denied the traditional interpretations of sense, which were canonized to a certain extent; she overemphasized certain typical features of individual characters, disclosing their nature from a completely unexpected side (for example, Don Juan from "Stone Master" or Messiah from "Obsessed").

This approach proved to be surprising, embarrassing, and it even drew a sharp denial from ardent proponents of the established dramatic and stage forms (it is worth mentioning Marko Kropyvnytsky's confusion during his stage work on "Blue Rose" or Mykola Sadovsky's rejection of Lesia Ukrainka's concept of Don Juan's character). This attitude was paired with the lack of understanding or rather unwillingness to realize that, turning to the distant past themes, Lesia Ukrainka had in mind the problems of her time, the fate of her motherland, and her people (it was Hnat Khotkevych who could not understand Lesia's interest in ancient images of "Jews, Egyptians and any other "pre-historians", while Andriy Nikovsky accused the poetess of writing her works in a way that they were rather "exotic" and "literary" than truthful and lifelike, and her "plots have no clear national ground and direction").

### 3. DISCUSSION

The Nowadays, however, Lesia Ukrainka's drama works convince us of their author's desire to lead the reader or spectator to broad conclusions and introduce certain assumptions based on a correct interpretation of the human mistakes as well as failed or successful ideas throughout the mankind history. Therefore, she wrote her works so that these mistakes would not be repeated by future generations.

In the field of modern drama Lesia Ukrainka went further than her predecessors, as she created and used genres that eventually gained the full-fledged status in the Ukrainian stage literature; and that was her innovation. According to Mykola Zerov, her favorite genre was a poetic drama. However, it was hardly the only favourite, as neither the "Blue Rose", nor the "Stone Master", and not even the "Forest Song", was created as a poetic drama. Lesia Ukrainka mastered many dramatic genres equally well, including such opposites as a *féerie* (a fairy play) and a poetic drama.

The well-known Ukrainian literary theorist Ihor Kachurovskyi clearly distinguished their features: "A *féerie* is all about the visual effects – colours and movements, scenery and costumes are of paramount importance in the play if not the most important one, as the system of visual effects serves to reveal the author's key idea. On the contrary, a poetic drama is a work written in a dramatic form, yet disregarding the stage and its laws. Appearances and exits, movements on a stage, changes of scenery, audio and visual effects - all the attributes of a stage, are not very important in the genre of poetic drama, which is often not aimed at being performed on stage. The main emphasis in this genre is on the literary work text itself".

A *féerie* and a poetic drama are the genre forms most distant from each other among the genres of Lesia Ukrainka's dramatic works. "Forest Song" is a classic example of a *féerie* not only in the Ukrainian dramaturgy but also in the world one. As for the poetic dramas, it is hard to single out one of them as they are all written with the utmost mastery and talent, them including "Obsessed", "In the Catacombs", "In the Forest", "Orgy", "Cassandra", "Rufin and Priscilla", and "Advocate Martian".

In between these two opposite poles there can be found fine examples of the following genre formations: a symbolic drama ("Blue Rose"), a drama-in-poetry ("Stone Master" and "Boyar-ess"), a dramatic short story ("Farewell"), dialogue ("Aisha and Mohammed"), a dramatic sketch ("Johanna, Husov's wife"). At the same time, it is striking that Lesia Ukrainka's legacy in the comedy genre is almost non-existent. There is a scarcity of humorous effects or comical characters in her works (only a few), the same applies to humorous characters, and even humorous verbal situations and dialogues. The only exception is the scene of the fantastic drama "Autumn Tale", where a maid rescued a knight and hid him in a pigsty.

Talking about the above-mentioned work by Lesia Ukrainka, it is worth mentioning that until recently our official literary critics interpreted it as an undoubtedly revolutionary work, and, according to many researchers from the Ukrainian diaspora, including Natalia Ishchuk-Pazunyak, Ihor Kachurovsky, Roman Zadesniansky, Stepan Chorny, etc., "Autumn Tale" is perhaps the weakest work in the creative legacy of the writer. Although it is in this play that we come across a brilliant expression of Lesia Ukrainka: "Whoever frees himself will be free, whoever frees someone will take them prisoners."

