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The Blindness of Obsession as Portrayed in Nabokov's "A Dashing Fellow"

Brian Quinn

Vladimir Nabokov (1899~1977) lived for some fifteen years in Berlin from 1922 until 1937 after first escaping from Russia during the Bolshevik revolution and then completing his undergraduate studies at Cambridge University. During his immensely productive period in Berlin Nabokov composed numerous poems, several well received novels as well as a large number of short stories. Having attained worldwide fame only after the success of his English novel **Lolita** in 1958, his earlier stories, written exclusively in Russian, have always been relatively neglected. In 1995 Nabokov's son Dmitri finally published, for the first time, a comprehensive collection of all short stories written by Nabokov in both English and Russian. This interesting volume consists of a total of sixty-five stories taken from the author's four earlier collections of stories and also includes eleven stories never before translated into English. Many of these works display an astonishing range of Nabokov's technical skill and inventiveness. Most important of all, many of the earlier stories foreshadow much of what Nabokov later created in his more famous English novels. While his later English stories remain his best known works, Nabokov did create some strikingly mature short stories during his German period. All the earlier stories were written in Russian for the small but artistically thriving Russian emigre communities of Berlin, Paris and Prague. In addition, many of these stories help to greatly illuminate the evolution of Nabokov's creative process, as well as also providing unique insights into many of the themes and methods to be used later in many of his more famous novels. In addition, while many of Nabokov's novels continue to remain extremely complicated and often incomprehensible to the uninitiated reader, in contrast, his short stories are among his most immediately accessible works. The author's son, Dmitri Nabokov, who is the translator and editor of many of his father's works has noted: "Even when linked in some way to the larger fiction, they are self-contained. Even when they can be read on more than one level, they require few literary prerequisites. They offer the reader immediate gratification whether or not he or she had ventured into Nabokov's larger and more complex writings or delved into his personal history." (Dmitri Nabokov in the Preface to ***The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov***, pp. xii -xiii) Therefore, an excellent starting point for anyone who might want to begin to explore the world of Nabokov would thus clearly appear to be his short stories.

In this brief study, I would like to focus my attention on one of Nabokov's more infamous short stories, namely **"A Dashing Fellow"**, which was originally written in the spring of 1932

and published shortly thereafter. This story caused quite a stir in the Russian emigre community when it first appeared and was actually rejected as being improper and cruel by all the leading publishers of emigre literature including ***Rul'*** (Berlin) and ***Poslednie Novesti*** (Paris), where most of Nabokov's early works had been regularly published. As a result, the story eventually appeared under the author's Russian pen name of Vladimir Sirin in the journal ***Segodnya*** (Riga) which, at the time, was only a very minor publisher of Russian emigre literature. The commotion of both the sexual content and the inappropriateness of the story parallels quite closely the trouble that Nabokov experienced when trying to publish ***Lolita*** (1955) and having to eventually settle for the book being published in France in 1955. It was only after the book started to receive resounding worldwide acclaim that the novel was finally published in the United States in 1958. Another glaring similarity with this story and Lolita is the fact that the protagonist of **"A Dashing Fellow"**, a traveling salesman name Konstantin, is a hopelessly obsessive sexual pervert, not in the same manner perhaps, but to the same degree of intensity that Humbert is in his pursuit of a forbidden 12-year-old lover in Nabokov's most famous novel.

The outward storyline of ***"A Dashing Fellow"*** is an extremely short and simple one. It is the brief tale of a traveling salesman, a Russian emigre from the gentry class who escaped from Russia during the communist revolution after losing his family and possessions. The dapper salesman, named Konstantin or Kostya (the last name is always strategically omitted to avoid any unwanted contacts after his brief one night stands), picks up a "thirty-something" woman on a train, stops off at her home town and escorts her to her apartment by taxi with promises of a romantic evening. While the woman is out shopping for dinner, a young boy stops by to inform the unfortunate lady that her father is dying and will not survive the night. The impatient salesman intentionally fails to inform her as she returns while instead immediately pouncing on her to satisfy his now unbearable sexual needs.

