

## The Patterns of Doom in Nabokov's Short Story : 'Signs and Symbols'

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# The Patterns of Doom in Nabokov's Short Story: 'Signs and Symbols'

Brian Quinn

Vladimir Nabokov is by far better known for his novels, however, he also deserves great stature for his fifty-eight short stories that he wrote in both Russian and English. Among his English "American short stories", one of his most remarkable and impressive works is 'Signs and Symbols' written in 1947 and published in the *New Yorker* magazine on May 15, 1948. 'Signs and Symbols' is one of the shortest of all Nabokov's stories. Boyd calls it "one of the greatest short stories ever written" and goes on to describe it as "a triumph of economy and force, minute realism and shimmering mystery." (Boyd: p. 117) It is outwardly similar to many of his previous American short stories since it deals with many of the sad and difficult aspects of émigré life in America after World War II. It also mirrors many of the themes described by Singer who wrote similar stories at about the same time. Johnson perceptively notes: "Dealing with the poorer and more desperate side of émigré life in America, it strikes an amazingly similar note to that sounded by Isaac Bashevis Singer in his own stories dealing with the same topics - though of course the two writers also have in common their émigré status, their bi-lingualism, and the fact that they were both from eastern Europe." (Johnson: p. 1)

The basic story of 'Signs and Symbols' is that of an elderly émigré couple whose son has been hospitalized in an insane asylum due to an acute form of paranoia. After having been there for some time, the young man's parents try to visit him on his birthday. After arriving at the institution, they are not permitted to see their boy due to the fact that he has very recently attempted to commit suicide. The old couple is heart-broken and sadly return home greatly depressed by their fate and the

apparent hopelessness of the situation. Finally, later that night the elderly father firmly decides that no matter what the difficulties they should go back to the mental asylum and demand that they be allowed to take their boy home to live with them again. Thereafter, while discussing the details of their new plan the telephone rings twice, with each call being a wrong number made by the same person. The wife carefully explains the reason for the caller's error during the second call. The story ends in quite a dramatic fashion with the telephone ringing a third time. The reader is left to ponder who the caller might be.

As mentioned above, 'Signs and Symbols' has many of the themes that Nabokov is famous for in both his other stories and novels, such as madness, narcissism, the cruelty of fate, the plight of poor émigrés, the exploitation of patterns and symbols to signify hidden meanings and, finally, the theme of parents' love for their children and their dread of losing them. In fact, possibly the most poignant and dramatic moments of 'Signs and Symbols' is indeed best observed in the tender and moving glimpses of love that are demonstrated by the elderly couple for their only son.

### Theme of Madness

One of the central themes of 'Signs and Symbols' is the theme of madness as demonstrated by the son's present disease. Nabokov is well known for his deep interest in various forms of madness. Nabokov has often used madness as a main theme of such novels *Despair*, *Pale Fire* and *Lolita*, often with grotesque and comic effect. In this story the son's particular type of madness is a unique form that has been invented by the author himself to achieve the desired effect in his story. The disease is called 'referential mania' Nabokov first came upon the idea for this type of madness in 1943 while writing his biography *Nikolay Gogol* in which he stated: "I shall have occasion to speak in quite a different book of a lunatic who constantly felt that all the parts of a landscape and movements of inanimate objects were a complex code of allusion to his own being, so

that the whole universe seemed to be conversing about him by means of signs." (Nabokov:*Nikolay Gogol*: p.137) In the story, the author carefully describes this unique form of mental illness:

In these very rare cases the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. He excludes real people from the conspiracy - because he considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men. Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages which he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme. Some of the spies are detached observers, such as glass surfaces and still pools; others, such as coats in store windows, are prejudiced witnesses, lynchers at heart; others again (running water, storms) are hysterical to the point of insanity, have a distorted opinion of him, and grotesquely misinterpret his actions. He must be always on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things. The very air he exhales is indexed and filed away. ("Signs and Symbols", in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1995. Pp. 595 -596 : Hereafter, all quotes from the story will be taken from this edition)

The disease suffered by the boy in this story is therefore some type of complex schizophrenia which the author uses as one of the pillars of his story. No medical explanations are given, however, the author does provide the reader with a good timeline of the boy's illness. Late at night, after the father has gone off to bed, the elderly mother looks at old photo albums and reminisces about her life, especially about her boy's as she peruses the family photo album. In doing so, the increasing severity of her

son's mental illness becomes clearly evident:

As a baby he looked more surprised than most babies....Four years old, in a park: moodily shy, with puckered forehead, looking away from an eager squirrel as he would from any other stranger...Age six-that was when he drew wonderful birds with human hands and feet, and suffered from insomnia like a grown-up man. His cousin, now a famous chess player. He again, aged about eight, already difficult to understand, afraid of the wallpaper in the passage, afraid of a certain picture in a book which merely showed an idyllic landscape with rocks on a hillside and an old cart wheel hanging from the branch of a leafless tree. Aged ten: the year they left Europe. The shame, the pity, the humiliating difficulties, the ugly, vicious, backward children he was with in that special school. And then came a time in his life, coinciding with a long convalescence after pneumonia, when those little phobias of which his parents had stubbornly regarded as the eccentricities of a prodigiously gifted child hardened into a dense tangle of logically interacting illusions, making him totally inaccessible to normal minds. (pp. 596-597)

The above passage gives a well described glimpse into the downwardly spiraling mental disease of the boy, which is now even evident, to some degree, from infancy when retrospectively analyzing the boy's life. Nabokov also proves to be extremely skillful in describing the boy's illness in a very unique and insightful manner.

Interestingly, even though the symptoms and characteristics of the disease are carefully described by the author, the reader is given no descriptions regarding the possible cause of this mental disease. Therefore, the author leaves it up to the reader himself to discern the possible causes of this tragic disease. As a result, the overwhelmingly probable cause of this disease is the family's nomadic existence in which they have lost their country, language, friends, relatives, possessions, status and even their human dignity over the past 40 years due to the turmoil of wars

and revolutions in Europe. The family has now been in American for 11 years and they barely subsist thanks to the handouts of the father's younger brother who fortuitously came to America 40 years ago as a young man and thereby made a successful life for himself. One can easily assume, that whatever eccentricities the boy may have had became sorely exacerbated upon his arrival to the USA. Thereafter, the stress of learning a new language and culture, while also watching his parents continual suffering may have very well led to boy to escape into some kind of personal fantasy world which, after a while, he was no longer able to control.

In fact, the reason for the son's recent suicide attempts is apparently an attempt to finally control his fantasy by permanently escaping from it. According to the text, the recent suicide attempt is not the first, but appears to be one of many such incidents. The author carefully describes the last attempt before the most recent one:

The last time he had tried to do it, his method had been , in the doctor's words, a masterpiece of inventiveness; he would have succeeded, had not an envious fellow patient thought he was learning to fly-and stop him. What he really wanted to do was to tear a hole in his world and escape. (p. 595)

Here, Nabokov shows the son's intelligence while also indicating the severity of the boy's mental state. The disease seems to have originated from a need to escape the grim reality of the world that he saw and perceived around himself.

The author further hints that such endless floods of bad news throughout the boys lifetime may have sent him off the deep edge into insanity when in the midst of looking at her son's pictures, the mother also notices Aunt Rosa's photo, mixed in with those of her boy. Aunt Rosa's tragically unfortunate existence provides the background as she suffered all of her tragedies in parallel with the boy as he grew up from year to year:

Aunt Rosa, a fussy, angular, wild-eyed old lady, who had lived in a tremulous World of bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths-until the Germans put her to death, together with all the people she had worried about.( p. 597)

In this passage, the author shows the circumstances under which the precocious boy grew up and eventually decided to escape from. In some ways, it might appear that due to the widespread murder, torture and loss of human dignity that took place in the 1930's in Europe, it may well have been quite natural for some people to drift into insanity to escape the "insane" reality of the world around them. The contrast of the fussy, old aunt with the insane son is intentional on the author's part. The lives of both are somehow intertwined, with the old-woman endlessly worrying about the monsters and horrors of the real world while the boy now worries about those of his imaginary world.

