



**WORLD BULLETIN
PUBLISHING**

Online Publishing Hub

World Bulletin of Education and Learning (WBEL)

ISSN (E): 3072-175X

Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



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<https://worldbulletin.org/index.php/1>

FOLKLORE, ROMANTICISM AND ETHNOCULTURAL FOUNDATIONS IN N.V. GOGOL'S EARLY PROSE: EVENINGS ON A FARM NEAR DIKANKA AND VIY

Abdullayeva N. U.

Fourth-Year Student Berdakh Karakalpak State University
Nukus, Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan



Ismailova X. N.

Academic Supervisor, PhD, Associate Professor
Department of Russian Language and Literature
Faculty of Foreign Languages ‘
Berdakh Karakalpak State University Nukus,
Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan

Abstract

The article examines the folklore sources, romantic foundations, and ethnocultural specificity of N.V. Gogol's early prose, primarily the cycle Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka and the novella Viy. It is emphasized that these works belong to the period in which the most important features of Gogol's artistic thinking had already emerged, while his connection with romantic poetics, folklore imagery, and the ethnocultural world of Little Russia remained especially evident.

Keywords: N.V. Gogol, early prose, folklore, romanticism, ethnocultural tradition, Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka, Viy, Little Russia, folk demonology, artistic world.

 WORLD BULLETIN PUBLISHING <small>Online Publishing Hub</small>	<h1>World Bulletin of Education and Learning (WBEL)</h1>
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https://worldbulletin.org/index.php/1	

Introduction

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются фольклорные источники, романтические основы и этнокультурная специфика ранней прозы Н.В. Гоголя, прежде всего цикла «Вечера на хуторе близ Диканьки» и повести «Вий». Подчёркивается, что данные произведения относятся к тому периоду творчества писателя, когда важнейшие особенности его художественного мышления уже сформировались, однако связь с романтической поэтикой, фольклорной образностью и этнокультурным миром Малороссии оставалась особенно заметной.


Annotatsiya

Maqolada N.V. Gogolning ilk nasridagi folklor manbalari, romantik asoslar va etnomadaniy xususiyatlar, avvalo “Dikanka yaqinidagi xutordagi kechalar” turkumi hamda “Viy” qissasi misolida tahlil qilinadi. Ushbu asarlar yozuvchi ijodining shunday davriga mansubligi ta’kidlanadiki, unda uning badiiy tafakkurining eng muhim xususiyatlari allaqachon shakllangan, biroq romantik poetika, folklor obrazliligi va Kichik Rossiya etnomadaniy olami bilan aloqadorlik hali ham ayniqsa sezilarli bo‘lib qolgan.

Ключевые слова: Н.В. Гоголь, ранняя проза, фольклор, романтизм, этнокультурная традиция, «Вечера на хуторе близ Диканьки», «Вий», Малороссия, народная демонология, художественный мир.

Kalit so‘zlar: N.V. Gogol, ilk nasr, folklor, romantizm, etnomadaniy an’ana, “Dikanka yaqinidagi xutordagi kechalar”, “Viy”, Kichik Rossiya, xalq demonologiyasi, badiiy olam.

The works of N.V. Gogol examined in this study – the cycle “Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka” (*«Вечера на хуторе близ Диканьки»*) and the novella *Viy* (*«Вий»*) – belong to the period when the most important features of the writer’s artistic thinking had already become apparent, while his connection with the

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romantic tradition, folklore imagery, and the ethnocultural foundation of Little Russia was still especially palpable. *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* was published in 1831-1832, whereas *Viy* was included in the collection *Mirgorod*, published in 1835. It is significant that the author himself emphasized the continuity between these two books by providing *Mirgorod* with the subtitle: “Stories serving as a continuation of *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*.” [8, p. 302] Thus, the connection between them was fixed not only by the history of publication, but also by the author’s deliberate intention to continue a unified artistic line associated with the interpretation of folk life, national customs, mythological consciousness, and fantastic forms of representing reality.

Among the works included in *Mirgorod*, *Viy* preserves the closest connection with the artistic system of *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*. This proximity is explained not only by the presence of mystical and fairy-tale fantasy, but also by the very mode of textual organization in which the social and everyday concreteness of Little Russia is not opposed to the supernatural, but rather forms its natural cultural environment. In *Viy*, just as in *Evenings...*, folk demonology, religious imagination, everyday life, provincial customs, and stable conceptions of the other world are combined into a single artistic texture. As a result, the novella is linked with the early cycle not only by a common local color, but by the very logic of constructing artistic reality, where the fantastic does not violate the credibility of life, but grows out of it. It is precisely this type of verbal organization that makes it possible to regard both works as internally correlated forms of one creative experience in which folk culture acts simultaneously as the object of representation and as a principle of poetics.



