

HRYPORIY KVITKA-OSNOVYANENKO

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue dress with floral patterns and gold earrings, holds a black cat. The background is a dark blue night sky with a full moon and a small house with lit windows in the distance.

the WITCH
of KONOTOP

G L A G O S L A V P U B L I C A T I O N S

HRYHORIY
KVITKA·OSNOVYANENKO

the WITCH
of KONOTOP

UKRAINIAN
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THE WITCH OF KONOTOP

by Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko

First published in Ukrainian as *Конотопська відьма* in 1836

Translated from the Ukrainian
by Michael M. Naydan and Alla Perminova

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of the Translate Ukraine Translation Program**

Edited by Ludmilla A. Trigos

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TRANSLATED FROM THE UKRAINIAN
BY MICHAEL M. NAYDAN AND ALLA PERMINOVA

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS



HRYHORIY KVITKA-OSNOVYANENKO

(1778–1843)

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*Dedicated to the bright memory of Bohdan Zholdak,
who penned theatrical and filmscript versions of*

The Witch of Konotop.

*He was a great friend, whose boundless good heart, marvelous
wit, and effervescent charm will never be forgotten
by all of us touched by his life.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are extremely grateful to folklorist Natalie Kononenko for providing her expert commentary on Ukrainian folk beliefs in her guest introduction to this volume as well as to Max Mendor for his outstanding efforts on the cover design. Great thanks also to our editor Ludmilla A. Trigos for her expert emendations to our translation.

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Michael M. Naydan

Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko (1778–1843) is considered “the father of Ukrainian prose.” In the writer’s time it was common to take a hyphenated name when both surnames of the parents of an individual were from prominent families – thus the hyphenation in his name. He was born to a well-to-do gentry family in 1778 in the settlement of Osno-va, which then was on the outskirts of the city of Kharkiv. He grew up at a time when Ukraine had been colonized by the Russian empire. He received his early education through home schooling and later continued his studies at a monastery school. He particularly developed a love for art, literature, and music in his studies and was a proficient pianist. From 1793 to 1797 he served in the military as was common at the time and as a public servant. He retired at the rank of captain. When he was 26, he entered the Kuriazh Orthodox Monastery but left it after serving as a novice for ten months. As a result of his upbringing and faith, one finds a deep layer of religiosity and a moral tonality underpinning much of his writing.

Kvitka-Osnovyanenko became a tireless cultural activist for his indigenous Ukrainian people and grew up bilingual. Besides native fluency in Ukrainian, he was also fluent in Russian, the language of the empire. Thus, he was able to navigate between the two languages to create a space for Ukrainian among the dominant colonizing Russian culture.

He helped establish the Kharkiv Theater in 1812 and served as its first director. He founded the Ukrainian journal *The Ukrainian Messenger* in Kharkiv as well as the almanacs *Morning Star* and *Fresh Ice*, which all promoted Ukrainian authors on their pages. He also served in several civic positions including county marshal of the nobility (1816–1828) as well as president of the Kharkiv criminal court after that. He devoted much of his life to civic causes: helping indigent children and establishing an institute for girls. He also held the position of curator of the first public library in Kharkiv.

As a writer, Kvitka-Osnovyanenko was a late bloomer. He began his literary career first writing in Russian in 1820 and then later focused on Ukrainian. His volume *Little Russian Anecdotes* was published in 1822 when he was 44 years old. “Little Russia” or “Russia Minor” was a colonial appellation that Russians used for Ukraine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His first Ukrainian-language short story “The Portrait of a Soldier: A Latin Tall Tale as Told in Our Language” appeared in 1833. In 1836 he published his classic *The Witch of Konotop*, which contains elements of satire as well as indigenous Ukrainian folklore. Comedy has been one of the genres used by colonized minorities to create a space for their own language and culture. In this way colonized peoples often present their own culture as non-threatening, making them acceptable for the majority colonizing language and culture. This is the way that Ukrainian writer Ivan Kotlyarevsky portrayed his drunken Ukrainian Kozaks (aka Cossacks) in his mock epic based on Virgil’s *The Aeneid – Eneida* (1799) as a travesty, which was exotic and entertaining for the Russian reading public of the time. However, the work served a dual purpose: it codified the vernacular Ukrainian language in print and in part became the basis for the modern Ukrainian literary language. Kvitka-Osnovyanenko continued in that vein of Kotlyarevsky. While comedy was his genre of choice in his

early Ukrainian writings, he later proved in his prose that the Ukrainian language was suitable for serious topics.

