

Author Rediscovered

The Life and Writings of Vasyl Tkachuk

Summary

Vasyl Tkachuk (1916–1944), nicknamed Hutsul, was a talented Ukrainian novelist of the 1930s and a bard of Pokuttia and Hutsul lands. He went from being a favorite of critics, readers, and the authorities to an inconvenient writer due to the political conjuncture of the time and was consequently forcibly sent to the front, where he died in 1944.

Famous during the interwar period, after his death, he was forgotten and consequently left unexplored and unrecognized in the history of Ukrainian literature.

The purpose of the monograph *Author Rediscovered. The Life and Writings of Vasyl Tkachuk* was not only to restore the memory of a writer lost in the Ukrainian literary space but also to promote the uniqueness of his novelistic output, which unquestionably deserves to be popularized.

The book contains eight chapters with subsections, two appendices, an introduction, a conclusion, a bibliography, a personal index and an English summary.

The analysis confirmed that Vasyl Tkachuk is highly unorthodox in the context of the entire Western Ukrainian literary process of the interwar period. It's especially visible in the context of the activities of the youngest Lviv bohème – the “Twelve” (of which he was one of the undisputed leaders).

Unlike the vast majority of members of the “Twelve”, who took up urban themes in their work, the novelist explored the theme of Pokuttia and Hutsul, fully devoting himself to rural themes. However, like his closest literary comrades, he strived to find new forms of expression, joining the ranks of the spiritual elite of Western Ukraine and the Lviv literary avant-garde of the 1930s.

A favorite of the critics of the time, he remains not only in their memory but also in that of his fellow members of the “Twelve” and the Lviv bohème, as reflected in the memoirs of émigré writers. Due to the dual – Soviet and German – occupation of western Ukrainian lands, a sizable portion of Lviv's creative intelligentsia found refuge outside Ukraine, in exile, where they devoted themselves with great dedication to artistic work, including the writing of memoirs.

Writers such as Anatol Kurdydyk, Bohdan Nyzhankivsky, Ostap Tarnavsky, Yuriy Tys, Edward Kozak, and others left extremely valuable information about the Ukrainian avant-garde of the interwar period, the “Twelve” and Vasyl Tkachuk.

The formation of Tkachuk's talent was greatly influenced by the tumultuous though brief biography of the prematurely deceased writer, his impoverished childhood, his unruly teenage years, his love for the young Lviv native Mariya Janusz, the fruit of which was his only child – daughter Olga. Then came the separation from his family and the unexpected literary success of *The "Twelve"*, when the novelist published successive collections of novellas.

The writer's initial enthusiasm towards the Soviet authorities entering Lviv, then insubordination and open disagreement with the new reality of Western Ukraine, turn his luck around – the popular novelist becomes *persona non grata*. He ends up on the frontlines, gets lost in the turmoil of war, and probably loses his life on the Eastern Front.

What follows is the Soviet policy of obliterating traces of the inconvenient writer and, at the same time, the arduous work of restoring the memory of Hutsul by those closest to him.

In the arduous road "from oblivion to immortality", the post-memory plays an arch-important role, as confirmed by the results of five interviews – three of which I conducted in Ukraine and two in Poland.

In Tkachuk's home village of Illintsi, in the school the writer once attended, I had a touching conversation with the daughter of the director of the Illintsi Village People's History Museum, Luda Shychova, as well as with the novelist's found relative, Anna Fedoriychuk. And in picturesque Kolomyia, at the "Pisanka" hotel, with Mykola Sulatytski – historian, professor of the Department of Ukrainian Studies at the National Medical University in Ivano-Frankivsk.

I was fortunate to speak with the writer's daughter, Olga Hoffmann, twice in Szczecin. This is an essential part of the research on Tkachuk's life and work. The direct witnesses of his activities have passed on their memories to posterity – his father to Luda Shychova, his mother and grandmother to Anna Fedoriychuk, and the Sniatyn community to Prof. Sulatytski. The latter also based his knowledge on direct historical sources.

The daughter was not given the opportunity to meet her talented father, but she drew her information from the best sources – from her mother and grandmother, as well as from Roman Ryziuk's discoveries. The interviews made it possible to reconstruct an authentic portrait of Tkachuk as a man and an artist and allowed him to permanently restore his achievements to Ukrainian literature and culture.

Vasyl Tkachuk wrote novellas about the lives of the Hutsul and Pokuttian villages. Individual works on urban themes turned out to be artistically weaker and did not affect the overall image of the novelist as a bard of Pokuttia and Hutsul.

The novelistic legacy of the writer, with its themes and issues that fit into the classic rural narrative (ukr. селенісність) for Ukrainian writing, was a discovery for interwar critics because of its original poetics, saturating individual works with a multiplicity of means of artistic expression.

