

Episode 3: “Artificial Intelligence Discusses Nikolai Gogol”

This episode centers on chapter 2 of Oleh S. Ilnytskyj’s scholarly work, *Nikolai Gogol: Ukrainian Writer in the Empire. A Study in Identity*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111373263>

We delve into the reception of Nikolai Gogol's work in Ukrainian and Russian literary circles, with a focus on his early masterpiece, *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, published under the pseudonym Rudy Panko. Our AI-generated guests analyze how this collection captivated Russian critics, sparking debates over whether Gogol was a Ukrainian or Russian writer. The discussion examines these reactions to reveal the deep anxieties surrounding Russian national identity within the 19th-century Empire.

We also highlight the response from Ukrainian intellectuals, particularly Andriy Storozhenko’s detailed critique of Gogol’s work. Finally, the episode reflects on the enduring relevance of Gogol’s legacy in contemporary discussions of national identity, cultural ownership, and the complexities of literary history within an imperial context.

Transcript 3

[Male AI]: Welcome to the Deep Dive. Uh, today we're going to be looking at some excerpts [chapter 2] that you sent my way from an academic book [by Oleh S. Ilnytskyj] about Gogol.

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: Um, and we're specifically going to be looking at a chapter [“Gogol’s Ukrainian Debut and Appropriation by Russians”] that really focuses on the reception of his early work in both Russian and Ukrainian circles.

[Female AI]: Right.

[Male AI]: And I think it’ll be really fascinating to sort of dive into these reactions and unpack what they tell us about anxieties regarding national identity in 19th-century Russia.

[Female AI]: Yeah. I think Gogol is such a fascinating figure for this reason because even from his debut collection, *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*, which was published in 1831. It was an instant sensation and it really kind of threw Russian critics for a loop.

[Male AI]: Interesting.

[Female AI]: And they became very obsessed with trying to figure out who this Rudy Panko character was, which was Gogol’s pseudonym at the time.

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: Um, and these stories with their vivid portrayal of Ukrainian life, really forced Russians to confront their own somewhat vague national identity.

[Male AI]: It's fascinating how right off the bat his work sparked this sort of introspection.

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: On a national scale. Let's kind of start with just how the Russians reacted.

[Female AI]: Okay.

[Male AI]: What were those initial impressions?

[Female AI]: Yeah. So, I think the early reviews really reveal a struggle to try to categorize Gogol and his work.

[Male AI]: Hmm.

[Female AI]: So, you have some critics like Nikolai Polevoi who are totally convinced that this Rudy Pan'ko had to be Russian.

[Male AI]: Interesting.

[Female AI]: Basing this assumption solely on the writing style.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: And they even dismiss these Ukrainian elements as simply a poor imitation.

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: But I think this misinterpretation really underscores just how much nationality was intertwined with Gogol's reception from the very beginning.

[Male AI]: Yeah. It almost seems like a knee-jerk reaction, right? Like clinging to the familiar.

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: Were there other critics who kind of saw through that assumption?

[Female AI]: Absolutely. So we have someone like Vasili Ushakov who was writing in the *Severnaia pchela* and he recognized Gogol's Ukrainian roots and even viewed his work as part of a larger Ukrainian literary movement that was going on at the time.

[Male AI]: Uh-huh.

[Female AI]: And this move really emphasized the idea of preserving local traditions and exploring this concept of *narodnost'*.

[Male AI]: *Narodnost'*.

[Female AI]: ...which essentially means like nationality or the spirit of a people.

[Male AI]: Ah, *narodnost'* that's a really key concept to understanding these reactions I think...

[Female AI]: Absolutely.

[Male AI]: ...because it speaks to that very deep-seated need to sort of define and express what makes a nation unique.

[Female AI]: Totally, yeah. And Ushakov's review wasn't simply praising Gogol it was actually a pretty sharp critique of what he saw as a lack of distinct national character in Russian literature. And he even admitted that attempts by Russian writers to define their own identity really felt forced and imitative compared to this sort of natural portrayal of Ukrainian *narodnost'* in Gogol's stories.

[Male AI]: Wow, that's a pretty bold statement. It's like unintentionally Gogol became this measuring stick for them.

[Female AI]: Totally.

[Male AI]: And they're forced to confront their own perceived shortcomings.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And it wasn't an isolated observation.

[Male AI]: Hm.

[Female AI]: So we have another critic Nikolai Nadezhdin who also emphasized these unique aspects of Ukrainian culture and it's almost like poetic influence on Russians and he really seemed to idealize Ukraine as this pure source of Slavic identity.

