

KATERINA

By Taras Shevchenko



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INTRODUCTION

Taras Shevchenko wrote "Katerina" in 1838, in St. Petersburg, when he was 24 years old. It was in the same year that he was bought out of serfdom from Baron Englehardt by a group of St. Petersburg artists and intellectuals. This poem is dedicated to the Russian writer Zhukovsky, who posed for Karl Bryullov, the leading artist of the time. The portrait was sold for 2,500 rubles, to raise the purchase price of Taras Shevchenko's freedom. The poem "Katerina" was first printed in the 1840 edition of "Kobzar", and many of the passages were censored. In it, Shevchenko brings out the life of the serfs of that period, the status of women, and expresses his hatred of the tsarist regime which kept Ukraine in bondage.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

- 1) V. A. Zhukovsky is the writer and translator whose portrait, painted by artist K. Bryullov, bought Shevchenko's freedom. April 22, 1838, was the day the transaction was carried through.
- 2) Tsarist army soldiers and officers were called Moscali after Moscow, the capital of Russia. In this case Shevchenko had officers in mind as is shown further in the poem.
- 3) The war with Turkey in that period.
- 4) Moscovschina — Tsarist Russia.
- 5) Chumak — Cart-driver.
- 6) Puhach — Leader of one of the peasant rebellions against serfdom.
- 7) Hetman — A chieftain of the cossacks of early Ukrainian history.

Katerina

By TARAS SHEVCHENKO

To V. A. Zhukovsky in memory of April 22, 1838.¹⁾

Fall in love, O dark-browed maidens,
But not with the Moscali,²⁾
For Moscals — they're foreign folk,
Bringing naught but grief.
The Moscal will love in jest,
And in jest abandon;
Return to his native land,
Leave the maid to slander . . .
If but alone, it could be borne,
But there's the old mother
Who gave her birth on this God's earth,
She, also, must suffer.
The heart languishes, though singing,
Having its own reasons;
People though can't see the heart,
Their judgement — she's easy!
Fall in love, O dark-browed maidens,
But not with the Moscali,
For Moscals — they're foreign folk,
Cruel before your grief.

Katerina heeded not
Her father, or mother,

Fell in love with a Moscal,
Trustfully adored him.
Young he was, her new-found love,
In the orchard meeting,
She destroyed herself, her future,
Yielded to entreaty.
Mother called to sup in vain,
The daughter unheeding;
Where she dallied with her love,
There she ended sleeping.
Night after night she lovingly
Kissed her dark-eyed lover,
Till the village, full of talk,
Sneered at and maligned her.
Let them gossip if they will,
Let them prate of morals:
She's in love and doesn't hear
The approach of sorrow.
Came the evil news at last —
The bugles commanded
The Moscal to Turkish lands,³⁾
Left Katerusa stranded
Without warning, but indifferent
That her braids were covered:
If she could sing for a loved one,
She could also suffer.
He had promised, her dark-browed one,
That if death were lenient,
He would come back, he had promised —
And then Katerina
Would follow him to his land,
Forgetting her sorrows,
In the meantime, let the people
Gossip and tell stories.
Katerina does not grieve —
Wipes the teardrops quietly,
When the girls without her sing
On the village byways.
Katerina does not grieve —
Eyes swollen with weeping,
To the well for water goes
When midnight comes creeping,
So her enemies won't see;
Then, the well-side reaching,
'Neath the guelder-rose she sings

A song sad, beseeching.
'Tis of Hryts, so clear her woe,
That the rose starts weeping,
Then returns — and glad indeed,
That the world lies sleeping.
Katerina does not grieve,
Not a worry phases —
In a brand-new kerchief she
Through the window gazes.
Katerina gazes, waiting,
Half a year goes plodding,
When the pain around her heart,
Stabs her youthful body.
Very ill lies Katerina,
Barely, barely breathing . . .
And then better — rocks a cradle
Where a child lies sleeping.
Women's tongues with evil clacked,
Mothers sneering, laughing,
Jibed that all Moscals returning
Slept with her in passing.
—You've a lovely dark-eyed girl,
Though now not alone,
In the corner she's attending,
One of Moscow's own.
A dark-browed one she achieved,
Taught him, and he learned . . .
Devil take you, chatterers,
And may ill befall,
Like this mother of whom you laugh
For bearing a child!