Critics have divided Kvitka-Osnovyanenko's creative work essentially into two categories: comical burlesque writings and sentimental realistic works that describe village life in Ukraine in ethnographic detail. Women often appear as the heroes of his prose. His satirical Russian-language drama *A Visitor from the Capital or Turmoil in a District Town* (1827) may have influenced Myhola Hohol's (aka Nikolai Gogol) play *The Inspector General* (1835).¹ While Hohol and Kvitka-Osnovyanenko knew each other, Hohol denied any influence of the latter's writing. Kvitka-Osnovyanenko's Russian-language novella *Elections of the Gentry* (1828) resonated with the reading public in Moscow but was banned by Tsar Nicholas I after he read it. His Ukrainian-language novella *Marusya* (1832) marked a high point in the development of his sentimental prose, which presented moving portraits of his characters meant to elicit empathy from readers. He published Volume I of his *Little Russian Tales as Told by Hrytsko Osnovyanenko* in 1834 and Volume II in 1836–7. The lengthy short story "Tumbleweed," which is included in our translation here, appeared among those tales. Many Russians have long and wrongly argued that Ukrainian is a dialect of Russian unworthy of separate status as a literary language. Two centuries of myriad prominent Ukrainian writers obviously refutes that idiotic claim. In the Ukrainian literary tradition Kvitka-Osnovyanenko is also well known as a playwright for his comedies *Shelmenko the District Scribe* (1831), *Matchmaking at Honcharivka* (1834), and *Shelmenko the Orderly* (1837). He is remembered as one of the most prominent makers and promoters of Ukrainian culture in the early nineteenth-century.

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¹ See Viktoriia Lebovich's article "Priiezhii iz stolitsty, ili Sumatokha v uezdnom gorode i Revizor," in *Studia Slavica*, 63/1 (2018), pp. 89–96.



THE WITCH
OF KONOTOP

I

The sad and unhappy Kozak Captain Mykyta Ulasovych Zabryokha³ was sitting on a bench in a new attic loft that was separated from the rest of his house on the other side of his inside porch. Although the lad was usually tidy, he wasn't wearing a white shirt this holy Sunday and – forgive us for this expression – he hadn't taken off his blue nankeen trousers for the night. Yes, poor guy, he had slept in them, so very happy that he had made his way home by midnight; and right then and there, whether he had fallen asleep or not, he was awakened even before sunrise. He jumped up right away, yawned, scratched himself, prayed to God, sniffed some strong snuff three times, listened to what they were reading to him, gave some orders, and, remaining alone in the room, plopped himself down on the bench. His hair was disheveled, his scalp lock untrimmed, his kisser unwashed, his eyes sleepy, his whiskers uncurled, and his shirt loose. Lying at the edge of the table were his pipe and wallet, an

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³ Ukrainians among other Eastern Slavic peoples have a tradition of using the patronymic as a sign of respect. Ulasovych would mean the son of Ulas. In Ukrainian “sotnyk” would technically be the rank of a lieutenant, who would be in charge of a Kozak “sotnya” or hundred-man company. We've rendered the rank here as “captain” in English to indicate the commensurate level of his military responsibility and translated the word “sotnya” as “company.” Last names can be quite meaningful and often humorous in Ukrainian, and the captain's last name Zabryokha means a bespattered person.

inkwell, a comb, and a tankard filled with last-year's infused pear liqueur, which Pazka had poured into a bottle for him last evening. But although he had poured it into the tankard, in order, you know, to drink out of sorrow, since he started to fret again, he forgot about it, lay down, and fell asleep. And now, having grown tired, he didn't really hurry back to that tankard, for a new misfortune had completely twisted him up, though he himself didn't understand the cause of his fretting. What misfortune befell him, and why did such sorrow overwhelm him? Well! Be patient, and I'll tell you the whole story: from whence he arrived home so late, and why he had such a bad night's sleep. Here, look, just take a little bit of the stronger snuff, and listen.

