

Maya Kucherskaya
Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk district:
About Leskov's Literariness¹

The viper pours poison, with a pipette,
right into the ear
Radiating with spiritual beauty².

1. Introduction

In 1921, in „Novejschaia russkaia poeziiia” [Recent Russian Poetry], one of his early works, Roman Jakobson wrote, „The subject of literary scholarship is not literature in its totality but literariness, i. e., that which makes a given work a work of literature /.../ If literary scholarship wants to be scholarly, it must recognize ‘the [literary] device’ as its only ‘protagonist.’ The next main question is how the device is applied and motivated.”³

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¹ I am most grateful to Mila Nazyrova, Olga Meerson and Ekaterina Schnitke for providing their valuable feedback.

² Льет стерва яд с пипетки прямо в ухо,
Душевною блистая красотой.

The oral variant of the song „*Khodit Gamlet s pistolotom*” (by Alexei Okhriomenko, Sergei Kristi and Vladimir Shreiberg, 1950), published in: *Антология бардовской песни*. Сост. Р. Шипов — М.: Эксмо, 2006. The present variant is provided by Alexander Lifshits (The Library of MSU).

³ «Предметом науки о литературе является не литература, а литературность, т. е. то, что делает данное произведение литературным произведением. (...) Если наука о литературе хочет стать наукой, она принуждается признать „прием” своим единственным «героем». Далее основной вопрос — вопрос о применении, оправдании приема.» (Якобсон Р., «Новейшая русская поэзия», Якобсон Р. *Работы по поэтике: Переводы*. М.: Прогресс, 1987. P. 275.)

The obvious polemical rigorism of the quoted passage, and the historical and cultural biases of Jakobson's essay, hardly compromise the role of the artistic device in a literary text. In many instances, the analysis of the device, that is of the literary work's formal structure, allows for the rediscovery of what previously seemed to be exhausted as an object of study, and the detecting of which eludes scholars when using a less „formal” approach to the artistic text. Finally, only this analysis reveals the properties of the work that make it a „work of literature” or, in Yury Tynianov's terms, a „literary fact”⁴.

By „Literariness”, we mean the same as Roman Jakobson, namely: a set of formal devices used to make this a poetic work, as opposed to any other text. Jakobson does not concern himself with the question of the work's worth, or any valorization of the „good or bad taste” kind. But a certain literary quality is still implied in his criteria — as a form of effectiveness on the reader that a skilled author only may achieve.

This criterion for a literary work implies that every perfect work has literariness, without, however, implying the converse — that every work having literariness is good literature, let alone a masterpiece. Moreover, it is possible to assume that a graphomaniac's work may exemplify „literariness” in overabundance. The governing device may be too obvious; there may be too many fancy devices, such as a bold epigraph, or a denouement that is too dramatic, or epithets that are too „flowery.” All these may actually testify to the text being imitative or tailored without skill. Besides, a graphomaniac may have too little motivation for using so great an arsenal of devices. To use Chekhov's metaphor, they hang rifles on walls, half of which never end up shooting.

A true masterpiece consists of note merely having a device but of hiding it as well. It is only a scholar who ought to discern the governing device through this cover-up, while re-reading the work, rather than reading it for the first time — if the

⁴ Тынянов Ю. Н. „Литературный факт,” — Тынянов Ю. Н. *Поэтика. История литературы*. Кино. М., 1987. Р. 255—269.

work is truly good. Also, a writer, whether s/he be conscious of that or not, would use only those devices that would be motivated by their overall artistic goal.

Leskov's „Sketch” „Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District” is a literary masterpiece. Not only does Leskov have quite a range of effective devices but he also hides them adequately.

This article aims at, first, laying these devices bare, and, second, demonstrating how they serve the overall artistic goal of Leskov's „Lady Macbeth”. This will enable us to see both the actual makeup of the „sketch”'s „literariness” and the role this literariness plays in making this work something more than a mere sketch” — a real masterpiece, in fact.

2. Not „how” but „why”

The paradox of the situation is that „Lady Macbeth” is a very early masterpiece; this „sketch”⁵ was written at the time when Leskov was still a relatively immature author. He finished working on „Lady Macbeth” in Kiev, on November 26, 1864 (this date is in the end of the text) and on December 7, he sent the manuscript to the Dostoevsky brothers' magazine *Epokha* [Epoch]. The brothers apparently liked this „little trifle”⁶ so well that they published it in the very next issue of *The Epoch*, the first issue of the magazine in 1865, under Leskov's original title „Ledi Makbet nashego uezda” („Lady Macbeth of Our District”). In subsequent editions, beginning with the 1867 short-story collection⁷, Leskov changed the title to „Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk.”

⁵ „A sketch” is a genre subtitle, given by Leskov. However, in the point of view of contemporary literary criticism it is better termed as a „novella.” Although discussing the genre definition of „Lady Macbeth” is outside the purpose of the present paper, I will use both the term „sketch” as well as „novella”.

⁶ Leskov's letter to Nikolai Strakhov: Лесков Н. С. *Собрание сочинений в 11-ти томах*. М: 1958. P. 253. My translation — МК. Here and further, unless otherwise specified, my translations are given without a reference. Further while citing this edition we first give the volume number and then the page number.

⁷ *Повести, очерки и рассказы М. Стебницкого*. СПб: 1867. Vol. 1.