Katerina, heart of mine!
Fate is cruel, unkind!
Where on earth can you go now
With your orphan child?
Who will ask, or warmly greet
You without a husband?
Father, mother — strangers are,
Difficult and stubborn!

Katerina, soon recovered;
Every day her eager gaze,
Through the window watched the roadway,
As she rocked her tiny babe.

He doesn't come, he doesn't come . . .
Does she watch in vain?
She'd go to weep in the orchard,
But people will stare.
After sundown — Katerina
In the orchard walks,
In her arms her son she carries,
And the past recalls.
— Here she waited for her love,
Here they lingered talking,
And there . . . and there . . . my son, my son! —
Her voice broke, and halted . . .

Greener grew the cherry trees
In the orchard daily;
Once again to stroll its paths
Ventures Katerina.
Without singing, now she walks,
Where she sang before,
When she waited for her love
'Neath that cherry bower.
No more songs; the dark-browed maid
Curses now her plight.
In the meantime evil tongues
Freely vent their spite —
Daily grow their vicious tales.
How can she fight back?
If her loved one were but near,
He would stop their clack . . .
He's so far, her dark-browed love,
He can't hear, can't see,
How her foes all laugh at her,
How Katrusya weeps,
Did he die, her dark-browed one
The Danube far beyond?
Or is he in Moscow now
With another love?
No, it can't be that he's killed,
He's well, he's alive!
Where could he find other eyes
Or brows dark as night?
In Moscow, so far away,
Far beyond the sea —
There's no other Katerina;
She gave in to grief! . . .

Mother gave her fine dark brows,
Dark eyes warm and deep,
But she couldn't give her child
Happiness to keep.
Without fortune, a young maid —
Like that meadow blossom,
Is burnt by sun, swayed by winds,
Picked by all in passing.
Wash your fair face in your tears,
In their bitter flow,
For the Moscals have gone home,
Choosing other roads.

II.

At the table father sits
Leaning on his arms;
Gazing not on God's fair earth,
Worry is his lot.
And beside him on a bench
Sits the weeping mother,
Who faintly, through helpless tears,
Says to her young daughter:
— What, a wedding, darling child?
Where is your intended?
Where the candles, where the maids,
The best men, the elders?
Far in Moscow, dearest child!
Go and seek them yonder,
But don't tell the world's good folk
That you have a mother.
Cursed the time and cursed the hour
That witnessed your coming!
Had I known, I would have drowned you
Early that same morning . . .
You'd have to a serpent yielded,
Not to a Moscal — as now . . .
Daughter of mine, dearest child,
My sweet budding flower!
Like a berry, like a nestling,
I loved you and raised
To disaster . . . O my daughter,
How have you behaved?
This my thanks . . . Go now, and search
Your new in-law mother.
You refused to heed your own,

Now you'll heed another.
Go my daughter, find her now,
Greet her, win her love,
Happiness 'mong strangers seek,
Don't return to us!
Don't come back from that far land,
No, my dear child, never . . .
Then who'll lay my aching head
'Neath the soil forever?
Who will o'er my body weep,
But my near and dear?
Who will plant a guelder rose
O'er my lonely bier?
Who, but you, my sinful soul
Will in prayers recall?
Daughter of mine, dearest one,
My beloved child!
Leave us now . . .

and barely, barely

Her voice breathed to bless:
— God be with you! — then collapsing
She lay as in death . . .