These works are united on several grounds. They are related by their orientation toward the artistic recreation of the Little Russian world of life with its customs, speech element, festive culture, beliefs, and distinctive emotional atmosphere. They reveal a common ideological tendency connected with the depiction of a natural, integral, and inwardly free human life not yet fully alienated from the folk environment and the natural foundations of existence. Both texts also demonstrate a similar way of handling folklore material: folk beliefs,

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demonological motifs, mythological representations, and ritual elements become an important mechanism for constructing the fantastic world.

Gogol's appeal to folklore and folk cultural tradition was part of the broader historical and literary process of the first third of the nineteenth century. After the Patriotic War of 1812, Russian society showed a marked increase of interest in national history, folk language, song culture, ritual forms, and oral creativity [7, p. 90]. This process was connected not only with romantic aesthetics, but also with the general rise of historical and national self-consciousness. Folklore acquired increasing significance as a form of collective memory in which spiritual experience, historical ideas, and cultural identity were preserved. The publication of collections of folk songs, legends, proverbs, and other texts of oral tradition became not merely a literary phenomenon, but part of a broader movement toward understanding folk culture as a meaningful spiritual reality. Such interest in folklore also reflected an inner need of the age – the striving to discover in folk culture the foundations of wholeness, moral naturalness, and harmony. In this respect, the observations of Yu.M. Lotman are indicative, as he linked the spiritual searches of Russian literature of this period with the tense correlation between personality and nationality [7, p. 45]. The people began to be conceived as the bearers of organic and natural life, while personality was increasingly perceived as a form of separation from original integrity. Literature developed a desire to find a path toward restoring this lost connection. Gogol entered this circle of quests, yet solved the problem in his own way: his folk world is neither idealized nor reduced to stylization, but is revealed as a space that is at once poetic, free, comic, and тревожное. In Gogol's artistic system, the folk element contains not only joy and vitality, but also fear, anxiety, and an awareness of hidden destructive forces.

In the period under consideration, the folklore of Little Russia also attracted special attention. An important role in this was played by the publication of folk poetic texts, above all M.A. Maksimovich's collections *Little Russian Songs* (1827) and *Ukrainian Folk Songs* (1834). These editions contributed not only to the preservation of folklore heritage, but also to the formation of a new view of folk culture as a significant source of artistic self-consciousness. In this context,

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Gogol’s work was connected with the general movement of the age toward the discovery of the folk world as an aesthetically and spiritually meaningful reality. For Gogol himself, the appeal to Little Russian folklore was determined not by an external literary trend, but by a deep personal connection with his native cultural environment. In his correspondence he repeatedly mentions the existence in St. Petersburg of a peculiar fashion “for everything Little Russian,” which testifies to the cultural atmosphere of the time [5, p. 303]. Yet for the writer this material had not a superficial decorative, but an inwardly meaningful significance. Having drawn closer in the early 1830s to Pushkin’s circle, Gogol became even more acutely aware of the artistic value of folk poetry, the folk word, and those forms of collective memory in which the living wisdom of the people was preserved. Therefore, as the basis of his first books he turned precisely to Little Russian folklore, seeing in it not only a source of plots and images, but also a special spiritual form of national consciousness.

Gogol’s letters to his family demonstrate how consistently he collected material concerning folk life: legends, tales, Christmas carols, descriptions of rituals, costumes, village customs, and local beliefs [5, p. 295]. This testifies to deliberate work aimed at reconstructing the national and cultural environment. At the same time, analysis of his epistolary heritage shows that the information received from his family did not exhaust the range of sources nourishing his artistic imagination. Of considerable importance was also his correspondence with friends, in which Gogol was interested not only in the local realities of Little Russia, but also in broader questions connected with types of Russian life, social customs, manners, and the psychology of different social groups. This allows us to see Gogol’s folklorism not as a narrowly ethnographic intention, but as an effort to combine national and cultural concreteness with a broader artistic interpretation of folk life.

A significant part of these impressions also went back to personal experience. Being a native of Little Russia, Gogol retained a strong emotional connection with his homeland and in many respects relied on childhood memory, the family environment, and journeys back to his native land [4, p. 91]. However, the testimony of contemporaries makes it possible to clarify the character of this

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experience. His interest in folk culture was not ethnographic in the strict scientific sense of the word: he did not act as a collector of material following the model of a scholar who methodically records the phenomena of everyday life. What attracted him above all was the living breath of tradition, and a special place in this series belonged to Little Russian songs, in which he perceived the most concentrated expression of national character, moral experience, and poetic consciousness [6, p. 434]. Song was understood by him not merely as a genre of oral literature, but as one of the highest forms of preserving the historical memory and spiritual identity of the people. The folklore element entered his artistic consciousness simultaneously as personal recollection, cultural memory, and an aesthetically meaningful verbal form.