By 1864, Leskov already had much experience in journalism and political writing. He collaborated in many periodicals, wrote dozens of articles and notes on publicly relevant topics, a study about the life of Old Believers in Riga, and large cycles of travel sketches⁸. At the same time, he still was rather inexperienced in short fiction. As a writer of pure fiction, a practitioner of literariness, i. e., of what interests us here primarily, he was a mere beginner. By that time, he had published a few non-fiction short-stories based on real events „from popular life,”⁹ a short-story „Ovtsebyk” [Musk-Ox] and a tale „Zhitie odnoi baby.” [The Life of a Peasant Woman]

Although both of these earlier texts document events in real life and are full of personal memories from Leskov's childhood and adolescence, in both the short-story „Ovtsebyk” and the tale „The Life of a Peasant Woman,” the artistic principle clearly prevails over the non-fictive: there are many fictitious elements, psychological details, and poetic descriptions of nature. However, in terms of literary form such as composition or the unity of style both texts are extremely unbalanced. Obvious prolixities, digressions irrelevant for the development of the plot or the main characters, digressions on ethnography, often stylistically jarring with the rest of the text, betray a beginner, although a very talented one.

Of course, by the end of 1864, Leskov's the novel anti-Nihilist „Nekuda” („No Way Out”), had already been written and published, but we will not consider it as it is neither short fiction nor viewed as an artistic success even by Leskov himself. „This novel bears all signs of my haste and clumsiness,” the writer himself admitted (10, 169).

Suddenly, against the background of these first timid and mediocre steps on the path of pure fiction, „Lady Macbeth of Mt-sensk,” a true masterpiece, emerges from under his pen. This

⁸ Leskov's non-fiction works of 1861–1864 are included into the first three volumes of the edition of his collected works: Лесков Н. С. *Полное собрание сочинений в 30 томах*. М.: Терра, 1996–98.

⁹ See „Засуха”, „Разбойник”, „В тарангасе”, „Ум свое, а черт свое”, „Язвительный” (Op. cit, vols. 1–2).

work is exemplary and magnificently composed, permeated with deep inner echoes and parallels, and populated with exquisitely elaborated characters whose speech is incredibly vivid and true to the language milieu of the merchants. Not only does „Lady Macbeth” demonstrate Leskov’s subtle sensitivity to language, a sensitivity not entirely new, as evident already in his earlier works, but this so-called „sketch” also makes it evident how well he understands how literary works are made, to use Boris Eichenbaum’s expression. How then could Leskov author this „sketch” so early in his career? Indeed, after he finished it, it was also some time before he would write anything as good and important as „Lady Macbeth” again. „Voitel’nitsa” (1866) [The Warrior Woman], a short story that he wrote soon after „Lady Macbeth,” is a curious sketch but by no means comparable to it in craftsmanship; neither are two completely imitative tales „Oboidennye” (1865) [„The Overlooked”], „Ostrovitiane” (1866) [„The Islanders”], nor an equally unoriginal drama „Rastochitel” (1867) [The Squanderer]. So why is this creative peak so unique and followed by an anti-climax?

An exhaustive answer to this question is clearly impossible, since here we are facing the mystery of literary creation. However, without hazarding any guesses as to the question *how*, we still may attempt to understand *why* „Lady Macbeth” ended up to be so perfect. After all, this „sketch” exemplifies literariness. It is created in accordance with those laws of artistic prose which Leskov so persistently wrestled with in his mature years.

He is known to persistently extend the limits of traditional literary genres. In particular, he defined his stories’ genres with unprecedented sub-titles (e.g., „a landscape and a genre [painting],” „a picture drawn from nature,” „an à propos story,” or „a rhapsody”), and he also tried to introduce non-literary material into the domain of literature. He often opposed life and literature — often to the disadvantage of the latter. „The artificial and unnatural form of the novel” irritated him, and he took pride in that his characters spoke „their own way, not the literary way,” and that he himself was fluent in „the living speech, not the liter-

ary talk.”¹⁰ He even surmised that „fiction, in the form of novels and poems, once it does its job, is likely to pass one day, giving way to a new species of literary creation...”¹¹

But he would say all this much later, in the 1870-s — 1880s, when he himself would become fully aware of his specific gift as a writer and would define his literary position accordingly.

In 1864, he was still discovering the laws of artistic prose, and was not only far from fighting them but instead actively mastering them. The literary quality of „Lady Macbeth” greatly benefited from this process of discovering literary laws. The „sketch” harmoniously fuses tradition and originality, and Leskov's voice is already distinctly recognizable in it. Because of this fusion and Leskov's stylistic discoveries, the sketch belongs to *belles lettres* in the highest sense. In other words, Leskov's mastering of the laws of fiction determines the literariness of his „Lady Macbeth” and the ways in which, eventually, he would wrestle with these very laws. Let us consider the elements of this literariness in order.

3. Intertextuality

One of the elements of literariness in „Lady Macbeth” consists of organically fusing very heterogeneous source, including documents, folklore, and literary motifs. In the end, all of them are transformed and reshaped in the new context of the writer's general plan.

Leskov was attracted to factual based narratives. „I always love to base my work on real events, not on fantasy,” — the writer noted years after he wrote „Lady Macbeth”¹². In an open letter to P. K. Shchebal'skii (1884) he also states, „I have a capacity for observation, and, perhaps, some ability to analyze feelings

¹⁰ Фаресов А. *Против течений*. СПб: 1904. P. 275.

¹¹ Фаресов. *Op. cit.* P. 305. Let us note that Leskov proved to be partially right and nowadays literary non-fiction evokes more and more interest in readers, often at the expense of the literary fiction.

¹² «Привет!» *Художественно-научно-литературный сборник*. СПб, 1898. P. 219.

and intentions, but I have little imagination. It is hard and burdensome for me to invent things, so I have always been in need of real characters whose spiritual makeup I would find interesting. They would take hold of me and I would try to embody them in short stories, quite often based on a real event as well.” (11, 229)

Leskov presents the events of „Lady Macbeth” as factually based as well. It is for verisimilitude, in the first edition, he speaks about „our district,” and, in the following editions, provides the exact geographic location of the „frightening drama” — the Mtsensk district. He puts the story in the mouth of a narrator who himself is a local resident. (cf., „Sometimes in our parts, one can run into quite a character”¹³). It is unclear if this narrator is an eye-witness, but he is clearly well-informed of these events through local news and about the main protagonists, as they are locally known.