Pan⁴ Captain Ulasovych was from an honest, noteworthy lineage. Since time immemorial, after all, a hundred officers were all Zabryokhas; and Mykyta's grandfathers and great-grandfathers were Captains in the glorious little town of Captains Konotop. Thus, from father to son the hundredth one came in succession after the previous ones. Just when old Ulas Zabryokha, a Captain of Konotop, had died... oh how the Kozaks regretted his passing! And the people, both old and young, all wept. And at his funeral, his coffin was carried through the entire village in the people's arms, the way a father carries his child. They interred him near the church and commemorated him well at many funeral repasts. When they marked the fortieth day of his passing with raised toasts, when the people gathered to give advice about whom should be designated Captain, they all spoke in a single voice and

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⁴ "Pan" means "Mr." in Ukrainian and is a common polite form of address. It can be used with a person's first or last name as well as with a person's profession or, in the case of this text, with one's father's profession. The forms "Pani" (Mrs.) and "Panna" (Miss) are used in the same way. We've used the Ukrainian forms of the word to maintain the flavor of the text and to avoid awkwardness in English.

shouted out: “Who should it be? Ulas Zabryokha’s son; who else better could we find?”

And Zabryokha was designated Captain. From a Zabryoshchenko,⁵ he became just Zabryokha. Then after burying his father, he looked around, and he was already – give or take – twenty-five. You can’t get around it, time to get married, time to go lookin’ for a gal... For his father, old Ulas, had been on the stingy side, and when it happened that Mykyta had gone to him for a heart-to-heart talk and started to ask his father to marry him off, the old man would furrow his brow, stand up and look at him, and say: “Let the weather just clear up, look, it’s gotten cloudy. What kind of half-decent son is getting married now? Look, grain’s expensive, five altyns⁶ for a sack. And it will be cramped for us if we takes on a wife for you: we just have this house with a room, and across the inner porch there’s another house, and that’s it. Where could I fit you and the kids, I already knows that you’ll have tons of them. Let’s just think about it later.” Mykyta would just scratch himself and leave after that refusal. Now that the old man had died, he was free to do as he pleased. Having taken the adjacent house, now he built a wall, and he had an additional spacious upper room there. Then he began to look for a girl and sat down to think. Who had he not thought about already? Moreover, where from? Now he set his eyes on the Chernihiv archpriest’s daughter and was scared off by the gap in status: you wouldn’t be able to fit all her clothes on two carts, and, her father, they says, will toss necklaces in bundles, and that’s nothin’. The seminarians ate pig slop baked pumpkins there, so our lad had no good rea-

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⁵ A little Zabryokha or son of Zabryokha. The -enko suffix is typical of Ukrainian Kozak last names. For example, the name Honcharenko would be “little Honchar” (potter) or “son of the potter.”

⁶ An altyn was a three-kopeck coin that was used as currency in eighteenth-century Ukraine and in the Russian empire.

son to hurry over. So, he decided to set the bar lower, kept mulling things over and over, he thought some and kept on thinking... then he slapped his palms together and shouted out to himself in the house: "Aha! She's mine! Laddie! Saddle the horse as quick as you can!" Whether he was ready or not, our Ulasovych mounted his horse oh so quick... and once he started his giddyap, he was long gone in no time.

Where did he head off so swiftly? Eh! Once, somewhere at a fair, he had seen the Kozak calvary cornet's⁷ daughter Olena, over there at a farmstead on Sukha Balka [Dry Gully], nicknamed Bezverkhy Khutir [Hilless Farmstead]. While looking the girl over, he was really surprised that she was so young, but still bought a lot of flour; and as he began to ask people about her, he was told that she didn't have a father or mother, but just a brother; that she was a diligent homemaker, whether she tended the cows, or worked in the field with mowers and reapers, and in winter she took care of things herself in the brewery and prepared all the grain for it. Her brother, the cornet's son, though a young man, didn't want to get married, but was thinking about becoming a monk, because when he was sick, he made himself a promise: "When," he said, "I get better, I'll become a monk, after giving away my sister in marriage." So, he recovered and waited for a good man to come around to give him both control of the household and his sister, and he cared about nothing else, just reading books, and Olena took care of everything in the household for him.