[Male AI]: It sounds like there's this sense of both admiration and envy in these reactions, right? Like they admire the perceived strength of Ukrainian national character.

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: But then there's this underlying anxiety about their own.

[Female AI]: Yeah. You've hit the nail on the head. And this admiration often came with a sense of wanting to claim Gogol and his talent for Russian literature.

[Male AI]: Interesting.

[Female AI]: Even though his work was so rooted in a very different cultural space.

[Male AI]: Yeah. That's kind of, uh, I don't know if it's a red flag, but it definitely raises some questions.

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: About cultural ownership, especially within the dynamics of a multi-ethnic empire, right? You know,

[Female AI]: Totally.

[Male AI]: It's like you want to celebrate it, but you only want to celebrate it by absorbing it into your narrative.

[Female AI]: Yeah. You've picked up on a key tension here. And this tendency to appropriate really becomes even more pronounced as we look at later reviews. But before we get to that, I want to stop and consider for a moment Nadezhdin's comment about "our Ukraine."

[Male AI]: Yeah. "Our Ukraine."

[Female AI]: What are your thoughts on that?

[Male AI]: Well, it definitely has a sense of entitlement, right?

[Female AI]: Yeah. Almost as if Ukraine's cultural richness was something to be possessed or controlled, right? It hints at these power dynamics that are operating within the empire. Because while these critics might have praised Ukrainian culture, they were doing so from a position of dominance and that inevitably colors their interpretation of Gogol's work.

[Male AI]: So within the Russian reaction, we're already seeing this complex interplay, right?

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: Of admiration, anxiety, and this desire to kind of claim ownership.

[Female AI]: Totally.

[Male AI]: I'm curious to hear how the Ukrainian critics responded to Gogol.

[Female AI]: Okay.

[Male AI]: I'm imagining their perspective is quite different.

[Female AI]: Yeah, you're right. The Ukrainian response was a mix of pride, scrutiny, and a desire to ensure that Gogol was accurately representing their culture on this larger stage.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: And I think one of the most in-depth analyses came from Andriy Storozhenko.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: Writing under the pseudonym Andriy Tsarynnyi in the journal *Syn otechestva i severnyi arkhiv*.

[Male AI]: So what really distinguished Storozhenko's critique from what the Russians were saying?

[Female AI]: Well, first of all, it's sheer length.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: So while most Russian reviews were fairly short, Storozhenko's spanned five journal issues and was even reprinted as a separate booklet.

[Male AI]: Wow.

[Female AI]: He felt like the Russian praise lacked depth, even Pushkin's.

[Male AI]: Interesting.

[Female AI]: And he called for a truly detailed analysis of Gogol's work.

[Male AI]: It seems like he was taking his role as a critic very seriously.

[Female AI]: Totally.

[Male AI]: He wasn't just celebrating the success.

[Female AI]: Right.

[Male AI]: He really felt a responsibility to hold him accountable.

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: For how he was portraying Ukraine.

[Female AI]: That's a great observation because he wasn't content with just blind praise. He saw Gogol as this potential national hero, even comparing him to Walter Scott.

[Male AI]: Interesting.

[Female AI]: And he wanted to ensure that his work really lived up to that potential.

[Male AI]: So he was fact-checking him essentially.

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: On his Ukrainian authenticity.

[Female AI]: Totally.

[Male AI]: What kinds of things did he point out?

[Female AI]: He scrutinized everything from the depiction of customs and beliefs to the accuracy of historical details. So for instance, he even provided Gogol with many history lessons about the Hetmanate.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: Almost like a concerned teacher guiding his student toward a more truthful representation of Ukrainian history.

[Male AI]: Yeah. It's interesting how he almost approached this work as a cultural document.

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: Not just as fiction.

[Female AI]: Totally.

[Male AI]: You know, there's a real sense of responsibility there.

[Female AI]: Right.

[Male AI]: To wanting to present an accurate picture within this larger imperial context.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And this reflects a larger concern among Ukrainian intellectuals at the time. This need to accurately portray their culture within the empire.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: So, they're participating in this larger literary scene.

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: But with this deep sense of responsibility towards their own national identity.

[Male AI]: It's this dual identity, right? Ukrainian and imperial.

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: That seems to be a recurring theme here.

[Female AI]: Totally.

[Male AI]: How did Storozhenko navigate that in his own writing?

[Female AI]: That's a great question. So, he explicitly called himself a *Malorosiianin*.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: A Little Russian

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: And expressed a deep love for his *rodina*, his homeland.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: But simultaneously, he recognized that Gogol as a Ukrainian writer was addressing an imperial audience and achieving recognition on this much larger stage.

