



Motif of Infidelity in V. Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the structural and functional role of the infidelity motif in Vladimir Nabokov's early masterpiece, *Laughter in the Dark* (originally *Kamera Obskura*). Rather than a mere plot device, infidelity serves as the primary catalyst for character morphogenesis and the orchestration of dramatic action. The protagonists are entangled in a sophisticated system of domestic betrayal—an intricate "narrative web" characterized by deceptive exchanges and psychological manipulation. Drawing comparative parallels with Nabokov's earlier work, *King, Queen, Knave*, this study examines how the author refines the geometry of the love triangle into a more sinister, cinematic irony. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates how the theme of infidelity is bolstered by Nabokov's signature leitmotifs, including lepidopterological imagery (butterflies), specular doubling (mirrors), and the parodic subversion of Dostoevskian "crime and punishment." By situating infidelity within this broader symbolic network, the paper reveals how Nabokov uses betrayal to mirror the inherent instability of perception and the cruelty of the aesthetic gaze.

Keywords: Nabokov, infidelity, motif, theme, model, function, *Lolita*

Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov is a writer who attracted and intrigued many critics and literary scholars with his works. No matter, that his last completed novel was published in 1969, and since the death of the author nearly forty years had passed, there are still new interpretational concepts of his works. Novels' multi-levelness of this unique Russian-American writer never ceases to amaze researchers. Literary scholars constantly notice new peculiarities of his work forcing to reinterpret and change the pre-defined positions.

Nabokov's phenomenon is found in his tendency to play, not only with regular readers, but also with literature scholars. Writer created many interpretation routes

by purpose. He added forewords to many of his novels (often, only after many years), by which, he cleverly manipulates the reader, leading him to a specific way of novel perception. Some scholars stand that everything, that was said by the author directly, may turn out to be a trap (e.g. Toporov, 1990). Nabokov's books remind chess puzzle, which writer loved to create. One wrong conclusion at the beginning of the book is enough to be sentenced to interpretational defeat.

However, regardless of how much the writer was sure of his talent and text dictatorship (control of each particular element in the novel), he was not able to choose what will happen to his novel after publishing.

Nabokov (officially) hated every remark about literary influence of Dostoyevsky works on his own novels. Many times he denied interpretational methods, based on psychoanalysis and commented (and even attacked) attempts to read his books with its help. In many forewords (for instance, to English version of *The Defense* from 1964) Nabokov is actually provoking readers (Nabokov, 2005, p. 9).

Moreover, in such prefaces author often mentions moments, which actually never occurred in the book, trying to trick the reader even more.

Disregarding the numerous traps and manipulations, scholars were able to determine leading motifs and themes in Nabokov's works, for instance, childhood, memories or even particular concept of art. There is, however, many recurring elements, which presence is not spotted immediately (e.g. motif of shadow [Belobrovstseva, 2000, p. 76-90] or oranges [Kladov, 2003, p. 221-227]), and their role in novel interpretation is often significant, if not crucial. One should not underestimate the elements, which constantly appear in different novels of this writer.

Famous polish literature scholar, Z. Lempicki, in his work (Lempicki, 1966, p. 177) stands, that motif should be considered from a perspective of author's individuality. Motifs, which are general form of interpersonal contact, are closely related to specific experiences of the author. The presence of multiple recurring motifs in the works of a particular writer, according to the researcher, has its overt or hidden causes. It may not be the matter of incidence, when a given motif appears in nearly every work of examined author.

One of such motifs in Nabokov's works is infidelity. This paper is focused not on the reasons of frequent appearance of a given element in many novels, but tries to determine its importance in a specific work, which is written in 1933 in Russian (titled *Камера обскура*), novel *Laughter in the Dark*. The first English translation was made in 1936 by Johnathan Long but Nabokov was so displeased that translated the book for his own. Nabokov's English version was published in 1938. For this paper we used both versions. Names and quotes are from English translation. Nabokov had a tendency to introduce significant changes in later editions of his works, to exaggerate or diminish the importance of certain elements. There is no

guinea pig Cheepy in English version, the character from cartoon series by Robert Gorn (Axel Rex). There is also a plenty of other differences, yet we are not going to discuss them deeply.

Infidelity motif is fulfilling different functions. It might, firstly, be a main motif, forming the plot and arranging the whole work, which takes place in the described novel (and also in *King, Queen, Knave*), or, secondly, create a seemingly insignificant background for events (*Lolita*). Besides in some works it has a supportive function, aimed at exposing unreliable narrator (*Despair*).

In this scientific piece of paper main heroes will be characterized. Also we will try to present and describe multi-levelled structure of infidelity in the novel and its relatedness with other Nabokov's works. Moreover, we will characterize elements adjunctive to the described phenomenon (the caricature, the theatre of the absurd, the motif of crime and punishment, the art).