Johnson also supports this connection between the boy's madness and the terrible tragedies suffered by his family over the past 40 years:"There is a sense in which this is the second subject in the story, running parallel with the first, which is the harshness of the couple's life as émigrés. They are poor, living on the support of a relative, and they are getting old. Behind them they have the flight of émigrés - Minsk, the Revolution, Leipzig, Berlin - and the relatives who have perished." (Johnson: p. 2)

The title of the story, 'Signs and Symbols' is also interesting in that the signs and symbols of the boy's disease as described by some famous German doctor also indicate a series of patterns in the boy's life and disease. Parker interestingly suggests that the disease of "referential mania" might also be some type of literary sickness that readers can suffer from if they get too involved in a text and begin to over focus on it at the expense of the real world around them:"The young man suffers from "referential mania," a mental disorder in which the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence." The detailed description of the malady employs the

words "signs," "alphabet," "patterns," "messages," "cipher," "theme," "observers." It is the language not only of medical diagnosis but also of literature and literary criticism. The inference which can be drawn is that "referential" mania" can also be an affliction of readers who get caught up in an over-reading of a literary text. "Signs and Symbols" not only suggests the possibility, but exemplifies, through a perfect merging of form and content, just how that might come about. (Parker: p. 133) As suggested by Parker, the signs and symbols of this story point to tragedy in the past, present and future for the protagonists. In addition, it is suggested that the reader, too, should be careful not to delve too deeply this time into the morass of symbols of this story since it may be more a more straight forward tale than one usually encounters in Nabokov's world.

The madness that is ever present in this story thus exists on several levels, first of all on the level of the insane son, next on the level of insanity that modern history has continually dealt to certain countries and peoples in the 20<sup>th</sup> century , and finally on the level of the reader who may have to occasionally enter into the realm of the insane mind to relate with those who have already escaped from the normal world.

Field also suggests that the "insanity experienced by the son in this story is only another type of extreme narcissism, similar to that pervasive disease which afflicts many of Nabokov's main protagonists in both his novels and short stories: "If one delves into the scientific literature on the subject, many of the outstanding features of Nabokov's writing are identified as characteristic of narcissism. B. Grunberger, for instance, one of the leading psychiatric theoreticians of narcissism, points out that the narcissist is constantly menaced by the world of things. That is only natural, since there is only one self and everything else is thing. This theme begins to play strongly in Nabokov's second novel, *King, Queen, Knave* (1926) and is more than a stylistic innovation that links him with the object-orientation French *nouveau roman* several decades later. For the narcissist, repetitions are absolutely necessary. They are a quest for the patterns of the past, and their very rhythm lulls disquiet. The narcis-



sist may suffer referential madness, the theme of Nabokov's 1948 short story, "Signs and Symbols," in which everything in creation becomes a reference to oneself, which also explains *audition coloree* where language becomes privatized with unique colors in which letters and words are seen in the mind as they are said or read. Nabokov's mother experienced *audition coloree*, and she was also the extravagantly favored child in her own youth. It is less evident because the form and stylistic brilliance of his books vary so much from one another in comparison with most other writers, but Vladimir Nabokov really does have one tale to tell: the shadow that pursues or is being pursued by someone. That is the only story Narcissus knows." (Field: pp. 29-30) Therefore, according to Field, the son in this story is just another in the line of extravagant heroes that make up Nabokov's oeuvre. For Field, the insanity described as "referential mania" in the story, is just another version of narcissism. As a result, the presence of madness tends to be quite a usual occurrence in Nabokov's world.

### Theme of Tragic Fate and Impending Doom

The reader is confronted with tragedy right in the first paragraph as Nabokov introduces the "problem" of the young man's "incurably deranged" mind. We understand the couple's tragic fate in the second paragraph where we learn of their poverty and helpless financial and social condition. The sense of impending doom is hinted at in the third paragraph of the story:

That Friday everything went wrong. (p. 594)

The fourth paragraph ends with the couple observing a baby bird dying as they walked by:

A few feet away under a swaying and dripping tree, a tiny half-dead unfledged bird was helplessly twitching in a puddle. ( p 595)

The gloomy picture continues in the fifth paragraph as the sad couple notice another passenger on the same bus crying in despair:

It gave her a kind of soft shock, a mixture of compassion and wonder, to notice that one of the passengers, a girl with dark hair and grubby red toenails, was weeping on the shoulder of an older woman.