Our Pan Captain Zabryokha was drawn there. It was not like he had to use a hell of a lot of imagination! The cat knows where they keep the pig lard: not only is that

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⁷ "Korundzhyi" in Ukrainian means the "standard-bearer." We've opted for the British military term "cornet" that has the same meaning. "Khorundzhivna" in this context would be the cornet's daughter. It could also mean a cornet's wife in other contexts.

girl healthy, young, pretty, dark-haired, full-faced, but the farm animals – the farm animals – Lordy! She has her own farmstead, a small forest, a brewery, a little mill, a windmill, and cattle and sheep – what else can you say. She'll be getting all of that. So our Ulasovych was in such a hurry that he wouldn't let the horse catch its breath, and he himself, without having eaten his midday meal, covered thirty seven-hundred-sazhen-length versts, racing along, without resting, and as he reached the Bezverkhy Khutir and got off his horse near the cornet's house, he staggered as if he were drunk, and as I mentioned, he didn't stop to eat anywhere.

After greeting Pan Cornet's Son and taking a seat in his house, our fellows got deeply into conversation and proclaimed that their parents were also friendly with each other, so they shouldn't be strangers. Further, the cornet asked our Captain where God was taking him and why? Now our Ulasovych began to lie, because as older people say: as soon as you plan to start wooing, you start lying, too, and not a single man has ever gone wooing without lying. So, our Captain says that apparently, he needs to get some mash for the oxen for the winter (what kind of winter? The Church Feast of Petrivka [Saints Peter and Paul] was just around the corner on June 29), and he heard that in Pan Cornet's Son's brewery, the leftovers from the mash were good and well-tended to, so he came to order some and barter.

"I don't know these matters, so I don't get involved in them. My sister knows better," Pan Cornet's Son told him.

"And where is Olena Yosypivna? If we call her, then we can close the deal with her," Zabryokha said.

"Well! My sister's in the field. They are sowing some millet there, so she's overseeing that because no one knows how to do anything without her. And you, Ulasovych, have some fun. She'll be here by evening. Until she returns, come here, maid! Pour us some plum spirits! We'll drink a glass or two. Since you're already at our place, Pan Captain, spend

the night with us, because it's no longer early," Pan Cornet's Son said.

"It's the will of the master!" Mykyta happily replied.

So, they downed a pitcher of plum spirits on their own, and then they tasted a bit of the blackthorn liquor. Our Olena then arrived from the field. She saw that there was a stranger in the house. So, she immediately fluttered about, ordered that carp be brought in from the pond and arranged for dinner to be prepared. She rushed around here and there and gave out the entire work schedule for the next day, and who needed to go for what, and then got dressed so nicely, as was usual for a young lady and daughter of a cornet: she attached a lustrine *zapaska* (sash) to an old *plakhta* (high-waisted woven wrap skirt), put on a silk *yupka* (jacket) with long sleeves and folds at the back, and a ducat coin on a velvet thread around her neck, and red shoes. Then she tied a pretty ribbon on her head and made an entrance, bowing down low to Pan Ulasovych.

Our Zabryokha, when he saw such a lovely young lady, of a kind he had never seen since he was born, such that he never had dreamt of, began to shudder and had no clue what to say, but the cornet reminded him and said:

"So, Pan Captain, here is out mistress of the house. Consult her, she is in charge of everything.

So, what about our Ulasovych? Not a word from his lips. He tried to say something, but he just hemmed and hawed, and began to talk about oxen, then finished talking about doves, thought about grains, and said something about thorns, and when he fell silent, he became really dumbstruck and just swallowed his drool while gazing at such a beauty.