All this verisimilitude notwithstanding, the factual ground of „Lady Macbeth” is most likely mythologized. Had it really happened, a triple murder like the one in „Lady Macbeth” would have undoubtedly been known all about and discussed in the papers. Yet neither *Orlovskie vedomosti*, the main newspaper of the region which would publish the relevant criminal records between 1838 and 1850, nor the documents of the Orël Chamber of the Criminal Court for these years¹⁴, provide any record of any similar multiple crimes, not, at any rate, „committed by a woman. Yet Leskov's story still may have some factual ground. Discussing possible sources for „Lady Macbeth,” commentators usually refer to the writer's childhood memories about a case in Orël which he quotes in a fragment „Kak ia uchilsia prazdnovat” [„How I learned to celebrate”]:

„Once an impatient daughter-in-law poured boiling sealing-wax into our neighbor's ear, an old man who was impudent enough to live for more than seventy years, and then, imprudent enough to go ahead and take a rest under a bush of black currant

¹³ Иной раз в наших местах задаются такие характеры... (1, 96).

¹⁴ Государственный Архив Орловской области. Ф. 580.

on a summer day. I remember how they buried him... His ear fell off... Later, on the Il'inka Square, a 'torturer tortured' her. She was young, and everyone was amazed how white she was..." (1, 498)

There are two overlaps between this episode and the events of „Lady Macbeth,” — the murder of a father-in-law impudent in his longevity, and the punishment of the female criminal. Indeed, it is likely that this story influenced Leskov's sketch, although most likely, there were others that did as well. Scholars indeed point to other possible sources for the sketch¹⁵, but the range of these sources and possible references can be infinite. After all, hatred for one's father-in-law and murder out of jealousy are archetypal enough. Nonetheless, the quoted episode from the writer's Orël memoirs deserves special attention, because it helps to identify another possible motive for Leskov's choice of the title for his sketch. Sealing-wax poured into the ear of „an old male neighbor”, resembles the scene of the murder of Hamlet's father from Shakespeare's play. Claudius poured poison into the ear of his brother, the King of Denmark, while the latter was asleep. It looks like the impatient daughter-in-law from Orël also poured the sealing-wax into her father-in-law's ear while he napped under the black currant bush. At any rate, according to Leskov's recollections, the old man „went to take a rest” under this bush, likely meaning that he slept¹⁶. Moreover it is easier to approach someone with boiling sealing-wax while this victim is asleep. It is, most likely, the manner of murder chosen by the

¹⁵ See, for example, Жери Катрин. „Чувственность и преступление в «Леди Макбет Мценского уезда Н. С. Лескова»” *Русская литература*, 2004, # 1, p. 104; Горелов А.А. *Лесков и народная культура*. Moscow: 1988, p. 175. See also the monolog of doctor Rozanov in the novel „No Way Out” about a peasant woman who murdered her husband and his lover with an axe (Leskov, 1958. Vol. 2, 178–179).

¹⁶ Let us note that the story described by Leskov fully agrees with the logic of popular consciousness. According to this consciousness, the ... murder is ascribed to the woman (Compare the song: „Khodit Gamlet s pistolom” quoted in the epigraph. In this song, it is the queen and not the rival who commits the murder. The authors stylized their song as a folk song, and this stylization was incredibly successful; the song was widely known as a folk song in the 1950s — 1960s).

Orël daughter-in-law that inspired Leskov to liken Katerina Izmailova to a Shakespeare heroine. At the same time, this allusion suggests that Shakespearean passions can occur in a modest district like Mtsensk, and that dramas — not merely criminal cases — happen in Russian popular life¹⁷. The first suggestion is sociological but the second consists of an argument about literary genres. It the literary allusion — evoking Shakespeare — that allows for both of these suggestions.

On the whole, the events described in the sketch are most likely invented. Presenting them as factually based will eventually become one of Leskov's favorite devices. A great deal of Leskov's literary mystifications are based on this device of verisimilitude.

For Leskov, pointing to the authenticity of the described events seemed to guarantee their artistic cogency. Indeed, life in his system of values always prevailed over literature, over „made up things,” when everything „happens exactly *as in a novel*” (10, 452). For that reason, Leskov was convinced that a story about real events was supposed to affect the reader more.

The reference to Shakespeare made the title of the sketch an oxymoron — Lady Macbeth, but of the Mtsensk District — thus enhancing its expressiveness. Shakespeare's text served as a literary background for Leskov, thus adding credit and symbolic depth to the events happening in the humble district of Mtsensk. As the exact influence that Shakespeare's dramatic works had on Leskov's text has been thoroughly studied before, there is no need to dwell on it¹⁸. Hugh McLean points out another obvious literary source for Leskov's title, „Gamlet Shchigrovskogo uezda” [„The Hamlet of the Shchigrov District”] by Ivan Turgenev¹⁹. Another text consciously engaged by Leskov in a dialog is, of

¹⁷ This is the subject of an argument between doctor Rozanov and landlord Zarnitsyn in the novel *No Way Out* (2, 178—184).

¹⁸ See, for example, McLean Hugh. *Nikolai Leskov: The Man and His Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977. P. 146; Коробкова А. А. „Шекспировские реминисценции в повести Н. С. Лескова 'Леди Макбет Мценского уезда.'” *Русская словесность*, 2006, # 2. p. p. 31—35.

¹⁹ McLean 1977. P. 146.

course, Nikolai Ostrovskii's drama „Groza” [„The Thunderstorm”]. Comparing the two Katerinas, Leskov's Izmailova and Ostrovsky's Kabanova ²⁰, has long since become a fixture for standard Russian Literature textbooks and the related predictable High School composition assignments. All these parallels underscore the great extent to which Leskov still focused on literariness, by 1864.