The main character of the novel is Albert Albinus, a rich painting expert who succumbs to erotic fascination of Peters. A young usherette, being governed by inborn courtesan instincts, makes him leave his wife and daughter (Boyd, 2001, online). A girl who is interested only in Albinus's money, is not faithful to him, she stultifies him, humiliates and drives him to death.

The novel's plot is based on the complicated structure of infidelity, which creates character's relationships through mutual relations. The whole novel revolves around two love triangles. The first one, less important to us, constitutes a relationship between Albinus, his wife (Elisabeth) and his lover (Margot), and the second one is created by Albert, and Axel Horn. The first triangle, typical for and frequently appearing in the art, reproduces already known schemes. The next one inverts the situation of the first and Albinus transforms from betrayer into betrayed person. Such a scheme also appears in *Lolita*. Humbert gets married with Dolores's mother in order to have a sexual relationship with a girl who later on betrays him with a well-known dramatist and screenwriter (Quilty). He is featured by absurdness and ruthlessness towards the character who betrayed first.

Albert Albinus had enduring relationship with his wife for nine years. Not once had he cheated on her during this time, but thoughts about betrayal have been pursuing him all the time. When Elisabeth, Albinus's wife, spent three weeks in hospital before childbirth, he faulted himself for being a coward due to the fact that he did not manage to cheat on her.

Then one day she was taken to a nursing home and Albinus lived for three weeks alone. He did not know what to do with himself; took a good deal of brandy; was tortured by two dark thoughts, each of a different kind of darkness: one was that his wife might

*die, and the other that if only he had a little more pluck he might find a friendly girl and bring her back to his empty bedroom*¹.

Being bored by everyday life, he realized his dreams at night by dreaming about „young girl lying sprawl on hot lonely beach” (p. 17), but subconsciously he was afraid that his wife may catch him red-handed.

Everything has changed when he met her at the cinema, where she showed him a seat. A random meeting transformed into romance that destroyed main character. Albinus pleased his young partner as much as possible: he rented a house for her, supported her, and invited her to a trip. A teenage courtesan made him divorce with Elisabeth and shortly resided in Albinus’s house.

Albert is a literary prototype of Humbert (*Lolita*). Both of them trust their juvenile passions. It turns out that they are being betrayed and entangled into ridiculous triangle by their passions.

Peters met Albinus when she was seventeen (sixteen in Russian edition). She came from a poor middle-class home and had sad enough childhood. She dreamt to be an actress; she worked as a model (nude) and as an usherette at the cinema. Horn was her first love, who being overwhelmed by own feeling, split up with her. She likes Albinus, but once her ex-lover appears, she decides that “she won’t let him escape again” (p. 147).

There are many passages in the text where Margot is compared to animals that are connoted unpleasantly: „[...] lay there, her body curved and motionless, like a lizard” (p. 79); “In the cool room with the red-tiled floor, where the light through the slits of the shutters danced in one’s eyes and lay in bright lines at one’s feet, snake-like, shuffled off her black skin [...]” (p. 115); (“A lovely creature, unquestionably,” thought Lampert, “but there is something snakelike about her”) (p. 162); “ [...] slowly drew herself up higher and higher, like a snake when it uncoils” (p. 195).

Such comparisons connote with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, which contributed to the collapse of the first biblical people. The serpent is a symbol of deception, sin, evil, the Devil in the Christian tradition. Vipers are virulent, whereas a meeting with them jeopardizes with death. Nabokov applied a similar trick in his previous works (*King, Queen, Knave*) in order to render the main heroine’s nature as morally collapsed. Franz noticed two times that Martha, his lover, resembled a toad: “A complete stranger within Franz’s consciousness observed in passing that she rather resembled a toad. Martha moved her head. Reality returned” (Nabokov, 1989, p. 198); “[...] an honest young man who had been seduced and appropriated by an older woman who, despite her fine dresses and face lotions, resembled a large white toad” (Nabokov, 1989, p. 259).

¹ Next pages will be noticed in brackets.

Moreover, has a lot in common with a juvenile Dolores, Humbert's miserable love, who is the main character of *Lolita*. Albinus's lover is a representative of so-called nymphet, which frequently appeared in Nabokov's works. According to Humbert, nymphets are girls who are from nine to fourteen years old. She had her first touch of love as a thirteen year's old girl (in Russian version). When she was sixteen (fourteen in first version of the book), she went to a motorbike ride with a stranger, who having eased out of the city "[...] he put his arm round her and began to squeeze and fumble and kiss her so violently that the discomfort she felt that day turned to dizziness" (p. 28). A few months later a naked girl posed in the studio. Seventeen year's old Margot is characterized by childishness and immaturity, whereas passages describing her appearance resemble characterization of Lolita when it comes to the style:

1. a) *Albinus sat down beside her and looked [...] at that face in which everything was so charming – the burning cheeks, the lips glistening from the cherry brandy, the childish solemnity of the long hazel eyes and the small downy mole on the soft curve just beneath the left one* (p. 48): **Margot**.