Ironically his efforts result in no more than a premature ejaculation. Moments later, while the woman now begins to prepare dinner, the hero steps out supposedly to buy a cigar. He then promptly returns to the train station while cursing the money he had given the woman to purchase food, picks up his checked bag and calmly continues on his original journey.

Although the plot itself appears vile and vulgar, Nabokov's genius is in how he masterfully describes in great detail the lurid mental wanderings of the perverted man's distorted mind. Just as in ***Lolita***, the reader must remember that no moralizing will be found, there is no overt criticism of the social miscreant that the salesman represents. The reason for this is that the narrator is the pervert himself. As a result, the salesman is simply retelling the entire action from his own deranged perspective and not from that of the author. The reader must therefore take great care not to mistake the narrator for Nabokov himself. Unfortunately, numerous people continue to presume to this very day that Nabokov himself must also be perverted because of the skill with which he described Humbert's degenerate desires in ***Lolita***. However, Nabokov was merely using his genius to try and recreate the tone and

texture of the mental meanderings of such a mind by recreating them so vividly in his works. Brian Boyd has called ***"A Dashing Fellow"***: "An excellent study of a hearty, heartless, self-satisfied vulgarian seen form the inside, the story is told with a lurid vitality to match the colors and forms flicking past the train window and a speed that keeps pace with the clattering train or a male in a rut. It follows the unpleasant twists of the hero's mind this way and that: the fraudulent patter of the pickup, a polluted stream of consciousness, a would-be imposing narrative 'we' that grates like everything else about the man." (Boyd, p. 379) As Boyd notes, we are constantly repelled by this vulgar individual but at the same time find his gutter consciousness alluringly appealing and the reader thus finds himself compelled to read on while the author does not disappoint as he continually lets the hero compound his vulgarity throughout a series of progressively new lows ending with the failure to inform the woman that her father was dying and then complaining about how she had made him waste over 12 Marks.

As in most of Nabokov's more famous longer novels recurring themes and patterns abound in this eleven page tale. Through the protagonists peripatetic eyes the reader seems to rush through the story at an ever increasing pace. Nabokov combines clarity and economy, subjective intensity, memorable detail, a unique plot and structure, and finally an original solution to an unexpected ending.

Everything about the salesman annoys and disgusts the reader, right from the first paragraph where he constantly uses a condescending "we", which is apparently intended to bring the reader along on his vile journey through debauchery, however, its constant use has just the opposite effect and only succeeds in irritating the reader as does everything else about the man:

> Our suitcase is carefully embellished with bright-colored stickers: 'Nurnberg', 'Stuttgart, 'Koln'—and even 'Lido' (but that one is fraudulent). We have a swarthy complexion, a network of purple-red veins, a black mustache, trimly clipped and hairy nostrils. We breathe hard through our nose as we try to solve a crossword puzzle in an emigre paper. We are alone in a third-class compartment—alone and therefore, bored. . . . During the last trip we were unfaithful to Katya three times, and that cost us thirty Reichsmarks. (**"A Dashing Fellow"** p. 127, hereafter all quotations are taken from the publication: ***A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*** by Vladimir Nabokov, Penguin Books 1973)

Although this unappealing use of "we" thoroughly revolts us, the reader feels mesmerized by the workings of the man's mind. In fact, this story comprises some of Nabokov's most compelling and picaresque use of language. Brian Boyd also describes that: "There is little so *dramatic* as this in Nabokov, so completely an entry into another mind. The miracle is that the story makes a squalid mind and manners so colorful—albeit in the repellent hues of a garish tie." (Boyd, p. 379) Thus the reader is simultaneously repelled and inexplicably

drawn to this lower form of human creation. In short, the reader is curious to find out what makes such a man tick (mentally) while also curiously wondering what kind of adventure is going to befall the fellow.

The careless reader will again think that the author condones this man's perverse manner, however, it is abundantly clear throughout the story that the author has no sympathy whatsoever for his protagonist. The author never comes out and says "this man is the embodiment or moral turpitude", however, the author achieves this same effect more subtly in an inverted fashion. The reader must therefore glean the author's message not from what the narrator says but from what he does not say, Thus when the salesman ponders whether or not to try and seduce the woman who has just happened to enter his carriage he thinks:

> What is better: the experience of a sexy thirty-year-old brunette, or the silly young bloom of a bright-curled romp? Today the former is better, and tomorrow we shall see. (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 129)

Here the salesman's cold and calculating evaluation of the situation clearly hints at the author's own disdain for such thinking.