[Male AI]: It wasn't just about local pride. It was about representing Ukraine to the entire empire.

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: And ensuring that that representation was accurate and authentic.

[Female AI]: His essay really gives us this window into how Ukrainian identity was forming in the 1830s. It wasn't just about being different from Russians. It was about articulating what it meant to be Ukrainian within a complex and frankly unequal imperial system.

[Male AI]: It seems like that really raises the stakes for Gogol's success, right?

[Female AI]: Absolutely.

[Male AI]: His work became more than just entertainment. It's almost like a battleground for these competing narratives.

[Female AI]: Yeah. It's a space where Ukrainian and Russian anxieties and aspirations and insecurities all played out. It's remarkable how much insight we can gain about this historical context just by analyzing the reception of Gogol's early work.

[Male AI]: And speaking of insights...

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: ...Storozhenko didn't just limit his analysis to Gogol alone.

[Female AI]: Nope.

[Male AI]: Did he talk about other Ukrainian writers of the era.

[Female AI]: Yes, he did. He brought up several figures, including Ivan Kulzhyns'kyi, who believe it or not was actually Gogol's former Latin teacher.

[Male AI]: Oh, interesting connection.

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: What kind of writer was Kulzhyns'kyi?

[Female AI]: Well, that's where things get a little complicated.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: So his book, *Rural Ukraine*, aimed to capture this Ukrainian national character, but it contains some really striking contradictions.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: So he praised the Ukrainian language and culture, going so far as to call Ukrainian a distinct language and not just a dialect, which was a pretty bold statement at the time.

[Male AI]: Interesting.

[Female AI]: But while praising this Ukrainian distinctiveness, he also claimed that it had degenerated, straying from the general imperial spirit and failing to purge itself of these Tatar influences like Russian had supposedly done.

[Male AI]: Wow. So, there's this real mix of pride and self-deprecation.

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: Almost like he was trying to walk this tight rope between Ukrainian patriotism and kind of appeasing Russian sensibilities.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And this duality makes Kulzhyn'skyi's work stand out in such contrast to both Gogol and Storozhenko, who never compromised their Ukrainian themes to try to please Russian expectations.

[Male AI]: Yeah, I could see why Gogol called his former teachers book a “literary freak.”

[Female AI]: Uh-huh.

[Male AI]: It must have felt so inauthentic. Yeah. Especially compared to his own unwavering portrayal of Ukrainian life.

[Female AI]: That's a plausible interpretation. And it's worth noting that Storozhenko also criticized Kulzhyn'skyi's work, though not as harshly as Gogol did.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: He saw it as one of those publications that failed to bring honor to Ukraine.

[Male AI]: Interesting.

[Female AI]: Which again further emphasizes his commitment to presenting this strong and authentic Ukrainian image.

[Male AI]: So even within the Ukrainian response, there are these differing opinions and standards. It's not this monolithic block. It's a dynamic conversation about what it means to represent Ukrainian culture within this larger empire.

[Female AI]: You've got it. And this internal debate really adds another layer of complexity to our understanding of Gogol's reception.

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: Because he wasn't simply navigating Russian expectations...

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: He was also engaging with a vibrant and at times critical Ukrainian audience.

[Male AI]: This is where things get really fascinating because we've seen this initial Russian reaction.

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: This complex mix of admiration and anxiety and then this really nuanced response from Ukrainian critics.

[Female AI]: Right.

[Male AI]: But the story doesn't end there.

[Female AI]: Right.

[Male AI]: As Gogol becomes even more prominent...

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: ...these Russian attempts to claim him for their own literature, they just intensify.

[Female AI]: You're absolutely right. And that's what we'll delve into next. These complex dynamics of appropriation and anxiety and this battle for cultural ownership within the Russian Empire.

[Male AI]: Awesome. I'm excited to dive into that.

[Female AI]: Me, too. So, as Gogol's popularity continued to rise, um, a very particular type of Russian critic started to emerge.

[Male AI]: You're talking about critics like Stepan Shevyrev, right? Gogol's friend who actively tried to position him within Russian literature despite the obvious Ukrainian influence.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And Shevyrev acknowledged the distinct Ukrainian spirit in Gogol's work. But then went on to say that Russians could congratulate “our literature” on Gogol's success.

[Male AI]: That's quite revealing, right? Like they recognize the Ukrainian elements.

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: But still feel compelled to claim those achievements for Russia.

[Female AI]: And this really raises some important questions about cultural ownership and appropriation.

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: Especially within a multiethnic empire like Russia and Shevyrev even admitted that Gogol's humor...

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: ...which he praised for its freshness and originality, likely stemming from Ukrainian folktales.