When examining the folklore sources of Gogol's prose, it is also necessary to take into account that his artistic world was formed at the intersection of folk-poetic and religious principles. From childhood the writer had been immersed in the atmosphere of Little Russian everyday life, folk representations, speech elements, and religious impressions; therefore, his return to this environment in mature writing was not an external borrowing, but a natural return to an original spiritual experience. An important role in shaping this inner orientation was played by the writer's mother, from whom, as scholars have repeatedly noted, he inherited both an interest in folk creativity and a pronounced religious disposition. It is precisely for this reason that in Gogol's artistic world the folkloric-popular and the religious-spiritual principles do not exist separately. They constantly intersect, entering into a complex and inwardly tense interaction. This duality determines the peculiarity of his early prose, in which folk festivity, comic energy, and poetic vitality coexist with motifs of fear, sin, sacred prohibition, and religious experience.

No less important is the question of the degree to which Gogol's own historical-literary and ethnographic interests could serve as a source of his folklorism. A study of his correspondence and reading circle of the early 1830s makes it obvious that the writer was indeed attracted by the history of Little Russia, its past, folk customs, and legends. However, the range of materials available to him can hardly be called fully scientific in the modern sense of the word. A

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considerable part of the writings he used combined historical information with legendary elements, subjective evaluations, factual incompleteness, and a noticeable ideological bias. Scholars have repeatedly noted that while working on the texts later included in *Mirgorod*, Gogol turned to S.I. Myshetsky's *History of the Zaporozhian Cossacks*, G.L. Beauplan's *Description of Ukraine*, as well as to chronicle texts known to him through copies [32, p. 570]. In a letter to I.I. Sreznevsky he himself also mentions the writings of A.F. Shafonsky, A.I. Rigelman, N.N. Bantysh-Kamensky, and *The History of the Rus'* [33, p. 120]. All this shows that his striving to comprehend the past of Ukraine was fairly consistent; yet the incompleteness and heterogeneity of his sources did not so much provide the possibility of a strictly documentary reproduction of reality as open a space for artistic invention.

For this reason, the abundance of the mystical and fantastic in *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* and in *Viy* should not be explained solely by the author's inclination toward fiction. It is connected with a special mode of artistically assimilating folk life. Where historical knowledge remained incomplete, where ethnographic concreteness did not form a finished and strictly systematized picture, Gogol filled the gaps with imagination deeply rooted in folk demonology, mythopoetic thinking, and the emotional memory of culture. Owing to this, his works are not limited to the task of creating an external ethnographic color. The writer seeks to convey not only the visible signs of everyday life, but also the inner form of national character as manifested in language, fears, beliefs, laughter, religious representations, and modes of relating the human being to the world.

In this same line one may also consider the significance of childhood oral impressions, above all the genre of the scary story. Such genre experience is important for understanding Gogol's poetics of horror: tension is born here not so much from the event itself as from the atmosphere of expectation, the gradual intensification of anxiety, and the feeling of a hidden threat. In Gogol's prose, the mystical invades everyday life suddenly, yet it is experienced as inwardly possible within the limits of folk consciousness. It is precisely this inner possibility that makes the fantastic in his works especially convincing.

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The peculiarity of Gogol’s artistic method lies in the fact that he does not merely combine disparate information from letters, legends, historical writings, and personal impressions, but subordinates them to a unified aesthetic design. The world he creates simultaneously preserves the concreteness of folk life and becomes saturated with mystery, anxiety, and the sense of the hidden presence of other forces. Therefore, his early works should be understood not as a collection of ethnographic scenes or folklore illustrations, but as an artistic model of the world in which the everyday and the supernatural coexist in organic unity.

The sources of folklore elements in *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* and *Viy* were diverse. They included childhood impressions, personal memory, the family environment, oral stories, song tradition, ethnographic observations, epistolary materials, as well as historical and chronicle writings. Their artistic significance is determined not by the mere fact of their presence, but by the fact that in the writer’s creative consciousness they were deeply reworked and incorporated into a unified system of images, motifs, and meanings. For this reason, folklore in Gogol’s prose appears not as an external ethnographic detail, but as one of the principal artistic and ideological supports of his first books.

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PUBLISHING**

Online Publishing Hub

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ISSN (E): 3072-175X

Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



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<https://worldbulletin.org/index.php/1>

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