Then the father old spoke up:
— Why prolong the grief? —
Sobbing wildly, Katerina
Dropped before his feet:
— Your forgiveness, O my father,
For what I have done!
Your forgiveness, O my father,
My falcon beloved!
— Let the Lord forgive you child
And people benign;
Pray to him and go your way —
That would be most kind. —

Scarcely standing, she bowed low,
Quietly left her home;
Father, mother, old, infirm,
Like orphans alone.
Walked *beneath the cherry trees*,
Sent to God a prayer,
Then a bit of earth she picked,
For her cross to bear;
Saying: — I will not return!

In a far-off land,
In strange earth, strange people will
Bury me when dead;
Then this little bit of earth
Will o'er my body lie,
My misfortune and my woe
Will tell all passers-by . . .
Ah, don't tell, my little dove,
Wherever my grave,
Lest my sins might on this earth
People entertain.
You won't tell . . . Then look who'll say,
This mother was mine!
O my God! . . . O wicked fate!
Where, oh where to hide?
Ah, I'll hide, my little son,
Myself, I will drown,
Leaving you my sins to bear
'Mong people alone,
Parentless! . . . —

And through the village,
Katerina sobbed;
Walking, her head kerchief-covered,
Her child in her arms.
On the outskirts — her heart failed;
Looking back again,
Shaking her head hopelessly,
Brokenly she wailed.
Like a poplar in the field
By the road she stood,
Like the dewdrops just at sunrise,
So her teardrops flowed.
So bitterly, that the world
Was all hid in mist,
Only her son holding tightly
She wept over, kissed.
And the child, so like an angel,
Feels the soft caress,
Knows not why, but hands outflung
Seeks its mother's breast.
The sun set behind the grove,
Spread its rosy beams,
Wiping her tears, she turned away,
Left . . . as in a dream.
Gossiped long the village folk,

Many tales were told,
But they did not reach the ears,
Of the parents old . . .

So, on earth, do people act,
Using many ways!
One they bind, another knife,
One himself destroys . . .
And for what? The good Lord knows.
Earth, we know, is wide,
But how hard for one alone
A shelter to find.
This one has been sold by fate
To wander and roam,
And to this one has been left
That, which is unknown.
Where the people, the good folk,
That the heart prepared
To live with, accept and love?
Vanished, disappeared!

Aye, the world has fortune,
But who knows her smile?
Aye, the world has freedom,
But whose to define?
Aye, the world has people
Glittering with gold,
Seemingly — they're ruling,
Yet fortune don't know.
Nor fortune, nor freedom!
With boredom that's painful
They don their fine clothes.
To weep — would be shameful.
Take your gold, your silver
Rich, affluent be,
But I'll choose the tears —
To pour out my grief;
Drowning all misfortune
As I gently weep,
Stamping out all fetters
With my naked feet.
Then I will be happy,
Then I'll wealthy be,
When my darling dances
To fair freedom's beat.

III.

The owls hoot, the forest slumbers,
Stars twinkle in splendour,
Through amaranth, by the wayside,
Gophers play and wander.
Good folk have long gone to rest,
Each his own way wearied:
Some — from success, some — from tears,
All by darkness cherished.
Like a mother o'er her children,
Night has spread her cover;
How has she embraced Katrusya:
In house, or in forest?
In a meadow, beneath the sheaves
With her small son playing,

Or in a grove beside a log
A lone wolf awaiting?
Better that these brows so dark,
Should be owned by none,
When because of them such sorrow,
Such grief must be borne!
And what further still awaits?
More hardships, much more!
Yellow sands will bar the way
And folk that are foreign;
A harsh winter to endure . . .
And he — should they meet,
Will he welcome Katerina,
Will his son he greet?
With him all would be forgotten,
Hardships, sands, misfortune,
Like a mother, he'd receive her,
Like a brother, welcome.

We shall see, and we will hear,
Presently — I'll rest,
And the road to Moskovschina⁴⁾
In the meantime ask.
A long distance, gentlemen,
I know, realize!
Fairly makes the blood run cold
When it comes to mind.
Once I measured it myself —
As if one could measure! . . .