Probably the most constant and glaring theme of the entire work is the protagonists all encompassing selfishness. In this respect he is quite similar to Humbert in **Lolita** who is so absorbed in his quest to seduce and control the childwoman that he cannot even conceive of the possibility that he might be hurting somebody or even permanently damaging the girl psychologically. In the same fashion, our hero, Konstantin, is utterly incapable of comprehending that in all of his "gallant" endeavors that he could possibly be hurting people, breaking their hearts, or causing irreparable pain. For he is emotionally insensitive toward the world while also appearing to be thoroughly numb in regard to his own feelings. It is because of this lack of reflection and total disregard for human decency that he can be considered a prime example of Nabokov's antiheroes. In one of Nabokov's earlier novels, **Mary** (1925) , the hero Ganin, a young Russian emigre in Berlin, also selfishly plans to steal an acquaintance's young wife, who happened to be his first love, by intercepting her at the train station. Yet, at the end of the story Ganin is able to change his mind and reach a new level of understanding and consciousness at the train station by simply coming to realize that he already possesses his happy past in his soul and need not poison the present. Therefore, since Ganin is able to overcome his selfishness he comes to reach a new level in Nabokov's plane of human existence. However, other heroes including Van Veen (**Ada**) and Humbert (**Lolita**) are never able to rise up to a higher plane of human existence and remain in the gutter of humankind, in the same fashion as the traveling salesman, Konstantin, due to their all encompassing romantic intoxication of the self. The salesman's insensitive selfishness is finally further compounded by his failure to tell the woman that her father is dying. As he steals away to the station in order to avoid "wasting" any further time with the woman he logically rationalizes that it was completely unnecessary to pass on the news to the woman,

even though she will now lose the opportunity to spend a few last precious moments with her father before he passes away:

> As to the bad news, she was sure to get it sooner or later. I spared her several sad minutes by a deathbed. Still, maybe, I should send her a message from here? But I've forgotten the house number. No, I remember 27. Anyway, one may assume I forgot it —nobody is obliged to have such a good memory. I can imagine what a rumpus there would have been if I had told her at once! The old bitch. (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 136)

In this monologue we see a tiny glimpse of human sensitivity and kindness. He considers for a moment sending the woman a message from the station, but quickly creates an excuse not to. So here in the last pages of the story we see that the fellow is, from the human perspective, totally irredeemable, and thereby Nabokov shows us the complete and utter blindness of the human ego when it runs out of control.

Another theme throughout the story is that of triumph. According to our narrator the salesman is a moderately successful salesman and a highly successful ladies' man. Yet, his measuring stick for such triumphs counts only the number of successful seductions with a string of anonymous women. In addition, the less money needed to hoodwink a woman into sleeping with him the greater the triumph. His basic measuring stick is 10 Reichsmarks per orgasm ". . . three times, and that cost us thirty Reichsmarks." Therefore, he is thoroughly disgusted that he had exceeded his going rate for sex after calculating the total expenses related to seducing the woman in the story:

> Expenses: bag-check, 30 pfennigs, taxi 1.40, she 10 marks (5 would have been enough). What else? Yes, the beer, 55 pfennigs, with tip. In all: 12 marks and 25 pfennigs. Idiotic. (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 136)