[Male AI]: It's almost as if they were acknowledging the limitations of Russian literature at the time.

[Female AI]: Yes.

[Male AI]: By highlighting these unique Ukrainian influences.

[Female AI]: It's a very keen observation. And this underlying insecurity about Russian identity is further revealed in Shevyrev's anxiety about potential German influence in Gogol's writing.

[Male AI]: Interesting. He worried that Russianness couldn't stand up to this influx of European culture.

[Female AI]: It's fascinating how Gogol's work, which was so deeply rooted in Ukrainian culture...

[Male AI]: Yeah.

[Female AI]: ...became this focal point for Russian anxieties about their own national identity.

[Male AI]: It speaks to the complex dynamics at play, right?

[Female AI]: Right.

[Male AI]: They admire this vibrancy and authenticity of Ukrainian culture.

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: As reflected in Gogol's writing.

[Female AI]: Okay.

[Male AI]: But simultaneously, they feel the need to subsume it under the banner of Russian literature, almost as a way to bolster their own sense of national identity.

[Female AI]: Trying to build up their own national identity by incorporating elements from another culture.

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: Seems inherently contradictory, wouldn't you say?

[Male AI]: You've identified a really crucial tension there. This push and pull between recognizing and appropriating Ukrainian culture...

[Female AI]: Okay.

[Male AI]: ...is a recurring theme in the reception of Gogol's work.

[Female AI]: And this kind of leads to a big question, right? How did these competing narratives of national identity affect Gogol himself?

[Male AI]: That's a question that scholars still debate today.

[Female AI]: Um, some argue that Gogol eventually succumbed to the pressures of this Russian appropriation...

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: ...and shifted toward a more conservative pro-Russian stance in his later works.

[Male AI]: So, his own personal and artistic journey mirrors these larger cultural struggles and tensions.

[Female AI]: Precisely. And it adds yet another layer of complexity to understanding Gogol's legacy because he wasn't just this brilliant writer.

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: He was a figure caught between these competing national narratives, a symbol of both Ukrainian cultural richness and Russian imperial ambition.

[Male AI]: It makes you wonder how he felt about being co-opted into Russian literature.

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: Especially given his later shift towards a more pro-Russian viewpoint.

[Female AI]: That's a fascinating question and it brings up another important consideration. How might today's geopolitical climate influence our interpretation of these historical debates? [14:24]

[Male AI]: The parallels are hard to ignore, right? The anxieties about national identity, the struggles over cultural ownership, the power dynamics within a multi-ethnic context. All of these issues resonate with contemporary events.

[Female AI]: You're absolutely right. The way we read and interpret Gogol's work today is inevitably shaped by our own historical moment...

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: ...by our understanding of colonialism, cultural, and the ongoing struggle for national self-determination.

[Male AI]: So, what does this all mean? What are the key insights that we can glean from this deep dive into the reception of Gogol's early work? [14:57]

[Female AI]: Firstly, it reveals the complex and often contradictory ways in which national identity was constructed and contested in the 19th century. Gogol's Ukrainian tales while celebrated for their authenticity,

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: also became a focal point for Russian anxieties about their own cultural distinctiveness.

[Male AI]: It wasn't simply about appreciating cultural difference. It was about navigating these power dynamics within the empire.

[Female AI]: Precisely. And that leads to the second takeaway. The role of appropriation in shaping literary canons.

[Male AI]: Interesting.

[Female AI]: Russian critics, despite acknowledging Gogol's Ukrainian roots actively sought to incorporate him into Russian literature. [15:33]

[Male AI]: Which raises important questions, right, about cultural ownership and the ways in which dominant narratives shape our understanding of the past.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And finally, this deep dive emphasizes the enduring relevance of Gogol's work, the themes he explored.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: National identity, cultural belonging, the clash between tradition and modernity continue to resonate with us today, especially in a world grappling with globalization, migration, and the resurgence of nationalism.

[Male AI]: It's incredible how a handful of stories published in the 1830s can offer such profound insights into our own contemporary moment. [16:13]

[Female AI]: It's a testament to Gogol's enduring brilliance. His work and the reactions it provoked offer a unique window into the anxieties, aspirations, and insecurities of both Russian and Ukrainian intellectuals grappling with their place in the world.

[Male AI]: This has been a truly enlightening exploration. We've unpacked the initial excitement surrounding Gogol's Ukrainian tales,

[Female AI]: Uh-huh.