In general, nowadays, when a reader can find and see all the dramatic works of Lesia Ukrainka (in 1989 the Kharkiv magazine "Prapor" published her play "Boyar-ess", making it available to readers after the decades of being hidden), and after working out a new interpretation of the poetess's dramatic works, we cannot but draw attention of our contemporaries to certain essential literary facts.

First, let's consider the *féerie* drama "Forest Song", which has already been canonized by our official literary criticism, and, therefore, by school and university textbooks. The most obvious thing to start its analysis from is to find out how it differs from the ethnographic and social plays of playwrights-predecessors. This is a far cry from random question, as, before Lesia Ukrainka and her drama, the Ukrainian playwrights, representatives of the "Theater of Corypheas", had at least two main goals in their works (both of non-artistic nature). The first goal was to show the national way of life emphasizing the national peculiarities and thus proving that the Ukrainian people were a separate nation; the second goal was to appeal to the reader's or viewer's feelings, make them sympathize the disadvantaged, and thus provoke social protest or national resistance. The "Forest Song" depicted the diversity of Ukrainian folk demonology, but, unlike her Ukrainian predecessors, Lesia Ukrainka used ethnographic material to achieve artistic expression, artistic purpose, and not vice versa.

In addition, official literary criticism considered, the *féerie* "Forest Song" one of the best works of Lesia Ukrainka; and partially the idea is still around. In our opinion, this was once done in order to divert people's attention from other dramatic works of the writer, which were more refined psychologically, had a greater problem-philosophical and vision-prophetic nature.

Naturally, the "Forest Song" is formally brilliant and it is easy to perceive. Though, for the most part it relies on external effects and protagonist images; therefore, its depth doesn't equal to such masterpieces as "Blue Rose" with its symbolisms or "Stone Master" with his mysticism, or "In the Forest", which reveals the eternal problem of an artist and his surrounding; it is not even close to "Cassandra", the tragedy of the killing truth or "Orgy", that presents the problem of national enslavement through the prism of aesthetics; it is far from "Obsessed", in which Miriam's prophecy reaches the depths of the human spirit, or "Lawyer Martian", which is half a century ahead of European drama. By the way, there is something in "Advocate Martian" that makes this work related to the present day: there is a vicious circle with no way out, and a fatal coincidence, as well as a figure of a deaf-mute slave, who probably symbolizes the inexorability of time. In fact, it has everything that is typical of modern European literature of today.

More than that, in terms of a plot, *Forest Song* is the least independent of all the works. Reading it, you can help but think that some things have already been mentioned somewhere; for example, the symbolism of the "flooded bell" by Gerhart Hauptmann is directly associated with the symbolism of the *Forest Song*. Additionally, some lines from it resemble the lyrical passages of Maurice Maeterlinck's *Joyzelle*. Moreover, the last act of *Forest Song*, especially its final part, seems underdeveloped, which, of course, diminishes the artistic value of the work. These and other flaws of the *féerie* were duly pointed out by the poetess's work researchers, mostly from the Ukrainian diaspora (Viktor Petrov, Roman Zadesniansky, Osyp Kravcheniuk, Antonina Horokhovych, etc).

It is appropriate to state that the weakest point of Lesia Ukrainka's dramatic works is the denouement (both in a plot and a conflict). This vulnerability can be clearly seen even in her most perfect works *Cassandra* (the author herself pointed out that the final scene was unnecessary) and *Rufin and Priscilla* (the last scene doesn't show much, it rather tells).