Another cultural layer in Leskov's sketch comes from folklore. The connections between „Lady Macbeth's” plot and style on the one hand and the *lubok* literature and song tradition, on the other, have been thoroughly studied ²¹. It is curious, however, that the motifs of Russian urban folklore culture, as well as those of the *lubok* and folk songs, are all linked to Sergei only, and to his skillful use of their expressive potential. Katerina L'vovna has no words to respond to Sergei's flow of eloquence weaving together various clichés of the *lubok* novels. She seems to have come from nowhere; her world is uncultured and savage — neither merchant- nor urban petty-bourgeois-rooted (cf. I, 97). As a result, she is simply unable to appreciate the extent to which Sergei's passionate confessions are derivative. Lacking a cultural background herself, she takes his verbal clichés for their alleged face-value, which are long extinct. In the frame of reference set by Romanticism, Katerina would be a typical „natural” person, sweet in her artlessness, and Sergei would be the „civilized” man. It is, however, precisely this Romantic framework that is subverted here. In Leskov's „Lady Macbeth,” the sublime Romantic conflict is completely debunked, as it is being sunk into the context of popular culture. We have a lady here, of course,

²⁰ See e. g. Столярова И. В. „Трагическое в повести Лескова 'Леди Макбет Мценского уезда,’” *Русская литература*, 1981, # 4.

²¹ Горелов А. А. Н. С. Лесков и народная культура. М.: 1988. Р. р. 138—145; Гроссман Л. Н. С. Лесков. Жизнь-творчество-поэтика. М.: 1945. Р. р. 224; Гебель В. Н. С. Лесков. В творческой лаборатории. М.: 1945. Р. р. 206—208; Поздина И. В. „Песенно-лубочная традиция как источник моделирования сюжета повестей Н. С. Лескова 'Житие одной бабы» и 'Леди Макбет Мценского уезда.' *Лесковиана.*” *Международный сборник научных трудов.* Москва, Орел: 2009. Vol. 2. Р. р. 221—239.

but a lady in a very specific sense—as they have them in the Mtsensk district. Like district, like lady!

As for folklore, in Leskov's earlier tale „Zhitie odnoi baby,” where he also describes a story of the forbidden love of two young peasants, Stepan and Nastia, they first fully spell their love out in a song: Stepan starts to sing and Nastia joins in. In this tale the lovers speak the same cultural language, which is a token of their emerging spiritual kinship, tragic as their relationship will turn out to be. This kinship and shared cultural language are absent in „Lady Macbeth”; while Sergei speaks in ready-made formulas, and cliché images, Katerina L'vovna has an uncultured sincerity and the ability to speak from the heart — forms of artlessness which become her undoing. In her artlessness, Katerina L'vovna deeply feels the beauty of nature, whereas Sergei is indifferent to it. The heroine „continued to look up at the sky through the pale pink blossoms of the apple tree. Sergei, too, was silent; but the sky did not interest him. He sat hugging his knees with both arms, staring at his boots”²². The affinity of Katerina L'vovna's inner world with nature is emphasized by the moon over the Izmailovs' garden, which seems to come straight out of Katerina's dream; she has just dreamed of the moon which turned into a scary cat. There is more on this moonlit landscape. In the meantime, however, let us briefly summarize what has been said.

Leskov's quoted sources — including literary fiction from Shakespeare through Turgenev and Ostrovskii; popular culture referenced by the *lubok* texts and songs, and made up factuality — function as a meaningful background that deepens the significance of characters and events. These, moreover, gain a new meaning as they are uprooted from their expected generic contexts and replanted — the Romantic clichés lowered by the base urban folklore, etc.

²² Nikolai Leskov. *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk and Other Stories*. Translated by David McDuff. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987. P. 128: „все смотрела сквозь бледно-розовые цветы яблони на небо. Сергей тоже молчал; только его не занимало небо. Обхватив обеими руками свои колени, он сосредоточенно глядел на свои сапожки” (1, 109)

4. Cohesive motifs and narrative details

In speaking about the literariness of „Lady Macbeth...” it is impossible to disregard how meticulously it is structured. There are numerous cohesive motifs and narrative details. Meanings echo and rhyme each other throughout the novella. This thematic rhyming is definitely the author's intent, confirmed by the occasional laying-bare of this rhyming device.

Thus, for example, the sketch begins with overtly commenting on the meaning of the epigraph for Lady Macbeth“: „The first song should be sung with a blush”²³.

Echoing this epigraph, during the first meeting with Sergei, Katerina Izmailova continuously blushes. She blushes when she responds to Sergei's familiar words, and after Sergei lifts her up, embraces her and sets her down, Katerina L'vovna exits the barn „redder than red”²⁴. We should add that Sergei is dressed in a „red shirt” and that after this incident, in the course of the entire sketch, Katerina blushes only once, when the maid tells her that seeing the moon in a dream is for childbirth. So, in this case, the device is laid bare. More often, Leskov gives only a push in the desired direction, a hint that needs careful reading or deciphering.

The river is deep, the little pole is thin

In particular, in the scene of seduction, when Sergei arrives to Katerina L'vovna's house for the first time, he says,

„There is a song you sometimes hear, it goes: 'When your sweetheart's gone, sadness catches on,' and if you'll forgive me ma'am, that sadness is lying so heavy on my own heart that I'd like to cut it out of my breast with my damask steel knife and throw it at your feet.”²⁵

²³ Nikolai Leskov, 1987, p. 109: Первую песенку зардевшись спеть.

²⁴ Op. cit., p. 116: „красная-раскрасная” (1, 100).

²⁵ Op. cit., p. 119: „Песня поется: „без мила дружка обуяла грусть-тоска”, и эта тоска, доложу вам, Катерина Ильвовна, собственному моему сердцу столь, могу сказать чувствительна, что вот взял бы я его вырезал булатным ножом из моей груди и бросил бы к вашим ножкам” (1, 102).

The song that Sergei refers to is called „Noch' li, noch'en'ka.” Leskov who knew quite a few songs, could have known this common song previously or he could have learned it from its publication in the magazine „Otechestvennye zapiski” for 1861 ²⁶. The text is quoted in full because its content is closely connected with the plot of „Lady Macbeth.”