However, each conquest by this man turns out to be a false triumph, yes he can now put another notch on his belt, or count her just like one more sticker on his traveling bag, but in reality the entire experience was one more complete failure at achieving even a touch of human warmth or kindness. The total failure is even further enunciated by the man's premature ejaculation in the kitchen. As a result, even the act of fornication, supposedly the "ultimate" objective, proves to be thoroughly unsuccessful and unsatisfying. He has in essence gained nothing while tragically missing an opportunity to share a warm meal with another lonely person and somehow help each other escape, however fleetingly, from the loneliness of life. After learning of her father's condition he could have held her hand at such a distressful time and offered a warm shoulder to cry on in order to help share in the moment of human grief and compassion. However, such considerations never even occur to this "gallant" hero. After he gets his jollies, he is quickly off to his next train, next business meeting, next cafe, his next pickup, with nothing but the continual loneliness from now until

his inevitable death. Indeed, this can be considered one of Nabokov's most depressing stories when we think of the ending. As we watch the train depart from the station, we see the salesman's life as one great succession of business deals and brief sexual encounters with no beginning and no end, while the hero remains oblivious to the world around him with nothing to look forward to but a vast expanse of loneliness from now until certain death, which Nabokov seems to hint is perhaps the only magic elixir than can finally ease the man's pain:

> The train was crammed, the heat stifling. We feel out of sorts, but do not quite know if we are hungry or drowsy. But when we have fed and slept, life will regain its looks, and the American instruments will make music in the merry cafe described by our friend Lange. And then, sometime later, we die. (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, pp. 136-137)

Therefore, Nabokov condemns his cruel and heartless character to death, just as he did his more famous pervert Humbert in **Lolita**. However, the death of Konstantin will be a slow and evidently painful one. He already demonstrates the outwardly physical symptoms of some kind of sexually transmitted disease and his impatient and almost hysterical flow of consciousness also alludes most likely to the tertiary symptoms of gonorrhea in which the victim gradually goes insane and dies. The real tragedy here, of course, is not that Konstantin himself may be dying but that he is spreading the disease around to other new victims as fast as he can.

The blindness of obsession is also clearly displayed in the way the salesman evaluates his wife. Amidst his endless search for new sexual conquests he never even considers the fact that his actions might also be making her unhappy:

> Katya is the very type of a good wife. Lacks any sort of passion, cooks beautifully, washes her arms as far as the shoulders every morning and is not overbright: therefore, not jealous. Given the sterling breadth of her pelvis one is surprised that for the second time now she has produced a stillborn babikins. (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, pp. 127-128)

Here we see the blindness of this man's own homelife. Rather than looking for happiness in his in own backyard, he must search endlessly all over the country. This blindness and obsession even interferes with his business life since he can hardly get his business obligations completed until he satisfies his sexual requirements:

> Can't concentrate on business unless I first take care of my romantic interests. So here is the plan: starting point the cafe which Lange told me about. Now if I don't find anything there- (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 128)

In modern day America such an obsessive person's only hope would be to join group therapy sessions at the nearest branch office of "sexaholics anonymous."

Here we also see another unique trait of such a deranged mind. Everything he does is meticulously well planned and is almost reminiscent of a modern day serial killer. He is both clever and calculating. He counts the minutes with a passion. He measures the pauses during conversations. He sizes up the woman and leads her just where she wants to go in a conversation. He notices that she likes to drink and quickly orders beer. Finally when the timing and the mood is just right he makes his well rehearsed and time worn romantic pass:

> 'Do you know—I keep looking at you, and imagining that we met once years ago. You resemble to an absurd degree a girl—she died of consumption—whom I loved so much that I almost shot myself. Yes, we Russians are sentimental eccentrics, but believe me we can love with the passion of a Rasputin and the naivete of a child. You are lonely, and I am lonely. You are free, and I am free. Who, then, can forbid us to spend several pleasant hours in a sheltered love nest?' (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 132)

Even his escape from the woman is well rehearsed and perfectly executed when as soon as he zips up his trousers he says:

> 'Bought that cigar for me? he inquired.
> She was busy taking knives and forks out of the cupboard and did not hear.
> 'What about that cigar?' he repeated.
> 'Oh, sorry, I didn't know you smoked. Shall I run down and get one?'
> 'Never mind, I'll go myself,' he replied gruffly and passed into the bedroom where he put on his shoes and coat. Though the open door he could see her moving gracelessly as she laid the table. .
> 'Moreover, I'll get some pastry,' said Konstantin and went out.
> (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, pp. 135-136)

Of course, our hero thereafter proceeds full speed to the train station and the next train. For him life remains nothing more than a chess game in which he who memorizes enough effective moves can always win the little battles that we daily encounter.