Olena was such a quick-witted damsel. Although Pan Cornet's Son was beating around the bush, she now guessed who he was and why he had come. She said to him, "Okay, laddie. Drink up some blackthorn liqueur for your health and have some dinner, then go to bed, and tomorrow is a new day. As God is willing, we will sleep on it and decide what to do."

Upon hearing this, Zabryokha could not restrain himself from rejoicing, thinking: “That’s it, it’s all set, tomorrow I just need to bring the embroidered towels with me.”⁸ He got back to his mug and continued sipping spirits with Pan Cornet’s Son who was going to become a monk, but still hadn’t rushed to quit drinking. In fact, he loved it even more.

Olena often popped in on the young lads as if it were over this or that business matter, and this time just to scrutinize Mykyta Ulasovych better, to see what was what. When she entered and looked over Pan Captain with her eyes as dark as blackberries. His tongue turned into felt, and he couldn’t move it back into his mouth, blushing crimson. After fixing dinner, she didn’t come back anymore: the two young lads had dinner by themselves, and, finishing the jug of black-thorn spirits, Pan Cornet’s Son wanted to go to bed, until our Zabryokha made champing sounds, coughed, and smacked his lips. He wiped off his mustache and began to say what the deacon composed a long time ago for such an occasion. Here he goes:

“Pan Yosypovych, hark to what I sayeth unto thee: the essence of a single man is incommensurate both in the home and in the household economy. Every breath is esteemed in duality: a man only needeth to marry and have children. And I who art the lowest of men has’t taken this thought and insuppressible desire. A flame giveth birth inside me, and I shalt not depart, until I am joined in union with the beautiful, most highly respected Kat...” Here he fell silent. This is what the deacon wrote for him when he thought of courting the

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⁸ Embroidered towels or cloths are extremely significant in Ukrainian tradition. They are used as part of the engagement ritual as well as the wedding ceremony. The symmetry and symbols of the embroidery are meant to ward off evil and bring happiness to the young couple. For an image of one such “rushnyk” see: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/50/a7/3b/50a73b32e497509cf181bcfdb4289cc.jpg>.

priest's daughter from Chernihiv, and Zabryokha recited it to the very end as it was etched by heart in his memory, but then he remembered that the Cornet's daughter was not Kateryna, but Olena, and not highly respected, but – a young damsel, so that's why he fell silent, having messed it up either way. The cornet's son had almost fallen asleep, but he listened closely to this soliloquy and said:

“What are you saying, Pan Captain? Somehow, I don't fathom anything. Was it after drinking the spirits that you became like this?”

Ulasovych sighed and said:

“What a hell of a speech! This is what our deacon wrote for me....”

“But what is it? Yosypovych asked. “Is this a poem, or what?”

“Alas! I myself don't know what it is or what it's for,” Zabryokha said.

“So why are you saying such things to me before bedtime? It sends shivers down my spine.”

“I wouldn't say anything, but misfortune befell me!”

“What kind of misfortune?” Tell me quickly, I want to go to bed.”

“Well! It's for some to sleep and others not to!” Ulasovych said, and, breathing heavily, bowed to the cornet's son deeply and blurted out:

“Give me your sister in marriage!”

“Oy!” said the cornet's son, who began to ponder it, scratching the back of his head and shoulders, then his back, and then said: “I'll see what my sister will say, let's leave this till tomorrow and just sleep on it.” Thus, he left him there.

Our Zabryokha went to bed, but he couldn't sleep. Sunrise couldn't come quickly enough. He just needed to hear Olena's answer as soon as possible... Well, somehow, he managed to wait for sunrise, and the two young men arose and met. Then Pan Ulasovych asked:

“What will you say to me, young sir? Does our matter go into effect? If so I would quickly run over to the village elder and then appear here to fulfill my obligation. Tell me, please!”