Ночь ли, ноченька, ночка темная,
Ночка темная, осенняя долгая!
Молодка, молодка молоденькая,
Головка твоя победненькая!
С кем же тебе, молодка, ночку спать-ночевать,
Ночку спать-ночевать, осеннюю коротать?
Лягу спать одна, без мила дружка;
Без мила дружка обуяла грусть-тоска.
Грусть-тоска берет, далеко милой живет,
Далеко-далече, на той стороне,
На той стороне, не близко ко мне
Ходит мой милой тою стороной;
Машет мой милой правою рукой,
Ручкой правою, шляпой черною:
«Перейди, сударушка, на мою сторонушку!» —
— Я бы рада перешла, — переходу не нашла;
Переход нашла — речка глубока,
Речка глубока, жердочка тонка,
Тонка, тонка, гнется, боюсь: переломится!
Знать то, мой милой с другой водится! ²⁷

[Whether it's night, dear night, a dark night,
A dark night, a long Autumn [night.]
A new wife, a new wife, a young one,
Your, poor head!
With who will you, a new wife,
 sleep the night, spend the night?
I will go to sleep alone, without dear friend;
Without my dear friend, sadness and anguish seizes [me].

²⁶ „Отечественные записки.” Vol. 59, p. 456.

²⁷ Соболевский А. И. *Великорусские народные песни*. Спб.: 1895—1907. Vol. 5, p. 142.

Sadness and anguish captures me, my darling lives far away,
Far away and it's a long way, on the other side,
On the other side and not close to me.
And walks, my darling, on the other side;
And waves, my darling, with the right hand;
With the right hand, with the black hat:
„Cross, my dear lady, to my side!“ —
— I would gladly cross, [but] the river is deep,
The river is deep, the little pole is thin,
It's thin, thin, it bends, I am afraid: it will break!
Probably my darling consorts with another!]

As we can see, the major part of this song is sung on behalf of a girl who, as a matter of fact, was „seized by sadness and anguish,“ because uniting with „the darling“ is impossible since „the river is deep and the little pole is thin.“ In the end of the song, the girl suggests that all obstacles appear in her way not by accident, but the meeting is impossible because her beloved „consorts with another.“ All this, undoubtedly, has intersections with the events of the final part of „Lady Macbeth,“ — Katerina L'vovna is also to encounter a parting with Sergei; he starts to „consort“ with another; and the river itself becomes the grave of Katerina and her rival, and thus plays a fatal role in the story.

It is interesting that Leskov does not consider it necessary to quote this song in full, and in essence, he only points to it. However, when we „unfold“ this brief reference, we discover that the content of the song in many respects foreshadows the future tragic events at a point when nobody can predict them. It is also noteworthy that Sergei applies to himself the words which in the song are said on behalf of the girl. In this way, the character debunks the meaning of these words and involuntarily surrounds them with a carnival atmosphere where male is confused with female, and where everything can be shifted upside down.

A similar ambiguity, which foreshadows the tragic dénouement, is also present in the scene of the moonlit garden; Katerina L'vovna admires the beauty of the night while Sergei does not notice it. We should note that this happens after Katerina's father-in-law Boris Timofeevich is poisoned and buried.

„What a golden night it was! It was still and light and fragrant and benignly, enlivelyly warm. Far away beyond the ravine, behind the orchard, someone began to sing in a rich, resonant voice — in the de warehouses.”²⁸

The nightingale's song, the peaceful sigh of the „sleek horse,” the boisterous run of dogs all come to an end abruptly and darkly: the dogs disappear in the „deformed black shadow” of the „destroyed salt warehouses.” The description of a completely realistic landscape is concluded by a symbolic detail: the dogs disappear in the ruins of the old warehouses that formerly used to store salt.

It is quite possible that this is a reference to the Gospel image of salt that lost its taste (Mt. 5:13). And this is the reason why the shadow cast by the salt warehouses is so ugly and black. It breaks the symphony of the night, and destroys the enchantment of the magical moonlit scene, like the ominous shadow of the committed crime and of the events to come, a gloomy presage of the „black scaffold” and „black dirt” which the prisoners will be wading through.

The Poisoned Tea

The scene in the garden takes place after the murder of Boris Timofeevich. His execution occurs instantaneously—the very next day after he catches Sergei as the latter is coming down from Katerina L'vovna's bedroom and lashes the „villain” with a whip, Boris Timofeevich dines on mushrooms laced with rat

²⁸ Leskov 1987, p. 128.

„Золотая ночь! Тишина, свет, аромат и благотворная, оживляющая теплота. Далеко за оврагом, позади сада, кто-то завел звучную песню; под забором в густом черемушнике щелкнул и громко заколотил соловей; в клетке на высоком шесте забредил сонный перепел, и жирная лошадь томно вздохнула за стенкой конюшни, а по выгону за садовым забором пронеслась без всякого шума веселая стая собак и исчезла в безобразной, черной тени полуразвалившихся, старых соляных магазинов.” (1, 109).

It is significant that these golden apple trees will show up once more in the story, right after the murder of Zinovii Borisovich. „Теперь шабаш, — сказал Сергей и вздрогнул от звука собственного голоса. Когда они вернулись в спальню, тонкая румяная полоска зари прорезывалась на востоке и, золотя легонько одетые цветом яблони, заглядывала сквозь зеленые палки садовой решетки в комнату Катерины Львовны” (1, 120).

poison. This is the first crime which Katerina L'vovna commits and seemingly without any inner struggle. In fact, in the course of the entire sketch, we are convinced once and again that Katerina is not able to think things through and prefers to feel and act. Probably the decision to finish off her husband, Zinovii Borisych, is made on one of the magical „golden” nights.