Boyd states: "Detail after detail in the story seems impregnated with doom: That Friday everything went wrong. The underground train lost its life current between two stations. It is raining hard. They cannot see their son... When they reach home, the husband finds himself without his key. His new dentures are hopelessly uncomfortable. He has just got to bitter crab apple when the telephone rings for the fatal third time." (Boyd:p.119)

These unfortunate parents have led a life of continual tragedy and despair. While pondering her son's madness and her family's fate, the mother thinks about her life:

This, and much more, she accepted - for after all living did mean accepting the loss of one joy after another, not even joys in her case-mere possibilities of improvement. She thought of the endless waves of pain that for some reason or other she and her husband had to endure; of the invisible giants hurting her boy in some unimaginable fashion; of the incalculable amount of tenderness contained in the world; of the fate of this tenderness, which is either crushed, or wasted, or transformed into madness. (p. 597)

This theme of tragic fate and destiny is pervasive in many of Nabokov's short stories. Nabokov himself lost his family fortune when escaping from Czarist Russia in 1918 with his family. Thereafter, he lived in virtual poverty until he arrived in the USA in 1940. Many of Nabokov's friends were like the elderly couple described in this story. That is one of the reasons that Nabokov's descriptions seem so sincere and honest while

never being condescending.

The suffering experienced by these people is physical as well as mental. The old man is not healthy and his false teeth are killing him:

Straining the corners of his mouth apart by means of his thumbs, with a horrible masklike grimace, he removed his new hopelessly uncomfortable dental plate and severed the long tusks of saliva connecting him to it. (p. 596)

Real tragedy, both past and present seem to be inescapable for this couple. Whose only moments of bliss seem to be the quiet ones either drinking tea or sharing a meal together.

The ultimate tragedy of this story, of course, occurs in the last scene when the phone mysteriously rings for a third time in the middle of the night. Logic says that it cannot be the same person who dialed a wrong number twice. The author is left with almost no other conclusion than that the insane asylum is calling to inform them that their son has finally succeeded in committing suicide. Johnson notes: "We are given no further information, but it is impossible to escape the implication that the call is from the hospital with news of another and this time successful suicide attempt. For if it were another wrong number there would be no relation at all between these calls and the remainder of the story. It is not possible to 'prove' that this is the case, but it is quite obvious that Nabokov is inviting the reader to supply the missing explanation. Thus, the old man and his wife do have a further blow waiting for them, and the second link between the two subjects is made - in the reader's mind. (Johnson:p.2)

Therefore, from the beginning paragraph up until the first line of the work doom and gloom pervade this story. It is remarkable that Nabokov does not allow the couple to wallow in self-pity but he portrays them as strong and simple human beings who are simply trying their best to survive day to day in this often cruel world.

## The Use of a Realistic Style

The story "Signs and Symbols" is also impressive for its realistic air and compact style which, at times, appears to almost be journalistic in its mastery. Boyd notes that the story: "works brilliantly as poignant realism, but what makes the story such a masterpiece is the Nabokovian twist that turns the real world inside out and into an irresolvable enigma." (Boyd:118)

There are numerous passages where the author uses highly realistic imagery. The imagery of the hospital visit are highly realistic:

There they waited again; and instead of their boy shuffling into the room as he usually did ( his poor face botched with acne, ill-shaven, sullen, and confused), a nurse they knew, and did not care for, appeared at last and brightly explained that he had again attempted to take his life. He was all right, she said, but a visit might disturb him. The place was so miserably understaffed, and things got mislaid or mixed up so easily, that they decided not to leave their present in the office, but to bring it to him next time they came. (pp. 594 -595).

The above description of the unlikable nurse and the hospital conditions produce an impressive picture of a very depressing health-care facility that has changed little even today.

Nabokov's descriptions of the sights, sounds and smells of the city are also quite impressive for their realistic tinge:

When they emerged from the thunder and foul air of the subway, the last dregs of the day were mixed with the streetlights. She wanted to buy some fish for supper, so she handed him the basket of jelly jars, telling him to go home. He walked up to the third landing and then remembered he had given her his keys earlier in the day. (p. 596)

Not only the couple themselves but their entire living environment are also masterfully depicted by the author such as when the mother looked out the window of her apartment:

When he had gone to bed, she remained in the living room with her pack of soiled cards and her old albums. Across the narrow yard where the rain tinkled in the dark against some battered ash cans, windows were blandly alight and in one of them a black-trousered man with his bare elbows raised could be seen lying supine on an untidy bed. She pulled the blind down and examined the photographs. ( p. 596)

Such realistic scenes tend to lull the reader into a type of journalistic trance which thereafter make it even more interesting when the author surprises us with a clever twist or turn in his story. This story has a very modern feel to it and the reader feels comfortable reading it even though the main themes of insanity and tragic fate may seem obscure and distant to most of us.