I'd describe that tale of woe,
But who'd pay attention?
— Lying, they'd say, the so-and-so!
(But not to my face),
Just abusing our fair language,
Being irritating.
Yours the truth, good folk, all yours,
What's the use of knowing,
That which I would lay before you
With eyes overflowing?
What's the use? All of us have
Enough of our own . . .
Begone with you! In the meantime
A flint let us hone.
Have a smoke, so that, you know,
Worry is dispelled,
For it's wrong to talk of things
That nightmares compel!
Devil take the wretched mess!
Better to return
To where Katerina wanders
With Ivas, her son.

Beyond Kiev and the Dnieper,
Beside forest dark,
A Chumak⁵⁾ group wends its way
Singing of Puhach.⁶⁾
A young woman comes towards them,
A pilgrim, they guess,
But why the eyes red with weeping,
Obvious distress?
A patched overcoat she wears,
A sack hangs behind,
In one hand a staff, the other
Bears a sleeping child.
Encountering the Chumaks
She covers the babe,
Then turns to them with: — Good people,
Does this highway lead
To Moscow's lands? Yes, it does,
Going far, young friend?
Right to Moscow; for Christ's sake,
Give a little help! —
She takes the coin, shamed to take
Bounty from another.

Well then, what for? . . . The child, of course,
She's the baby's mother!
Once more in tears she journeys on,
In Brovaryakh rests,
There, for her son, she spends the coin
On some ginger-bread.
A long time, the wretched maid
Walked, and asked her way;
And times there were when 'neath a fence
She slept with her babe . . .

See what hazel eyes can lead to, when yearning:
So that by strange fences their tears can be shed.
Then beware, young maidens, repent while it's early,
So that you, as well, to search won't be led,
So that you won't seek, as Katrya is seeking . . .
That you need not ask why people, ill-treating,
Won't offer a pillow for a weary head.

Do not ask, O dark-browed maidens,
For people won't tell;
Whom God punishes on earth,
They punish as well . . .
People act just like those branches
Bending in the breeze.
The sun shines on the poor orphan
(Shines, but gives no heat) —
People would cut off the sunlight,
Had they but the power,
So its rays won't reach the orphan,
Lighten the dark hour.
But whatever for, good Lord!
Why on earth to languish?
What has she done to the people,
What are they demanding?
That she should weep! O my heart!
Don't weep Katerina,
Don't show the world your bitter tears,
Endure, don't surrender!
But so your sweet face won't fade,
So dark-browed and fair,
In the forest, just at sunrise,
Bathe it with your tears.
Bathing thus — you won't be seen,
Won't be cause for glee;

And the heart will find release,
When tears can flow free.

Such is grief, misfortune, observe well, young maidens,
Jesting, the Moscal, left Katrya behind.
Trouble doesn't see, with whom it is jesting,
And people, though seeing, will not sympathize.
— Let her go to ruin, they say, the loose creature,
If she couldn't keep her honour intact! —
So keep your good name, loves, that some evil hour
Won't lead you to searching a Moscal who left.

Where does Katrya wander?
Her nights she spent under fences,
Rising in the early dawn,
Hastening to Moscovschina,
When suddenly! . . . Winter comes.
The storm whistles through the meadows,
But Katrya plods on,
Bast-shoes on her feet — what grief! —
A thin coat for warmth.
Limping now, Katrusya walks;
Staring — in a daydream . . .
Obviously — they're Moscals . . .
Oh grief! Her heart fails her . . .
She flew forward, to encounter,
To ask — Is he here,
My Ivan, my dark-browed one?
— We don't know — they sneer.
And as usual for Moscals,
They clowned, laughed and jeered,
— Oh you woman! Oh our lads!
Who won't they mislead! —
Katerina stood and gazed:
— You're people, I see!
Don't cry, my son, my disaster!
What will be, will be.
I'll go on — I will continue,
And we may meet yet,
Then, my dove, I'll hand you over,
As for me, there's death. —