The primary success of this story lies in Nabokov's ability to entice the reader into becoming caught up in the alluring energy of Konstantin's emotion, as he does with Humbert and Van Veen, if the reader is not careful he too will fall prey to the false logic and delusion that the narrator spews out.

Nabokov also quite interestingly hints at the fact that perhaps Konstantin himself is the victim and not just the perpetrator of cruelty in the story since as a child his parents were apparently killed before his eyes by the communists and then in order to escape the country he had to disguise himself as a peasant girl:

> 'How terrible,' she said, 'how very terrible! '

'Yes, but it inures one. I escaped, disguised as a country girl. In those days I made a very cute little maiden. Soldiers pestered me.
Especially one beastly fellow. . . And thereby hangs a most comic tale.' He told his tale.
'Pfui!' she uttered smiling.
(**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 131)

The reader can only guess at the significance of this little story by the salesman, however, as a rich member of the gentry all such people were regularly slaughtered by the Bolsheviks, so the man's parents could very well have been butchered in his presence. In addition, since the communists had a tendency to kill any males over the age of twelve from such families, the salesman may very likely have had to escape dressed as a peasant girl. The comic tale he alludes to is probably his rape at the hands of one soldier. Finally the sentence "it inures one." seems to indicate that these experiences have hardened him and may have been so psychologically devastating as to thereafter have made any normal human interaction impossible. As a result, Konstantin may just be using these new sexual escapades as a means of coping with his pain of loss—loss of family, fortune and even childhood innocence.

Therefore, fate and circumstances may have possibly led a rich young Russian noble to now have degenerated to the level of a measly salesman with a cold, distorted and perverted view of humanity. Yes, Nabokov may possibly hint at this potential explanation, but he in no way excuses the man. Regardless of fate or destiny throughout the undercurrent of this story Nabokov seems to be implying that all men are ultimately responsible for their own fates as if to repeat a well worn phrase, he who makes his bed must sleep in it.

Konstantin's obsession also leads him to become filled with delusions of the reality around him. He has developed whole series of delusions to satisfy his imagined needs. After complaining of how laborious and difficult his job was, he deludes himself into thinking that all problems in life disappear after one romantic tryst with a blond bimbo:

God, how one longs to tangle with a graceful gold-bright little devil in a fantastically lit hotel room! Mirrors, orgies, a couple of drinks. . . After all, say what you will, but the mainspring of life is robust romance.
(**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p, 128)

His delusions grow with intensity as the story progresses when after he suggests to the woman that they spend the night together he greatly overestimates his own sexual prowess:

'All right, I'll accompany you, and tomorrow continue my journey.
Though I dare not predict anything madam. I have all grounds to believe that neither you nor I will regret it.'
(**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 132)

As we see a few pages later the salesman is far from an ideal lover, on the contrary he is perhaps incapable of satisfying a woman. Yet, the delusions continue as he begins to imagine how the evening with the woman will take shape after arriving at her station:

> An enchanting woman! A nervous, supple, interesting woman! We'll be there in half an hour. Long Live Life, Happiness, ruddy Health! A long night of double-edged pleasures. See our complete collection of caresses! Amorous Hercules! (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 133)

Contrary to whatever the salesman may imagine, he soon proves to certainly be no Hercules. Such delusions continue as he calmly rationalizes that not telling her about her dying father is a matter of no great significance. Again the reader might conclude that his gonorrhea is possibly getting the best of him and may even possibly be leading him headlong into insanity.

As alluded to earlier, the unique aspect of this story is the incredible intensity of emotion and vitality on the part of the salesman. After arriving at the woman's train station and accompanying her to the taxi stand the salesman's sense of urgency almost explodes and in the course of the next three pages Nabokov increases the intensity by such descriptive phrases as: "said terribly impatient Kostya., Come on, come on, tell him where to go!, Hurry up!, Quick!, All right, but for God's sake, hurry, I only beseech you to make haste.", and so on. His overwhelming urgency, and lack of any sense of decency is perhaps no more better described than during his brief wait at the apartment while the woman went out shopping:

> There was no toilet, so he quickly used the kitchen sink, then washed his hands and examined his lip. (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 134)

Ironically when the woman returns he immediately takes her while pushing her over the same sink which thereby equates the sex act to the same level of relieving oneself and, for Konstantin, both happen to take about the same length of time.

