



# MARKO VOVCHOK

Readings in Russian Literature: The Nineteenth Century  
IIIT Hyderabad  
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# Marko Vovchok (1833-1907)

- Ukrainian nom de plume of Mariia Vilinska-Markovych
- Russian who wrote in Ukrainian; born in Oryol province in Russia
- Mother a noblewoman, father an army officer
- Sent to study in Kharkiv, Ukraine, after her father dies when she is seven and mother remarries to survive
- Returns to be raised on her aunt's estate in Oryol; acts as governess to aunt's children
- Aunt organizes salons, wants her to marry a rich landowner



*Марко Вовчок*

# Marko Vovchok (1833-1907)

- Moved to Ukraine in 1851, after marrying a Ukrainian folklorist and ethnographer called Opanas Markovych
- Lived in different Ukrainian cities and towns, assisted her husband with his ethnographic work, learnt Ukrainian
- Published "Narodni opovidannya," a collection of Ukrainian folklore in 1857 and was immediately recognized by Ukrainian writers and intellectuals, e.g. Taras Shevchenko and Panteleimon Kulish
- Taras Shevchenko becomes a kind of father figure; dedicates "Instytutka" to him



*Марко Вовчок*



# Marko Vovchok (1833-1907)

- Ivan Turgenev edits a Russian translation of her book and publishes it as “Ukrainian Folktales” (“Ukrainskiye Narodniye Skazki”) in 1859
- Travelled all over Europe and returned to Russia, making friends such as Jules Verne, Leo Tolstoy, Alexander Herzen (Verne gives her exclusive permission to translate his works into Russian)
- Two more collections of folktales in Ukrainian (1862, 1865), these were her major works.
- Began to write in Russian owing to ban on Ukrainian (Valuyevsky Tsirkyular, 1863; Ems Ukaz, 1876), ban on “Little Russian” religious and educational literature



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- Opanas Markovych dies in 1867; Vovchok marries again in 1878
- Restores contact with Ukrainian publishers in the 1900s
- Faces plagiarism charges and loss of professional reputation; allegations of ghost-translators
- Worked on a Ukrainian dictionary
- Populist themes: Anti-serfdom, interested in the history of Ukraine, major themes in her work; women protagonists



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- Her writing is credited with contributing influentially to the development of the Ukrainian short story, esp. the genre of the social story, and leading the development of Ukrainian Realism
- Realist works include her stories on serfdom; ethnographic romanticism in her other work, characterized by strong characters and stronger-willed heroes.
- Individual works, published in journals, include "Instytutka" (After Finishing School, 1859) – founding example of the social story



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***“The first-person narrative flows on like a river of smarting memory ... Dense and vivid with pain, this book is a heart-rending portrait of human tragedy which calls for social justice, abolition of serfdom, and respect for the individual.”***

- What we read, research, teach, and learn shapes the **discourse** in any particular subject area.
- Teachers, students, textbooks, and **syllabi contribute significantly to what is known**, believed, said, circulated, propagated, and maintained about any topic or subject.
- The choice of what we are reading in this course is determined by **what is available in English translation**.
- There is a **high degree of marginalization** where Russian women writers are concerned, in the sense of both contemporary and present-day recognition.
- Therefore, what **we know of them is – to a large extent – limited by the conditions of their marginalization**, i.e. relatively little is known about them, few (if any) translations exist, and there is little research, which is conducted by a handful of scholars.
- So **we are not in a position to adequately describe or assess their work or their impact** on the world.
- But **we can make a difference by understanding** these conditions and **working to change** the way Russian literature is taught and learnt at universities.

## Reflections on University Syllabi, the Canon, and Marginalization



# The Ethics of Telling a Story

- What story do you tell?  
(depends also on)
  - how you tell a story
  - why you tell a story
- Who gets to tell a story, and whose story gets heard?

# Background

- An emerging left-wing movement had championed, among other things, **women's emancipation**, since the mid-nineteenth century. **Education** was a major aspect of this commitment.
- Debates and discussions about women's rights used **literature and translation** as major vehicles for diffusion and outreach.
  - Nikolai Chernyshevsky's novel ***What is to be Done?* (1863)** was a very influential and important text in this period
- Women had been very visible in left-wing politics. There were also a lot of women writing at this time.



*Portrait of a Woman Reading* (1881)  
Ivan Kramskoi  
Oil on Canvas  
Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts

# Background

- Since 1858, Russian girls were allowed to attend “**gymnasiums**,” a kind of high school that girls would have attended for a few years from around eight years of age.
- Women briefly allowed to attend **university lectures** in 1859-1860.
- By the end of the 1860s, university courses open to women.
  - **co-educational courses** of higher study



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# Quescussion

- **Why is the story named thus?**
- **Does this story tell, but not show?**
- **Why is the old woman largely unmoved by the new mistress' cruelty?**
- **Why does the narrator use offensive language about Jews?**
- Why do they (the grandmother and the granddaughter) not feel guilt?
- What is the relevance of the young mistress' finishing school education? How does it shape her?

# Quescussion

- Why are none of the landed class named?
- Why is the soldier cook so nonchalant?
- Why does the young mistress detest manual labour?
- Why a first-person narrator?
- Why does the young mistress object to laughter and tears?

# More

- How does Ustina approach the matter of daily beatings?
- How does Ustina's narrative subvert the treatment meted out to the serfs and allow her to transcend it? How does that affect the overall depiction of the upper classes and what the reader takes away from the story?
- Why does Ustina say "That was how they spoke about us, like we were horses or something" (17)? What does it mean?
- Why do Ustina and Prokip hide their love?
- Why does no one pick up the ruble the master gives Katriya after she has wasted away following her baby daughter's death and from working and toiling for the mistress?
- Do you think the old mistress' soul will be saved/redeemed?