Yet, it should be the plays *Cassandra*, *Obsessed*, *Orgy*, *Rufin and Priscilla* (according to M. Zerov, the author's favorite play), *Lawyer Martian* and others that make the subject under discussion. One can also add to the list the dramatic short story *Farewell*, a pearl that is still to be noticed. Written in 1895, during the time when the first attempts at plot less psychological prose began to appear in European literature, this short story was based entirely on the nuances of human psychology and revelations of the character's inner world. At the time, Ukrainian reader was not ready for such works, so one could hardly hope for an adequate perception of this work of Lesia. We can assume that if *Farewell* was translated into one of the European languages, Lesia Ukrainka would find her way to the top of world literature; her work would be known at least in Europe, as the beginning of our century has literally flooded it with similar modern literature.

It is safe to assume that being physically exhausted and overcoming an insidious disease did not account for the full tragedy of our genius poetess. Her tragedy is that being an original artist of the word, a phenomenal artist who has no rivals in world of drama, she could not reach the European reader and spectator in time due to the lack of translations. Just the same she could not "reach" the Ukrainian reader or spectator mainly because they were not ready to perceive and understand the aesthetics of Lesia Ukrainka's theater.

As Mykhailo Hrushevsky put it, her images, plots, and character, although inspired by the Ukrainian reality, were "connected with the eternal experiences of humanity". The poetess seemed to project them on universal dimensions, and it was incredibly difficult for a Ukrainian reader or spectator to comprehend and perceive that all, as he was largely brought up on the ethnographic and everyday material of national drama and theater.

Due her continual illness since childhood, Lesia Ukrainka often had to be treated abroad, and "lack of opportunities to obtain relevant national sources forced her to leave certain stories behind, even those ones she had been long attracted to" (Mykola Zerov). Only three of her works, *Blue Rose*, *Forest Song*, *Boyaryn-ess*, did Lesia Ukrainka write relying on "purely" national material. By the way, there exists relevant information that she wished to write a drama based on Bondarivna's plot, a play about Hordienko, a Zaporizhzhya Kish leader. However, she had to constantly postpone her plans, because she believed she did not have enough knowledge of the Ukrainian past, and it was not easy to obtain necessary information abroad.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Yet, Ukrainian scholars still haven't fully studied the phenomenon of *Lesia Ukrainka Theater*. The polyphony of feelings and sensations, meditations and destinies of her characters, the way the writer imagined them, has not been revealed in full yet.

"Does this mean that Lesia Ukrainka [her plays] should not be played on stage?" – such a rhetorical question was put forward more than five decades by a prominent diaspora scientist Yuri Sheveliov (Yuri Sherekh). He answered it with a sharp denial: "No! If Germans play *Faust*, in particular, their second parts; then we have the right and obligation to play Lesia Ukrainka (...) Competing (for

directors, actors, artists. - S. Kh.) with Lesia Ukrainka is scary, but it is also honorable. And who knows: perhaps, one day our theater will find and develop a way to handle poetic dramas in such a manner that the issue Lesia Ukrainka's plays stage performance will seem a ridiculous anarchism...". In the meantime, the poetess's drama seeks their worthy actors-interpreters and thoughtful, intellectual and philosophically prepared readers and spectators.

Shortly before her death, Lesia Ukrainka wrote a letter to her mother Olena Pchilka; she said she going to write a new drama, but still lacked the strength. Thus, this drama remained a sketch. It is about the great German philosopher Theocritus of Alexandria who believes in the ultimate victory of science. However, he lives in an age of Christian bigotry that denies and destroys scientific values only because of their pagan nature. The philosopher is arrested. Owning a whole library of ancient writings this Hellenic scientist does not have time to hide them from enemies. Instead, his children, a seventeen-year-old son and a fifteen-year-old daughter, do this secretly at night: they bury their father's precious papyruses in the desert sands. As soon as the sun rises, the children kneel and address it: "Helios! Save our treasures! We entrust them to you and the golden desert!"...

There is something significant and prophetic in these words. Thus, praying to the sun Lesia Ukrainka passed away at dawn in August, 1913. However, the light of her spiritual genius will always shine in the sky of her native Ukraine.

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