In addition to the secrets of Vasyl Tkachuk's novellas revealed during the research, it is important to remember the typological and artistic parallels between him and his notorious predecessor on the ground of the native novella, Vasyl Stefanyk – considered the most outstanding creator of Ukrainian novellas.

Tkachuk's masterful balancing act between novelistic tradition and innovation brought him recognition not only in the 1930s but also today, when he is being rediscovered and appreciated.

An extremely important aspect of Tkachuk's work is the richness of his artistic message, including images of women. It is known that they played a very important role in his life. The writer held his mother, Olena Tkachuk, in great esteem and love. She was not only present in his heart to the end, but he repeatedly eulogized her in his novellas.

For the writer, a mother is a symbol both of a faithful parent and, traditionally in Ukrainian culture, of a beloved homeland. The novelist, famous for his hot temper and weakness for beautiful women (who, incidentally, did not remain indebted to him), also immortalized in his works other archetypal female characters, such as a young girl, wife, daughter-in-law, or grandmother.

All of them were portrayed with respect and, surprisingly for a young country boy, tolerance and forbearance towards the strengths and weaknesses of the female character, which once again confirms the avant-garde nature of the writer's work. Only the image of the mother-in-law fits the convention of Ukrainian literature – it is completely negative.

Thanatological motifs also turned out to be important for understanding the specificity of Tkachuk's works. Death and its foreshadowing, *memento mori*, was shown in individual examples of the writer's short prose in various guises. It is omnipresent, affects a whole cross-section of society, and does not spare children or the young, the noble or the wicked, the happy or the betrayed or abandoned.

At first glance, this may undermine the claim that Hutsul's legacy is more optimistic compared to the classic Ukrainian novellas. However, these are unfounded fears, for death in Tkachuk's work is a natural, final, and inevitable stage of a person's life path, which cannot obscure the overall ideological message of his novellas.

Thus, life, not death, its various faces, persistence, and memory of it are the main themes of Tkachuk's novellas. This overshadows the pain and suffering associated with the necessity of leaving this world at the moment of death.

The core of the reconstruction of Tkachuk's artistic portrait is the symbolism of nature, which played a dominant role in the writer's philosophy, worldview, and perception of the surrounding reality. It seems that nature most clearly demonstrates the essence and character of the novelist's work. It coexists with the characters, closely interacts with them, and shares their worries and joys.

Pre-war critics drew attention to the dominance of nature in the writer's picturesque novellas, and with the current trends in literary studies, one can

speak of an ecocritical physiognomy of this legacy, with the chichka, wind, storm, sky, and celestial bodies at the center.

Vasyl Tkaczuk is, on the one hand, a proud Hutsul in love with the Carpathian nature and landscapes of Pokuttia, and on the other, a Ukrainian who respects his homeland and is inconvenienced by the Soviet authorities. His ethnic and national identity (which consequently prevented him from humbly accepting the ever-tightening Soviet noose of enslavement) was reflected in many of the works of his four collections of novellas. Thus, Tkachuk's understanding of the issue of national and cultural self-identification is another aspect of his legacy.

Of particular note is the writer's novellas as an example of a local Hutsul text. He treats the Hutsul region as a kind of *locus amoenus* – a beautiful place, friendly to man, and at the same time –*locus horridus*– a bleak place, terrible and unfriendly to its inhabitants. Unlike many of his predecessors who exclusively glorify Hutsul, its customs, and its inhabitants, the writer equally apologizes and de-glamorizes the region. He reveals its beauty but is also unfamiliar with Hutsul's inter-ethnic feuds, poverty, suffering, and death.

The last aspect of the study of Tkachuk's legacy concerns an almost unknown segment of his oeuvre – thirteen works (novellas and sketches) published only on the pages of Western Ukrainian newspapers and magazines of the 1930s.

Their analysis in terms of their themes and problems, ideological eloquence, and means of artistic expression leads to the conclusion that they do not differ in level from the rest of the published part of the literary legacy of this exceptional artist, forming an integral whole with it.

The supplements to the book, in addition to their unquestionable cognitive value, have great sentimental weight. The interviews with family members and fellow residents of the Illintsi and the Sniatyn district were extremely moving, reflecting the emotions of the respondents and showing their genuine attachment to the memory of Tkachuk.

On the other hand, the modern edition of Tkachuk's novellas printed only in old Galician periodicals is, in a way, the realization of the will of Olga Hoffmann, who wished to popularize, to save from oblivion her father's entire output, not just a fragment of it.

The monograph includes archival photographs of Vasyl Tkachuk and his loved ones, as well as contemporary photos documenting my stay in Tkachuk's "little homeland" and moments spent with the respondents of the aforementioned interviews, and finally, Olga Hoffmann's sentimental meeting with Anna Fedoriychuk in Szczecin, Poland.

The monograph will be useful to students of Ukrainian studies, literary scholars, enthusiasts of short prose forms, and all lovers of Ukrainian literature and culture.