Our Cornet's Son sniffled and said nothing to him. He just shouted into the adjoining room: “Well, sister! Give us some breakfast, whatever you have there.” A servant girl came out of the room, bowed, and set something on the table in front of Pan Ulasovych in a frying pan... baked pumpkin!.. When our Zabryokha saw such an insult, he jumped up from the table and ran out of the house! And here a hired hand was already holding his horse, which was already saddled. He quickly mounted it and began to ride around the house. When he heard people laughing at him, he became even more ashamed. What kind of evil trick was this? Something was dangling from the horse's neck! When he looked, it was a rope with a pumpkin tied to it! He tossed it away, and slapped the horse with his whip, giddyap, giddyap... One thing was the shame: he felt sorry for not getting such a girl, but he didn't even have anything to eat or drink! Now our Ulasovych was already running home with the pumpkin in the same way he ran to the maiden with the thought of taking the embroidered engagement towels. But the misfortune was for himself and his exhausted horse. So, with incredible difficulty, he forced himself home right before midnight and, as I said before, he quickly went to bed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko (1778–1843) is considered by many to be “the father of Ukrainian prose” and deserving of a wider readership. Born to a prominent Ukrainian family from just outside of Kharkiv, he became a tireless cultural activist for his Ukrainian people. His prose works such as the sentimentalist *Marusya* (1833) and the comic *The Witch of Konotop* (1837) along with his theatrical works such as *Matchmaking at Honcharivka* (1834) earn him a place in the pantheon of nineteenth-century Ukrainian writers.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS

Michael Naydan is Woskob Family Professor of Ukrainian Studies at The Pennsylvania State University. He has published over 50 articles on literary topics and more than 80 translations in journals and anthologies. He has translated, co-translated, or edited more than 40 books of translations, including Mark Andryczyk's *Ukraine 22: Ukrainian Writers Respond to War* (Penguin Books, 2023), *Zelensky: A Biography* (Polity Press, 2023), Yuri Vynnychuk's *The Night Reporter: A 1938 Lviv Murder Mystery* (Glagoslav Publications, 2021), *Selected Poetry of Bohdan Rubchak: Songs of Love, Songs of Death, Songs of the Moon* (Glagoslav Publications, 2020); Maria Matios's novel *Sweet Darusya: A Tale of Two Villages* and Yuri Vynnychuk's novel of the Shoah *Tango of Death* (both with Spuyten Duyvil Publishers, 2019). His own novel about the city of Lviv *Seven Signs of the Lion* appeared with Glagoslav Publications in 2016. He has co-translated several of these and other volumes with Alla Perminova. He has received numerous prizes for his translations including the George S.N. Luckyj Award in Ukrainian Literature Translation from the Canadian Foundation for Ukrainian Studies in 2013.

Alla Perminova is a professor of English at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a practicing literary translator from and into Ukrainian, English, and Spanish. She received her doctoral and postdoctoral degrees in translation studies from Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv where she worked as a full professor for fifteen years. She is

Oleh Olzych National Literary Contest first prize winner (1997), Fulbright senior scholar (The Pennsylvania State University, 2012–2013), the author of 70 scholarly articles, translator and/or editor of 20 books, presenter of over 30 talks at international conferences. Her personal philosophy as a translator and a researcher is discussed in her book *A Translator's Reception of Contemporary American Poetry* (in Ukrainian, 2015), in which she promotes the reception model of literary translation.

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Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko (1778–1843) is considered by many to be “the father of Ukrainian prose” and deserving of a wider readership. Born to a prominent Ukrainian family from just outside of Kharkiv, he became a tireless cultural activist for his Ukrainian people. His prose works such as the sentimentalist *Marusya* (1833) and the comic *The Witch of Konotop* (1837) along with his theatrical works such as *Matchmaking at Honcharivka* (1834) earn him a place in the pantheon of nineteenth-century Ukrainian writers.

The Witch of Konotop (written in 1833 and published in 1836–37) is a beloved, classic Ukrainian comic novella that is little known outside of Ukraine. Part of the reason for this has been the difficulty in translating its complex stylistic levels that range from archaic Old Church Slavonic to colorful, colloquial Ukrainian. It shares several stylistic similarities to Mykola Hohol’s (aka Nikolai Gogol’s) Ukrainian horror tales in *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (1833). These include a folksy, rambling narrator; comical situations with moral lessons; insignificant detail; ironic asides; as well as a thematic focus on Ukrainian folk belief in witches and demons.