In the scene of Zinovii Borisych's murder there are at least two circumstances that cannot be explained at first glance. Zinovii Borisych comes home secretly in hope of catching Sergei with Katerina L'vovna. He does not succeed in this only because she hears his steps and has time to let Sergei out through the bedroom window and hide him in the house. After the sullen meeting with her husband, she leaves to prepare the samovar. The narrator informs us that she is absent for half an hour which seems too long to Zinovii Borisych, „What's taken you so long?”²⁹ Zinovii Borisych hints at the fact that he is well informed about how she spent her time without him and threatens to punish her. His hints irritate Katerina L'vovna and she calls Sergei from his hiding place. She not only calls him, but when Sergei enters the room she „kisses him passionately” right in front of her husband as if she wishes to laugh Zinovii Borisych in the face. Only after this, Katerina and Sergei strangle Zinovii Borisych together.

The narrator's remark following the description of the murder is extremely curious. After the corpse is already taken to the cellar, Katerina L'vovna begins cleaning the bloody spot on the floor in the bedroom. „The water in the samovar from which Zinoviy Borisych had drunk his seigniorial cups of tea was still quite warm, and the stain washed away easily without a trace.”³⁰ The narrator makes it clear to us that Katerina has poisoned the tea that she treats her husband to, probably, with the very same rat poison that killed Boris Timofeevich. It is because she was

²⁹ Leskov 1987, p. 136: Что ты там возилась долго? (1, 115)

³⁰ Leskov 1987, p. 142: „Вода еще не остыла в самоваре, из которого Зиновий Борисыч распаривал отравленным чаем свою хозяйскую душеньку, и пятно вымылось без сякого следа.” (Leskov, 1958, 120).

poisoning the tea that she „took so long” and evoked Zinovii Borisych's discontent.

As a result, the murder of Zinovii Borisych arouses at least two questions: first, why did Katerina L'vovna need to involve Sergei in the murder? Second, why did she not want to wait? Indeed, Zinovii Borisych would have died very soon anyway since rat poison takes quick effect. It is improbable that in this way, she wanted to make Sergei an accomplice of the murder. Obviously, it was much more important to her to humiliate the hateful husband and to get the most painful revenge on him for his threats and for her doleful life. For the same reason, she did not want to wait for his death from the poison. The hatred probably raged in her with such a force that she could not bear seeing her spouse for another instant. And so Zinovii Borisych was sent to the other world without superfluous delays. Again we see that Leskov mentioned an important detail („poisoned tea”) only in passing and did not comment upon it, instead letting the reader catch his hints without assistance.

Sergei and the Black Viper

The last and the most fearful murder on the characters' way to happiness is the adolescent Fedia Liamin who is entitled to part of the widow's fortune. Fedia comes to Katerina's house together with his grandmother, the first cousin of Boris Timofeevich, and whose money the merchant partially used in his trade. It is Sergei who pushes Izmailova to the third murder. Without him, of course, the first two crimes would not have happened either but Katerina commits those of her own will and desire. She is not planning to kill Fedia Liamin and it is Sergei who gives her the idea.

McLean points out that for the reader this birth of avarice in the characters is a complete surprise („Nothing has prepared us for the appearance of such overpowering avarice in the two lovers”) ³¹. It seems that this is not quite correct. The Don Giovanni of Mtsensk, Sergei, is not an unequivocal figure. A spruce red shirt, familiar speech, black curls — at the beginning, every-

³¹ McLean 1977, p. 150.

thing in him underscores only the bravado of a young man. This type of shop assistant is familiar from Ostrovskii's „Groza.” [The Thunderstorm] In „Groza,” this type is represented by the cheerful and naughty Vania Kudriash whose nickname probably suggests that Vania is curly-headed. Curiously, Kudriash sings a song about an unfaithful wife and then runs from Kalinov with Varvara (who however is not married).

Katerina's feelings for Sergei are completely clear, her love is unrestrained and for this love, she is ready to commit the most frightening crimes. But how does Sergei's feel about Katerina? It is telling that after the scene of seduction he speaks of his love for her only at a minute of danger, when his relationship with the lady of the house (so flattering for his pride) is in jeopardy. This takes place on the eve of Zinovii Borisych's arrival. „You see, I'm not like other fellows who'll put up with anything just as long as they get their pleasure from a woman. What I feel is real love, and I feel it sucking at my heart like a black viper...”³² — he says to Katerina L'vovna on that strange summer night using a rather terrifying comparison to express his feelings. In Russian folklore and Christian tradition, the image of the „viper” has distinctly negative connotations and symbolizes evil and sin. Sergei imagines love in the shape of a black viper. This is obviously not a fortuitous slip of the tongue, and the black viper in his heart is not love but dark jealousy. He is very upset that with the return of the lawful spouse, his power over Katerina will come to an end.

Sergei utters the word „love” for the second time, in a situation when his personal well-being is endangered — after the arrival of Fedia Liamin who turns out to be the second heir of Zinovii Borisych's capital, „'[b]ecause, I swear by my love for you, Katerina Lvovna, I'd like to see you a real lady, who doesn't have to live in the way you've lived up to now (...).’ 'And now, what

³² Leskov 1987, p. 130: „Я ведь не как другие прочие, для которого все равно, абы ему от женщины только радость получить. Я чувствую, какова есть любовь и как она черной змеею сосет мое сердце...” (1, 111)

with the reduction in the capital, it looks through we'll be even worse off than we were before" ³³.

As for the heroine herself, she remarks in response that she does not need to be „a real lady". This is true, material prosperity does not concern her but Sergei, on the contrary, wants to be the spouse of „a real lady" and the owner of a large undivided capital. From the very beginning of his relationship with Katerina Izmailova he has been motivated by vanity alone. He is an experienced „devchur" [womanizer] and could „turn to sin" any woman. However, Sergei does not need just any woman — he needs a woman with status. As we remember, before entering Izmailovs' service, he was „kicked out" from his previous place of work because „he and the missus were carrying on together." ³⁴ His new employer Katerina L'vovna is his new victim since it is an honor for a simple shop assistant to be the lover of a merchant's wife.