The blizzard howls, roars and thunders,
Through the meadows sweeping;
Katrya, standing in its centre,

Can't control her weeping,
The storm, finally exhausted,
Breathes in deeper sighs;
Katerina would weep further,
But her tears have dried.
She looks down upon her child,
Showered by her woe,
Blooming like a rosy flower
In the morning dew.
Katerina looks and smiles,
A smile painful, torn,
With bitterness — which by the heart
Traacherously coils.
Silently, she scans the scene;
Ah — a grove looms black,
And beside it, by the roadside,
Perchance there's a shack.
— Come, my son, the darkness falls,
Maybe this homestead
Will welcome us; And if not,
Then outdoors we'll bed.
Under its walls we will sleep.
Ah Ivan, my son!
Where will you be sleeping then,
When your mother's gone?
Outdoors, with the dogs, my son,
Their affection seek!
Dogs are vicious, they may bite,
But they will not speak,
Will not gossip, will not laugh . . .
Sleep and share their food . . .
Oh my poor, my aching head!
What am I to do? —

A young orphan dog has his own cross to bear,
Good words do exist for the orphan on earth;
But he's sworn at, beaten, to bondage compelled,
To ask of the mother, none will, e'en in mirth.
But Ivas will be asked, very early indeed,
Before the poor lad even learns how to talk.
On whom do the dogs vent their spleen on the street?
Who by the picket sits ragged and starved?
And who leads the beggar? The dark bastard child . . .
His only good fortune — his handsome dark eyes,
But even with those jealous people find fault.

IV.

Throughout ravine and mountainside,
Like those old men with foreheads bald,
Stands ancient oaks from Hetman⁷⁾ times.
There is a dam, with willows lined.
The pond 'neath ice is fettered solid,
As is the water-hole — ice-bound . . .
Like a disc of glowing scarlet,
Through cloud the sun's bright fire broods,
The wind blows high; Its unleashed might
Effaces all; the world is white . . .
Its moaning fills the wintry woods.

The gale, howling fiercely, whistles,
Through the forest wailing;
Like the sea, snow-covered fields
In white, roll unending.
The armed watchman left his hut,
The woods to inspect,
But not a chance! So vile the storm,
The world's indistinct.
— Aha, quite a fugue, I see!
To hell with inspection!
Back to the hut . . . But what's this?
Hundreds, devil take them!
An evil one sent them here,
As if they were needed.
Come, my dear! Just look at them,
Snow-covered and freezing!
— What, Moscals? . . . Where the Moscals?
— What is this? Take care! . . .
— Where the Moscals, where are the lads?
— See, just over there! —
On winged feet sped Katerina,
Coatless, unattired,
— Right properly those Moscals
Must have filled her mind,
For all night that's all one hears,
Is his name, while sleeping. —
Over stumps and snow-drifts high
She flew, barely breathing.
Standing barefoot on the roadway,
She wiped her damp brow,
The Moscals approached to meet her,
As one, on their mounts.

— Oh, my grief! My unkind fate! —
 To them . . . When she noticed —
 The officer at their head.
 — Ivan, my beloved!
 My sweetheart, my dearest one!
 Where have you delayed? —
 She ran forward . . . grasped his stirrup . . .
 He turned a cold gaze —
 Then drove his spurs into his mount.
 — But why turn aside?
 Did you forget Katerina?
 Don't you recognize?
 Look at me then, my sweet dove,
 Look me in the face:
 It's Katrusya — your beloved,
 Why then, spur away?
 But he drove his horse ahead,
 Ignored her completely.
 — Wait a bit, my dear, my dove!
 Look — I am not weeping.
 Don't you know me, my Ivan?
 Sweetheart, look at me.
 Swear to God, it's I — Katrusya!
 — You fool, let me be!
 Take her away, she's insane!
 — Oh my God! Ivan!
 Are you then forsaking me?
 But you swore your love!
 — Take her away! Why do you wait?
 — Who me? Me to take?
 Whatever for, tell me, love,
 To whom will you give
 Your Katrusya, who with you
 In the orchard loved,
 Your Katrusya, who for you
 Bore an infant son?
 My father, my brother dear!
 Don't cast me aside!
 I will be your servant-girl . . .
 Take another bride . . .
 With the world . . . I will forget,
 That I had a lover,
 That I bore for you a son,
 An unmarried mother . . .
 A mother unwed . . . What shame!

