

Vlada Ivankiv, Maria Kudla, Maria Tatsynets

Ivan Franko National University of Lviv

<https://doi.org/10.33989/pnpu.863.c3574>

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF LESYA UKRAINKA

Lesia Ukrainka remains a significant figure in Ukrainian Literature and history. She was a writer, translator, folklorist, public and cultural activist. As a co-founder of the renowned literary society “Pleiada,” Lesia Ukrainka made significant contributions to national literature through her poetry, epics, novels, essays, and the development of poetic drama. She remains among the most iconic women in Ukrainian history.

Beyond her literary accomplishments, Ukrainka was deeply involved in ethnography. She documented Ukrainian folk traditions, including recording 220 folk melodies, publishing works on children’s games, songs, and fairy tales, and conducting studies such as Kupala in Volyn (about summer solstice traditions). Despite her illness and demanding treatments, Lesia Ukrainka led a vibrant cultural and social life. Fluent in nine foreign languages, Lesia Ukrainka engaged deeply with world literature, exploring universal themes like human loneliness, gender equality, cultural isolation, and the complexities of love and death. Her insights into these enduring issues continue to resonate today.

Lesia Ukrainka was born in 1871 in Novohrad-Volynskyi into a close-knit, intellectually vibrant, and patriotic family. Lesya’s childhood was immersed in an atmosphere of love for literature and art. She exhibited a remarkable talent for writing from an early age. Her mother, Otha Drahomanova-Kosach, who went by the pen name Olena Pchilka, was a distinguished literary figure known for her refined poetry and children’s stories. The education, political intent, exposure to local culture and history, and the beauty of rural landscapes formed the essential elements of Ukrainka’s adult writing style and favourite themes. Due to tuberculosis of the bone – a condition she referred to as her “Thirty Years’ War” – she was homeschooled but achieved an exceptional education. Born into an intellectually prominent family as the second of six children, Ukrainka grew up in a culturally rich environment. Surrounded by Ukrainian aristocrats and intellectuals like M. Dragomanov, M. Lysenko, V. Antonovych, and M. Starytskyi. Her uncle, Mykhailo Drahomanov, encouraged her to study Ukrainian folk songs, folk stories, and history, as well as to peruse the Bible for its inspired poetry and eternal themes. Lesia Ukrainka demonstrated her early intellectual prowess by writing a 250-page textbook, *The Ancient History of the Eastern Peoples*, for her siblings while still a teenager.

Larysa Kosach began writing poetry at the age of eight. By the time she was eight, Ukrainka wrote her first poem, “Hope,” which was composed in reaction to the events surrounding her. She was inspired by news of her aunt, Olena Kosach, who had been exiled for her involvement in the revolutionary movement. In 1884, her poems *Lily of the Valley* and *Sappho* were first published in the Lviv magazine *Zorya*, marking the debut of her pen name, Lesya Ukrainka. It was here that she first used her pseudonym, which was suggested by her mother because, in the Russian Empire, publications in the Ukrainian language were forbidden. Ukrainka’s first collection of poetry had to be published secretly in western Ukraine and snuck into Kyiv under her pseudonym. In 1885, she and her brother Mykhailo collaborated on translations of works by Mykola Gogol, which were also published in Lviv. The Kosach household was

deeply committed to Ukrainian nationalism and opposition to the Russian tsarist autocracy that dominated the region. Ukrainka and her siblings received a home-based education from their parents and private tutors, with a strong emphasis on reading and writing in Ukrainian. It was from her parents that Ukrainka would learn that literature and politics were tightly entwined and impossible to unravel. Lesya Ukrainka was an active member of the politically engaged Literary and Artistic Society of Kyiv, but later, along with her brother Mykhailo, she co-founded a literary circle called Pleiada, inspired by the French poetry school La Pléiade, named after the constellation The Seven Sisters. This group brought together a cohort of writers and preceded the more famous Bloomsbury Group in London, though Pleiada was arguably more productive within its brief existence.

The group was united by a common and urgent goal: preserving the Ukrainian language in the face of Russian imperialist threats. While they often struggled to bypass Russian censorship, the restrictive laws did not deter their efforts. In 1907, Lesya Ukrainka was arrested by Russian authorities due to her revolutionary views and contentious publications, though soon released. Despite this, those final years were enough for her to leave a lasting impact and earn deep admiration for her efforts in preserving and advancing Ukrainian culture.

Lesya Ukrainka's early lyrical poetry intertwines personal, national, and philosophical themes, reflecting her unwavering patriotism, deep emotional connection to her homeland, and exploration of human existence.