### Theme of Family Love

Nabokov is sometimes described as a cold and calculating wizard of words who only finds joy in his widely proclaimed goal of achieving “aesthetic bliss”. In fact, Nabokov was a loving husband and father who doted on his only son and always led a life that revolved around his family. The main reason for this is due to the fact that he had such a warm and loving childhood before the Russian Revolution and he was able to find comfort and solace in the peacefulness of his own home life.

The theme of family love can be seen throughout this story. In fact, we are left with the impression that the son and his regular visits continue to be to only bright light in this couple’s lives. In fact, the only time we see the two elderly individuals cheer up and become positive and cheerful

is after the father suddenly decides to bring the boy home to live with them so that they can once again be a real family again. After stating that they will bring the boy home tomorrow the father explains:

He returned in high spirits, saying in a loud voice: "I have it all figured out. We will give him the bedroom. Each of us will spend part of the night near him and the other part on this couch. By turns. We will have the doctor see him at least twice a week. It does not matter what the Prince says. He won't have to say much anyway because it will come out cheaper." (p. 598)

The passage is quite amazing because the father's incredible love for his son has suddenly made the doom and gloom disappear from their tiny apartment, even if only momentarily. The logistics of such an endeavor are mind boggling, namely 24-hour-a-day surveillance, sleep watch shifts, twice weekly visits to the doctor. However, none of those difficulties matter if they can be together again as a family. The father is old and he has even admitted to his wife that he is dying. His only wish now is to be together with his precious boy, living together as a family, one more time.

The same heart-warming love and tenderness can be felt in the way the mother lovingly looks at her little boy's photo album at night after the father goes to bed. The reader can tell that this is far from a rare occurrence. The mother's favorite pastime is to look at her old family photos and think back on happier days when their little boy was together with them.

The final and most powerful example of this family love is in their optimistic mood after making the decision to bring their boy home:

They sat down to their unexpected festive midnight tea. The birthday present stood on the table. He sipped noisily; his face flushed; every now and then he imparted a circular motion to his raised glass so as to make the sugar dissolve more thoroughly. While she poured him another glass of tea, he put on his spectacles

and reexamined with pleasure the luminous yellow, green, red little jars. His clumsy moist lips spelled out their eloquent labels: apricot, grape, beech plum, quince. He had got to crab apple, when the telephone rang again.

In this final passage of the story, the reader can feel the joy and happy anticipation of the father as he merrily reads the labels on the jars of the jellies that he and his wife has so carefully chose for their beloved son. The delight that must exist on the father's face is dramatically erased, however, by the mysterious ring of the telephone for a third time. The contrast of the elderly couple's new found joy with that of the likely meaning of the ringing phone , make for a powerful ending to this simple, yet masterfully crafted tale.

### Conclusion

"Signs and Symbols" is one of Vladimir Nabokov's best written stories. It is both easy to read and cleverly holds the reader's interest right up until the last words, in which the author describes the telephone ringing a foreboding third time. The author deals with madness on several levels and the reader is left with a lot of freedom to imagine both the cause and course of the unfortunate son's disease. This story also has a very modern feel to it since its use of realistic descriptions throughout the story give it an up-to-date aura and appeal. The author focuses on the tragic fate that befalls one poor émigré family and shows how they have relied on family love to overcome all the harshness and cruelty of the modern world. Finally, the author hints at the fact that fate sometimes continues to be unkind even for those who have experienced more than their fair share of tragedy in life. Nabokov seems to fully understand the deep love felt by the father and mother for their boy. Unfortunately, the arbitrariness of tragic fate remains unabated and unstoppable in the modern world. We are left with both feelings of frustration and sadness at the world's never ending cycle of pain. However, the author has shown us a

glimpse of strength, love and devotion as portrayed in two remarkably wonderful parents. Their love makes even this final tragedy seem not insurmountable,

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