And, as he stood by the bed and feasted his eyes on that childish face, with the soft pink lips and flushed cheeks [...] (p. 178): **Margot**.

b) *There she stood and blinked, cheeks aflame, hair awry, her eyes passing over me as lightly as they did over the furniture [...]* (Nabokov, 1995, p. 61): **Lolita**.

2. a) *Even that vulgar Berlin slang of hers only enhanced the charm of her throaty voice and large white teeth. When laughing she half closed her eyes and a dimple danced on her cheek* (p. 49): **Margot**.

b) *What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet – of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures, from the blurry pinkness of adolescent maidservants in the Old Country (smelling of crushed daisies and sweat)* (Nabokov, 1995, p. 44): **Lolita**.

Besides Albert bathed her and used the words that he earlier used only to his eight-years-old daughter: "Albinus, as he tried to console her, unconsciously used the very words with which he had once comforted Irma when he kissed a bruise – words which now, after Irma's death, were vacant" (p. 192).

The text is much richer in motifs and plots, connecting both Nabokov's heroines. Little Lo Humbert he got into tennis, Margot was taught to play by certain American. She dreamed about actress career, she played supporting role in a movie financed by Albinus, and Lolita took part in theatre spectacle. Moreover, playwright Quilty abandoned Dolores, when she refused to star in a porn movie.

Margot's lover and at the same time first love is Axel Rex, caricaturist, immoral men and one would think, deprived of any feelings. An exception, that artist could not

understand, was Margot, memory that “was solely pure and beautiful”. Frightened by his own feelings towards young Peters, Axel returned to America. The girl ignited a feeling, which after separation he characterized as acute sorrow – feeling that had been unknown to Rex earlier.

Character left his mentally challenged mother, who died soon after his escape to America. Narrator’s words complete his characteristics:

As a child he had poured oil over live mice, set fire to them and watched them dart about for a few seconds like flaming meteors. And it is best not to inquire into the things he did to cats. Then, in riper years, when his artistic talent developed, he tried in more subtle ways to satiate his curiosity, for it was not anything morbid with a medical name – oh, not at all – just cold, wide-eyed curiosity, just the marginal notes supplied by life to his art. It amused him immensely to see life made to look silly, as it slid helplessly into caricature. He despised practical jokes: he liked them to happen by themselves with perchance now and then just that little touch on his part which would send the wheel running downhill. He loved to fool people; and the less trouble the process entailed, the more the joke pleased him (p. 143).

Similarly to other participants of a triangle, Also Axel has got his double in later Nabokov’s novel (*Lolita*), whom is Quilty. Both are art activists (playwright and caricaturist), characterized by dubious moral backbone and lack of respect for the people around them. Heroes are characterized by theatricality, which is proved by descriptions of their appearance and scenes, where they act.

The man had impressed him the evening before not only by his ready wit and easy manner, but also by his extraordinary personal appearance: his pale, hollow cheeks, thick lips and queer black hair went to form a kind of fascinating ugliness (p. 145).

Given characteristic brings to mind famous British actor and comedian, Charlie Chaplin. Moreover, Russian scholar N. Dolgova (Dolgova, 2013), in her work analyses fragments of *Laughter in the Dark* and *Lolita*, which express theatrical tradition of carnival performed by common people (Dolgova, 2013, online) (e.g. Pietrushka theater—in Russian version): “[...] he pressed his hand to his heart and flung out his arms jerkily – it was a capital imitation of Punch – all this of course in dumb show, though he could have squeaked remarkably in more favourable circumstances” (p. 253).

Another point proving character’s theatricality is that Axel in front of Albert played a role of homosexual, so he did not suspect that someone is trying to take Margot from him: “No, thank you. A woman for me is only a harmless mammal, or a jolly companion—sometimes” (p. 167).

Duel scene between Humbert and Quilty, its absurd and caricature nature is explicitly similar to a meeting scene between Paul (Albinus’s brother-in-law) and

Rex. In both scenes there is nudity, theatrical behaviour of attacked characters, which, despite received hits, keep their smile.

[...] and Paul, good-natured Paul who had never in his life hit a living creature, swung out mightily at Rex's head and got it with tremendous bang. Rex leaped back – his face still twisted in a smile – and suddenly something remarkable occurred: like Adam after the Fall, Rex, cowering by the white wall and grinning wanly, covered his nakedness with his hand (p. 278).