Nature emerges as a powerful motif in her works, serving not only as a beautiful backdrop but also as a source of strength and solace. Her landscapes, filled with rivers, forests, and skies, symbolize the resilience and enduring spirit of Ukraine, mirroring her own longing for freedom.

Patriotic and civic themes dominate her poetry, expressing a profound unity with the Ukrainian people and a passionate protest against social and national oppression. This love for her homeland is not mere sentiment – it's an active, impassioned force that gives voice to her nation's struggles and aspirations.

Her personal experiences, especially her battle with tuberculosis, are deeply embedded in her poetry. Works like *Contra spem Spero* transform her suffering into a universal meditation on human resilience and hope, while *The Journey to the Sea* reflects on nature's vastness and the inexorable flow of time.

Ukrainka blends classical philosophy, religious teachings, and Ukrainian folk traditions to tackle existential questions of life, death, and human purpose. Her poetry balances idealism and realism – striving for truth, beauty, and freedom while acknowledging life's harsh realities. This tension infuses her work with timeless relevance, resonating with readers who face their own struggles.

She also revolutionized Ukrainian literature, introducing the genre of the dramatic poem. Works like *Forest Song*, written in 1911, remain a staple of Ukrainian theatre, rich with opportunities for interpretation and performance. Other plays, such as *Cassandra*, draw from global mythology while exploring modern philosophical dilemmas.

Fluent in seven languages – including Ukrainian, French, German, and English – Ukrainka's translations brought the works of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and other greats to Ukrainian audiences. She even ventured into ancient texts, translating hymns from the *Rigveda* and Egyptian folk songs. Her translations weren't just linguistic; they bridged

cultures, broadening Ukraine's literary landscape and showcasing Ukrainian culture to the world.

Lesya Ukrainka's influence on Ukrainian literature and national identity remains profound. Her works, filled with themes of self-determination, social justice, and national pride, inspired generations of writers, thinkers, and activists. Commemorated through monuments, museums, and cultural events across Ukraine, she endures as a symbol of resilience and freedom. Her legacy remains a beacon for those fighting for cultural and political independence, proving that art can be both a personal expression and a powerful tool for national awakening and solidarity.

The Ukrainian community of Japan "Kraiyan" created a series of video stories about Lesya Ukrainka in Japanese. Ukrainians in India filmed the play "Forest Song" in Hindi. Young Ukrainians from Denmark have prepared interesting facts from the life of the famous writer. In several countries around the world, monuments, museums, and memorial places have been created for the glorious daughter of the Ukrainian people, Lesia Ukrainka. This is evidenced by a significant source base, both on paper and electronic media. Monuments and museums dedicated to Lesia Ukrainka are located in different parts of the world – Canada, Italy, Austria, Georgia, Egypt, Germany, Estonia, and various cities of Ukraine. Her activities, in addition to Ukraine, cover 16 other countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America, including not only the physical presence of the poetess but also the presence of signs of respect for this great person.

Lesia Ukrayinka is a unique figure in the cultural life of our country. Lesya Ukrainka is a role model for young people today, as she was decades ago. In her works, one can find ideas that are close to the modern person. Her literature masterpieces, life circumstances, passion and lust for life have shown us how important it is to be dedicated to what you love and what is your true destiny. She is the part of today's culture and her art is implemented into nowadays lifestyle. That is why she is unique – she has "something in her heart, that never dies."

References:

Lesya Ukrainka & Theater [<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/lesya-ukrainka-amp-theater-music/JAUxdS2XiJyMLg?hl=en>];

Strong and hot poetic word of Lesya Ukrainka [<https://kpi.ua/en/lesya-ukrainka>];

Ed. Natalia Pazuniak, Lesya Ukrainka in Translations English German Spanish French Croatian Portuguese Italian [<https://diasporiana.org.ua/poeziya/13774-lesya-ukrainka-in-translations-english-german-spanish-french-croatian-portuguese-italian/>];

Ktrobinson, & Ktrobinson. (2022, October 2). Who is Lesia Ukrainka? ▸ Ukrainian Institute London. The Ukrainian Institute London | Giving Ukraine a voice in the UK and beyond. [<https://ukrainianinstitute.org.uk/who-is-lesia-ukrainka/>];

Ukrainian Institute London. (2020, December 19). Lesia Ukrainka: Fin-de-siècle Ukrainian feminism (10 things Everyone Should Know about Ukraine) [Video]. YouTube. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6epjym1-Dw>];

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2025, February 21). Lesya Ukrainka | feminist, activist & writer. Encyclopedia Britannica. [<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lesya-Ukrainka>].