[Male AI]: the anxieties they stirred about Russian identity, the meticulous analysis from Ukrainian critics,

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: and the subtle yet persistent attempts to appropriate Gogol for Russian literature. [16:43]

[Female AI]: It's clear that Gogol's work, even in its early stages, struck a core, sparking debates about national character, cultural ownership, and the meaning of belonging within a multi-ethnic empire.

[Male AI]: And these debates continue to hold relevance today as we wrestle with similar questions about identity, belonging, and the power of narratives to shape our worldviews.

[Female AI]: Gogol's work and the reactions it elicited provide us with a valuable lens through which to examine these enduring human concerns.

[Male AI]: Well, thank you so much for guiding us through this complex...

[Female AI]: You're welcome.

[Male AI]: ...and fascinating topic. I believe our listeners will come away with a much deeper understanding of Gogol's legacy and the enduring ability of literature to reflect and shape our

understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Picking up on this theme of appropriation, it's crucial, I think, to delve a little deeper into how Russian critics and intellectuals sought to position Gogol within their own literary tradition.

[Female AI]: Yeah. Right. And I think this this appropriation really reflects the inherent power imbalances within the Russian Empire. [17:45]

[Male AI]: Right.

[Female AI]: So, Ukrainians had a distinct culture and literary tradition.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: But were often relegated to a secondary position within the imperial hierarchy. And this made their cultural output very vulnerable to reinterpretation and assimilation by the dominant Russian culture.

[Male AI]: So even though Gogol's work was celebrated for its Ukrainianness,

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: it also became this tool for Russian cultural expansion.

[Female AI]: In a sense, yes. By claiming Gogol as a Russian writer, they were essentially absorbing Ukrainian talent and creativity into their own narrative of national greatness. [18:12]

[Male AI]: Um.

[Female AI]: And we see this so clearly in how critics like Shevyrev downplayed Gogol's Ukrainian roots and emphasized his contributions to Russian literature.

[Male AI]: It's a subtle form of erasure, almost like trying to rewrite history to fit a particular narrative. [18:31]

[Female AI]: Precisely. And this erasure wasn't confined to just Gogol. It was part of a broader pattern of Russian cultural dominance within the empire where non-Russian identities were often subsumed under the umbrella of Russianness.

[Male AI]: Given this context, how did Ukrainian intellectuals respond to this appropriation? Did they just sort of accept it or were there voices of resistance?

[Female AI]: There were certainly voices of resistance though they often had to operate within the constraints of the imperial system.

[Male AI]: Okay.

[Female AI]: So writers like Storozhenko while participating in the broader Russian literary scene also maintained a strong sense of Ukrainian identity and insisted on this accurate and authentic portrayal of their culture.

[Male AI]: So it was a very delicate balancing act. Right. Yeah. Engaging with that imperial center but also safeguarding their own cultural heritage.

[Female AI]: Exactly. And this balancing act really required a great deal of ingenuity and resilience. Ukrainian intellectuals had to be strategic in their critiques,

[Male AI]: Right

[Female AI]: ...pushing back against appropriation while navigating the complexities of imperial censorship and power dynamics.

[Male AI]: Their efforts to promote Ukrainian culture in this environment,

[Female AI]: Yeah.

[Male AI]: ...seem all the more significant now.

[Female AI]: Absolutely. Because they were working within a system that often sought to marginalize their voices. Yet they managed to create a vibrant and distinctive Ukrainian literary tradition.

[Male AI]: So Gogol's story then is not just about one writer's journey, but about this larger struggle for cultural recognition and self-determination. [20:05]

[Female AI]: That's a powerful insight, and it's a struggle that continues to resonate today as we grapple with the legacies of colonialism, the complexities of national identity, and the importance of cultural diversity.

[Male AI]: This deep dive has been truly illuminating. We've explored the initial excitement surrounding Gogol's Ukrainian tales...

[Female AI]: Right.

[Male AI]: ...the anxieties they triggered about Russian identity, the meticulous scrutiny from Ukrainian critics and their persistent efforts to appropriate Gogol for Russian literature.

[Female AI]: And I think what's most fascinating is that these debates remain relevant today.

[Male AI]: Yeah.

[Female AI]: As we continue to grapple with similar questions about identity belonging and the power of narratives to shape our world.

[Male AI]: Gogol's work and the reactions it provoked offer us this valuable lens through which to examine these enduring human concerns.

[Female AI]: It's a testament to the enduring power of literature to reflect and challenge and ultimately help us understand the complexities of the human experience.

[Male AI]: Well, thank you so much for joining us on this deep dive.

[Female AI]: You're welcome.

[Male AI]: I hope it's given you a richer understanding of Gogol's work and his lasting impact on our understanding of culture, identity, and the complexities of history.