Axel's actions strongly connote to absurd theatre, where traditional roles designated to tragedy and comedy are turned upside down – tragedy becomes a carrier of comic content, and comedy – tragic. Besides, gifted caricaturist often takes role of spectator, who is pleased by witnessing tragicomic show.

He watched with interest the sufferings of Albinus [...]; whereas Rex reflected – with a sense of pleasant anticipation – that, far from being the limit, it was merely the first item in the program of a roaring comedy at which he, Rex had been reserved a place in the stage manager's private box (p. 182).

At the end of the novel stage direction appear which, once again, turns the reader to structure of dramatic text.

Infidelity motif, which is a foundation of whole novel, connects in *Laughter in the Dark* with motif of crime and punishment. Albinus, who cheated on his wife, hence committed a crime against their relationship, paid the highest price for that – price of his own life. First punishment, delivered by fate, was death of Albert's daughter, Irma. Sick child had been getting well, when in the night she heard whistling, reminding her melody, which her father used to whistle when returned home. She leaned out a window in a chilly night, which made her condition worse and she died. Author, through this symbolic scene shows who is to be blamed for children's death – Albinus. For him it was a sign, to leave his paramour and return to his wife. He made the wrong decision and absolute author-demiurge sentenced him to death.

Similar situation we have in *King, Queen, Knave*, where Martha, not only cheated on her husband, but also decided to kill him. During temporarily postponed murder attempt she got ill with pneumonia and soon after she died.

Motif of infidelity is also mixed with motif of art. E. Antoshina in her work (Antoshina, 2010, p. 186-191) examines the motif of animated portrait. The introduction to a given phenomenon is a story of a guinea pig, a hero of caricature series by Axel Rex, which won the hearts of the western world. The image of a guinea pig "comes alive" in the movie, during a screening when Albert met Margot. According to researcher, young Peters keeps this motif through variation of animated statue/waxwork (Antoshina, 2010, p. 189). That is proved by Albert thoughts: "Albinus' specialty had been his passion for art; his most brilliant discovery had been Margot" (p. 257). Moreover E. Antoshina states, that Margot has

a function of psychopomp (Antoshina, 2010, p. 190) (in Greek mythology: a guide of souls to the place of the dead¹). This is very accurate remark, considering the final of this novel (metaphoric psychopomp leads Albert to the world of death, by killing him).

In this novel art has an unmasking function. Certain about her talent, Margot played in a movie, which turned out to be a disaster. Film, vivid portrait, presents caricature character, whose appearance discourages and pushes away:

Awkward and ugly, with a swollen, strangely altered, leech-black mouth, misplaced brows and unexpected creases in her dress, the girl on the screen stared wildly in front of her and then broke in two with her stomach on the window sill and her buttocks to the spectators (p. 187).

Movie portrait of Margot changes like a portrait of Dorian Grey (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), which grew older and reflected character's corruption, whilst he remained young and beautiful.

It is through the art Albinus finds out about Margot's infidelity. His old friend, whom he met accidentally after so many years, reads him a fragment of his own story, based on fatal meeting between Margot and Axel in a train compartment. Young people, use the opportunity that Albert is not around and talk about events so familiar to deceived Albinus. Cheated character goes berserk, he wants to kill Margot, and but he takes her from the hotel instead, crushes his car and loses his sight.

Cheating scenes are also filled with caricature, which is so important for Rex. During the first meeting of all three, confused Margot sits between her admirers. Under the table Albert grabs one of her knees, and Axel grabs another one. When, during a visit in Albinus's house, Rex leans to kiss Margot, householder enters the room, Axel cannot disentangle himself from lace of Peters's scarf. In the way south they stop in a hotel, where Axel's and Albinus's rooms have a shared bathroom. In the evening and in the morning Margot locks herself in a divided room, drains water into the tub and sneaks to Rex. Axel's crowning achievement is organizing common place with blind Albert. Together with Margot they do not miss a chance, to gloat over misfortune and helplessness of Albinus. We already mentioned Rex's passion that was implemented through transforming different situations into a living caricature.

To summarize the abovementioned, infidelity motif has a crucial role in the novel. It is a main element, organizing whole work and motivating characters' conduct, which influences later Nabokov's novels (e.g. *Lolita*: they are prototypes of Humbert, Lolita, Quilty). This phenomenon interacts with other themes and traditions (theatre of absurd, caricature, art, motif of crime and punishment). Multi-levelled structure of infidelity becomes an intertextual bridge, connecting *Laughter in the Dark* not only

¹ Psychopomp. Oxford Dictionaries. [online]. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/psychopomp>.

with other works of Russian-American writer, but also with traditions of world literature. It is one of the most frequently appearing motif in Nabokov's work, which depending on a novel fulfills different functions.

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