The next time that Sergei is especially tender to Katerina Ivanovna is on the way to the penal colony when he wants to procure from her wool stockings for her rival. It is the same „black viper" calculation, the use of someone else's passion for one's own purposes. So, the words Sergei utters in the very end of the sketch „I don't think, I ever loved her" ³⁵, sound completely true. Perhaps they become the last drop to exhaust Katerina's patience, and after she hears them, she throws herself into the river, drawing her rival with her.

5. Liturgical subtext

The murder of Fedia, as has been repeatedly pointed out is reminiscent of a martyr's Life. On the eve of his death, Fedia

³³ Leskov 1987, p. 146. Here and further the spelling of Russian names of the translator is preserved: „Потому, как по любви моей к вам я желал бы, Катерина Ильвовна, видеть вас настоящей дамой, а не то, что как вы допреж сего жили. А теперь наоборот выходит, что при уменьшении капитала мы и даже против прежнего должны гораздо ниже еще произойти." (1, 123).

³⁴ Op. cit., p. 117: „с самой хозяйкой в любви был" (1, 101)

³⁵ Op. cit., p. 170: „я ее, может, и никогда не любил." (1, 142)

was lying in his bed recovering from an illness, reading the Life of his patron Saint, the Martyr Theodore Stratilates, and admiring how the Saint had pleased God. The boy was waiting for his grandmother to return from Church and bring him some „consecrated wafer”³⁶. Looking at the sick Fedia, Katerina L'vovna thought about using poison, a murder method that was so well familiar to her: „All I have to do is say the doctor gave him the wrong medicine.”³⁷ But again, as in the case with Zinovii Bori-sych, she is not willing and is not able to wait; this time not because of anger or hatred but simply because all trace of shame has been lost and no point is seen in observing any proprieties. So the lovers decide to murder Fedia immediately.

It is significant that a few minutes before the murder, during a talk with the boy, Katerina L'vovna felt that „[f]or the first time, her own child had just stirred within her, and she felt a sensation of cold pass through her. She stood still for a moment in the middle of the room, and then went out, rubbing her chilled hands”³⁸. In a different situation and to a different woman this event would most likely seem touching and meaningful but here it is described as distressing and „cold”. Probably because this movement under the heart serves as an annoying obstacle in the way of Katerina L'vovna's plan. But once the obstacle disappears, she calls Sergei and they commit the villainy.

Fedia's grandmother left for the night-service on the eve of the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple. At this service, as well as at other holidays dedicated to Our Lady, the priest reads an excerpt from the Gospel according to Luke (Lk 1: 39—49, 56) about the meeting of the Virgin Mary, already bearing Christ in her womb, with Elizabeth, also pregnant, carrying future John the Baptist. „And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was

³⁶ Leskov 1987, p. 150: „благословенного хлебца” (1, 126)

³⁷ Op. cit., p. 148: „Только всего и скажу, что лекарь не такое лекарство потрафил.” (1, 125).

³⁸ Op. cit., p. 150: „собственный ребенок у нее впервые повернулся под сердцем, и в груди у нее потянуло холодом. Постояла она среди комнаты и вышла, потирая стынущие руки.” (1, 126).

filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, „Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.” (Lk. 1: 41–45, New King James Version)

This is the passage that is read in Church at the night-service. Leskov, the grandson of a priest, and the son of a former seminarian, positively knew this and most likely consciously rhymed the two scenes — the one of the Gospel and the one that happened in the Mtsensk district and through this, established a frame of reference and outlined its top and bottom poles.

The physical cold that Katerina L'vovna experiences in response to the joyous event of the child's movement in her womb is the bottom pole. The meeting of the two rejoicing women — Mary and Elizabeth — both of whom are awaiting a son, one Jesus and the other John the Prophet, is the upper pole. One more boy, Fedia Liamin, is strangulated in the same evening and possibly at the same moment as all the Christians are reminded of this holy meeting at the all-night vigil. Thus the abyss of Katerina's downfall becomes vivid in all its uncanny depth.

6. Mystic symbol

Lastly, let us touch upon the mystical constituent of Leskov's tale. The presence of mystic motifs is an especially obvious connection between Leskov's „Lady Macbeth” and Shakespeare's tragedy „Macbeth,” which opens with a conversation between three witches. An ominous and magical atmosphere reigns in Shakespeare's play until the very last pages. At the eve of the murder of king Duncan, Macbeth sees a bloody dagger; the ghost of the warrior Banquo shakes his „gory locks” at him; the witches foretell the hero's future rather ambiguously; and Lady

Macbeth, who compels her husband to commit the murder of the king, becomes delirious and tries to wash off blood stains that only she can see. Clearly, Leskov borrows the idea of retribution coming to a criminal in the image of a vision or a ghost, directly from Shakespeare, however he translates the Scottish mysticism into the vernacular of the Mtsensk district.

Soon after the murder of Boris Timofeevich, Katerina has two dreams containing a strange cat — „such an enormous, handsome grey tom-cat, as fat as fat could be...”³⁹, which cuddles with her. The image of the cat has multiple meanings in Russian myth and it carries a whole train of cultural and mythological associations⁴⁰. In particular, the cat is an inhabitant of two worlds, and can easily shift into the invisible mystic dimension. Moreover, the cat is connected with marriage, it is not without reason that Alexander Pushkin in the scene of Christmas fortunetelling in his novel „Eugene Onegin” says: «Милей кошурка сердцу дев»⁴¹. Indeed, the cat is a promise of marriage. Despite all of this, according to the famous mantic book by Martin Zadeka, meeting a cat in a dream can mean the collapse of a marriage⁴², and in other Slavic superstitions, the cat can presage the death of an infant. The echoes of all these omens and beliefs can be easily detected in the plot of „Lady Macbeth” However, although Leskov was most likely familiar with the all of these mythological subtexts, he filled the image of the cat in his work with his own meaning that we will not find in Martin Zadeka or in any other dream books and popular beliefs.