This sense of urgency continues as he cannot wait to escape from the woman's sight as soon as he has gotten what he wanted. As he rushes out of her apartment, in his haste to flee he is practically run over by a bicycle and then his mind continues to buzz as he calculates the minutes left until the next train arrives.

As in all of Nabokov's works there is a great attention to detail, and the story is full of memorable details including colors, smells, clothing and various images in strange lights or hues. These details all add to the readers pleasure, yet in this tale it is not so much the attention to detail that impresses but the author's array of combinations, patterns, and harmonies, as we follow the hero's distorted logical and often absurd thoughts. However, throughout the story the author is primarily concerned with describing the hero's consciousness. This consciousness is carefully introduced on the second page of the story as we follow the world through our hero's eyes as the train stops at some provincial station:

> Crossing gate, warehouse, big station. Our traveler let down the window and leaned upon it, elbows wide apart. Beyond a platform, steam was issuing from under some sleeping cars. One could vaguely make out the pigeons changing perches under the lofty glass dome. Hotdogs cried out in treble, beer in baritone. A girl, her bust enclosed in white wool, stood talking to a man, now joining her bare arms behind her back, swaying slightly and beating her buttocks with her handbag, now folding her arms on her chest and stepping with one foot upon the other, or else holding her handbag under her arm and with a small snapping sound thrusting nimble fingers under her glossy black belt; thus she stood and laughed, and sometimes touched her companion in a valedictory gesture, only to resume at once her twisting and turning: a suntanned girl with a heaped-up hairdo that left her ears bare, and a quite ravishing scratch on her honey-hued upper arm. She does not look at us, but never mind, let us ogle her fixedly. (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 128)

This entire passage introduces us to the patterns and combinations of the salesman's thought processes. Nabokov is trying to show the flow of consciousness while also showing its absurdity and limitations since it is only able to focus on what the individual deems worthy of attention. Hereafter the reader becomes the prisoner of Konstantin's view of the world until the story's end. Nabokov creates a very natural stream of events which seem to glide from one scene to the next until the reader, too, sees the absurdity that Konstantin is incapable of comprehending. Some of the criticism of this work, as well as for ***Lolita***, is that the author is too cerebral and too sensual. However, this is how Nabokov is able to push the consciousness of human emotion to its extremes. In both works the author succeeds masterfully in what he was trying to achieve.

Finally, the one last theme that needs mentioning in regard to **"A Dashing Fellow"** is the unspoken theme of happiness. Nabokov has again created a new type of madman, a cold cruel, obnoxious and thoroughly unlikable character. However, through the guise of his efficient and calculated womanizing there lies an undercurrent of the search for happiness. The traveling salesman is supposedly looking for it, the divorced woman he meets on the train is looking for it:

> 'I had a husband, it was a dreadful marriage, and I said to myself: enough! I'm going to live my own way. (**"A Dashing Fellow"**, p. 131)

Even his wife Katya is surely looking for it, but in this upside down world no one is really able to find it. The hero Konstantin thus remains a somewhat tragic figure for he does not even know himself what it is he is really looking for. In Nabokov's world it is only the very few who are bestowed a glimpse of happiness in this cold and calculating world. We see most of Nabokov's characters wandering as prisoners of their own limited consciousness and weaknesses. Therefore, all his characters seem to be searching for that elusive sense of

happiness, the same sense of happiness that Nabokov himself appears to have left behind in prerevolutionary Russia and forever thereafter seems to have only existed in his own conscious acceptance of the fact that he could never return.

The story ends with our hero on his train heading off to places unknown trying to survive another day by somehow dulling the pain and loneliness of life. Once again nothing has been gained while the salesman has only succeeded in losing a little more of his own humanity. As the sun sets and darkness fills the sky, so too does a similar darkness envelope his soul ever further on his journey towards death.

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