For that am I ruined!
Abandon me, and forget me,
But your son don't spurn.
You won't leave then? Dearest heart,
Don't run off from me . . .
I'll bring to you your little son. —
The stirrup she freed
And to the house. Then returning,
Their son with her brings,
Bedraggled and wet with tears,
The poor little thing.
— Here he is, just look at him!
Where are you? You're hiding?
Fled! Not here! His son, his son,
A father's deserting!
Oh my God! My little child!
Where shall I go now?
Moscalki! My dear lads!
Please take him along;
Don't shun the babe, my good fellows:
He's an orphan now;
Take him and deliver him
To the one in charge.
Take him . . . Or I'll leave him too,
As his father left —
May this wicked, evil deed
Never let him rest!
In sinfulness to God's world
You were given birth;
Grow up then, to taunts and laughter! —
She placed him to earth.
— Remain here to find your father,
I've already tried . . . —
Then quick she fled from road to woods!
Left the child behind.
Crying, poor soul . . . And the Moscals,
Indifferent, went on.
Which was as well, for his cries
Brought the woodsmen 'round.

Barefoot through the forest, Katrya
Sped, and wildly weeping,
Alternately, she cursed Ivan,
Crying, then beseeching.
Coming to the forest edge;

She paused, looked around —
The ravine . . . She flew . . . and stopped
Silent on the pond.
— Accept, O Lord, my sinful soul,
And you — you, my body! —
The water splashed! And 'neath the ice
Deep the ripples eddied.

So the dark-browed Katerina
Found what she was seeking!
The wind howled across the gully
All traces erasing.

It's not the wind, that violent
The giant oak tree fells;
There's no sorrow, there's no grief
When a mother dies;
Not orphans, the little ones,
Burying her remains:
They are left with their good name,
With their mother's grave.
And if people cruel will jeer,
At the orphaned tot, —
It can weep upon the grave,
Ease its aching heart.
But for him, for him, on earth,
What for him remains,
Whom the father has not seen,
The mother disclaimed?
What is left the bastard child?
Who will kindly speak?
No family and no home —
Just sands, highways, grief . . .
Noble features and dark brows . . .
What for? To be known!
A portrait made, then not hidden . . .
May it lose its glow!

V.

The Kobzar had turned to Kiev,
When he stopped to rest.
Hung about with many sacks
Was the guide who led —
A small child who, by his side,
Dozed in the hot sun,

In the meantime, the old Kobzar
Sang his hymns to God.
All who ride, or walk — don't pass:
Some a bun, some coins,
Give to the man, but the girls
Gave theirs to the boy.
Stared at him, the dark-browed maids —
Barefoot and forlorn,
— She gave him dark brows, they said,
But good fortune scorned! —

Along the road to the city
A coach of six passes,
And inside the mistress sits
With children and master.
Pausing opposite the beggars —
The whirling dust settles.
Ivas runs, for from the window
A hand, waving, beckons.
Giving Ivas a few coins,
The lady's enchanted.
The lord glanced . . . then turned away . . .
The brute, he remembered,
Recognized the slim dark brows,
The dark eyes so tender . . .
Recognized his little son,
But would not accept him.
The lady asks, what's your name?
— Ivas. — What a darling! —
The coach moved, leaving Ivas
In the dust, now swirling . . .
Having added what they got,
They rose, wretched, tired,
Crossed themselves toward the sunrise
Then tramped down the highway.

(*St. Petersburg, 1838.*)