In Leskov, the fluffy cuddling cat is the personification of Katerina's conscience. The conscience that in the beginning does

³⁹ Leskov 1987 p. 125: „славный, серый, рослый да претолстующий-толстый...” (1, 106).

⁴⁰ See Гуря А. В. Кошка, кот.// *Славянские древности. Этнолингвистический словарь* под ред. Н. И. Толстого. М.: Международные отношения, 1999, p. 637—640; Faith Wigzell. „Russian Dream Books and Lady Macbeth's Cat,” *The Slavonic and East European Review*. Vol. 66, No. 4, 1988, p. 626 —630.

⁴¹ „Girls prefer the Kitten's Wedding.” (Eugene Onegin, V. 8; Translated by Arndt).

⁴² *Древний и новый всегдашний гадательный оракул, найденный после смерти одного стошестилетнего старца Мартина Задека.* М.: 1821.

not bother the female protagonist, but suddenly appears to her in the image of cat and denounces her: „I am not a cat! Where did you get the idea? You know perfectly well, Katerina Lvovna, that I'm not a cat, but the prominent merchant Boris Timofeevich. (...) Well, Katerina Lvovna, how are you getting along in our house these days? I thought I'd just nip over from the cemetery for a while to watch you and Sergei Filipych keeping your husband's bed warm.”⁴³

The second mystic episode is connected with Sergei who hallucinates Zinovii Borisovich after the murder of Fedia, „'Zinoviyy Borisych, Zinoviyy Borisych!' he muttered, as he flew head over heels down the staircase, knocking Katerina off her feet and taking him with her as he fell. (...) 'Look, he's flying over us with a sheet of iron' (...) 'Look, look, there he is again! Oh! Oh!'"⁴⁴ It is not by accident that Sergei sees Zinovii Borisovich since it is his murder that involves Sergei's direct participation.

The last vision visits Katerina L'vovna on the way to the penal colony after Sergei chases Sonetka and utters the fatal words, „I don't think I loved her, anyway — all I know is that I get more pleasure out of one of Sonetka's down-at-heel shoes than I do from Katerina Lvovna's ugly mug, the scraggy feline...”⁴⁵.

Katerina L'vovna tries to pray but she cannot. „Interpersed with Sergei's foul-mouthed tirade she seemed to hear a groaning, rumbling sound that came from the breaking waves.

⁴³ Leskov 1987, p. 132: „Какой же, — говорит, — я кот! С какой стати! Ты это очень умно, Катерина Львовна, рассуждаешь, что совсем я не кот, а я именитый купец Борис Тимофеич. ...Ну, как же нонче ты у нас живешь-можешь, Катерина Львовна? Как свой закон верно соблюдаешь? Я и с кладбища нарочно пришел поглядеть, как вы с Сергеем Филипычем мужнину постельку согреваете.” (1, 113)

⁴⁴ Op. cit., p. 153: — Зиновий Борисыч, Зиновий Борисыч! — бормотал он, летя вниз головою по лестнице и увлекая за собою сбитую с ног Катерину Львовну. (...) Вот над нами с железным листом пролетел. Вот, вот опять! ай, ай!» (1, 128)

⁴⁵ Leskov 1987, p. 170: „...я ее, может, и никогда не любил, а теперь... да мне вот стоптанный Сонеткин башмак милее ее рожи, кошки эдакой ободранной.” (1, 142).

And then suddenly in one of the breaking waves she fancied she saw blue, swollen head of Boris Timofeevich, and in another the swaying from of her husband, peeping out at her and embracing Fedya's hanging head." ⁴⁶

She rushes towards them into the dark waters of the Volga River taking along her last victim, Sonetka the rival, and doing everything to prevent her from grabbing the boathook with a rope which has been thrown into the water.

To conclude, literariness in Leskov's „Lady Macbeth” consists of a certain set of literary devices, including: using intertexts from Shakespeare and folklore; cohesive motifs (red and gold colors, the image of river, the black viper), the narrative details (poisoned tea), an overarching liturgical subtext as a symbol (the feast of the Mother of God's Entrance into the Temple), and a creature appearing as a mystic symbol (the cat). All these marked elements are not merely operative in the texture of the work but also incorporated in a way that makes them non-obvious. Each element has worked for the overall goal – of making the main character more significant, or revealing the true meaning of the events for the story as a whole.

As a result of this dual activity of, first, activating and, then, hiding literary elements, the work itself exemplifies true literariness, in Roman Jakobson's sense. Leskov has well understood how a literary work is done, and how he could make it truly effective on the reader. After mastering these literary laws in „Lady Macbeth”, however, Leskov started experimenting with defying them – by making his prose rhythmic (as in his play „The Squanderer” and his following „sketch” titled „The Islanders”), or using a discursive persona with a narrative voice markedly different from his own, eventually arriving at the extreme form of this device, namely: skaz. He also started experi-

⁴⁶ Op. cit., p. 171: „Промежду гнусных речей Сергея гул и стон слышались ей из раскрывающихся и хлопающих валов. И вот вдруг из одного переломившегося вала показывается ей синяя голова Бориса Тимофеевча, из другого выглянул и закачался муж, обнявшись с поникшим головкой Федей.” (1, 142)

menting with accepted genres, rejecting an obvious cohesive plot but rather n chronology. ⁴⁷

Thus „Lady Macbeth” has become Leskov’s pivotal point, where he started deliberately diverting from the accepted tradition of what we know as „High Literature.”

⁴⁷ See about: Эйхенбаум Б. М. „Чрезмерный писатель (К 100-летию со дня рождения Н. Лескова),” Эйхенбаум Б. М. О прозе. Л.: 1969. P. p. 327 — 345.