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## The Elusiveness of Superficial Reality in Nabokov's 'The Vane Sisters'

Brian Quinn

Vladimir Nabokov is by far better known for his novels, however, he also deserves great stature for his 65 short stories which he wrote in both Russian and English. The work of Nabokov as a writer of short stories falls into three separate periods. The first period (1924 to 1929), while living as an émigré author in Berlin and trying to establish his reputation as a writer. In the second period (1930 to 1939), he reached his full power as an artist and crafted numerous novels and stories in his native Russian language. During the final period (1940 to 1951), he had to change his linguistic medium to English after escaping the turmoil in Europe and settling in the USA.

This study intends to focus on Nabokov's second to last short story, 'The Vane Sisters', which was written in March 1951 but was not published until 1959. It is important to note that this story was written before the author achieved international acclaim after the publication of his novel *Lolita* in 1955.

The Vane Sisters is now considered to be one of Nabokov's best short stories in either Russian or English. In addition, it was also regarded by Nabokov himself as one of his best three efforts in the short story genre, including two earlier Russian short stories 'Spring in Fialta' (1936) and 'Cloud, Castle Lake' (1937).

Boyd notes "This story is one of Nabokov's finest. No work of fiction has looked with sharper vision than this, as it records all the surprises of a sunny day in a snowy landscape" (Boyd, p. 194). Johnson also adds "In terms of the construction of its narrative if not the seriousness of its subject matter, 'The Vane Sisters' is among the greatest of Nabokov's achievements as a writer of short stories, along with 'The Eye', 'Lik', 'Spring in Fialta', and 'The Return of Chorb'" (Johnson, p. 3). Ironically, 'The Vane Sisters' was neither well understood nor well received at first. The New Yorker and several other journals rejected it and, as a result, it wasn't published until 1959 in a collection of Nabokov's other earlier works.

'The Vane Sisters' is an experimental work in which Nabokov creates an interesting dilemma. Johnson explains "He created a specially difficult task for this last major experiment. It is the problem of having a first person narrator transmit to the reader information of whose existence he is himself unaware." (Johnson p.1) The principal device used to achieve this effect is the use of an unreliable narrator, a technique used to perfection in such novels as *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. The narrator is an unnamed Frenchman (again the same as in *Lolita*) who is teaching literature at a girl's college in America.

It is important to state at the outset of this review that it can be generally said that the less plot a

Nabokov story has, the greater its poetic and linguistic power. Cornwell explains “The less plot a Nabokov story might have, the greater (as a general rule of thumb) its lyrical power: he continued and developed the poetic qualities found in the short prose of his main immediate Russian predecessors in this form, Chekov and Bunin. He made himself a master of both plotlessness and of the plot twist, and equally of the climactic and the anticlimactic.” (Cornwell, pp. 32-33). Or, in other words, when the plot itself seems to be lacking, the meaning and purpose of the story can often be found in a subtext of nuance and other poetic qualities found in a given work. In fact, Nabokov prided himself on being a master of both plotlessness and of plot twist, in addition to the frequent use of climactic and anticlimactic scenes in many of his stories. ‘The Vane Sisters’ is an excellent example of a relatively plotless story with a rare and unusual plot twist in the last paragraph. The story itself is confusingly sparse with the majority of the action being told after the fact in a very meandering manner which leaves the reader no alternative but to rely on the increasingly suspicious narrator. The reader’s initial impression of the narrator is that of a man immensely interested in the details of all around him, the snow, the icicles, the shadows of all things. The reader sees that the narrator even takes great pride in his visual sense, his ability to see everything around him a little more clearly than the average individual. However, as the story progresses, the reader gradually learns that the narrator is a rather dull and imperceptive individual who can only see the superficial aspects of the world around him and even of life itself. He only sees both Sybil and Cynthia Vane in terms of hair color, fashion, skin, manners, and voice. In contrast, he thoroughly fails to see the person behind the mask of such superficial aspects to an individual’s persona. In the beginning of the story he describes Sybil in an extremely precise manner, however, we see the narrator focusing on the details of her physical presence without the faintest hint as to what kind of person she really is:

She came in on highheels, with a suitcase, dumped it in a corner where several other bags were stacked, with a single shrug slipped her fur coat off her thin shoulders, folded it on her bag, and with two or three other girls stopped before my desk to ask when I would mail them their grades.....I also remember wondering whether D. had already informed her of his decision-and I felt acutely unhappy about my dutiful little student as during 150 minutes my gaze kept reverting to her, so childishly slight in close-fitting gray, and kept observing that carefully waved dark hair, that smell, small-flowered hat with a little hyaline veil as worn that season and under it her small face broken into a cubist pattern by scars due to a skin disease, pathetically masked by a sunlamp tan that hardened her features, whose charm was further impaired by her having painted everything that could be painted, so that the pale gums of her teeth between cherry—red chapped lips and the diluted blue ink of her eyes under darkened lids were the only visible openings into her beauty. (Nabokov, p. 617) (Hereafter, all quotes of ‘The Vane Sisters’ taken from: **The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov**, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1995)

In the above passage we see the narrator taking great pleasure in describing the details of Sybil while completely unable to discern her as a unique, delicate and vulnerable human being. The narrator then does the same thing later in the story as he describes Sybil’s older sister, Cynthia, with

whom he became involved after the fatal suicide. The narrator at one point almost seems to be falling in love with the older sister, but differences in their personalities result in the eventual break-up of their relationship. The narrator's harsh eye is even more critical of the older sister, even as he tries to explain to the reader why he found her attractive:

What attracted me was neither her ways, which I though repulsively vivacious, nor her looks, which other men thought striking. She had wide-spaced eyes very much like her sister's, of a frank, frightened blue with dark points in a radial arrangement. The interval between her thick black eyebrows was always shiny, and shiny too were the fleshy volutes of her nostrils. The coarse texture of her epiderm looked almost masculine, and in the stark lamplight of her studio, you could see the pores of her thirty-two-year-old face fairly gaping at you like something in an aquarium. She used cosmetics with as much zest as her little sister had, but with an additional slovenliness that would result in her big front teeth getting some of the rouge. She was handsomely dark, wore a not too tasteless mixture of fairly smart heterogeneous things, and had a so-called good figure; but all of her was curiously frowzy, after a way I obscurely associated with left-wing enthusiasms in politics and "advanced" banalities in art, although, actually, she cared for neither. Her coily hairdo, on a part-and-bun basis, might have looked feral and bizarre had it not been thoroughly domesticated by its own soft unkemptness at the vulnerable nape. Her fingernails were gaudily painted, but badly bitten and not clean. (Nabokov, p. 619)

The cold and impassionate way the narrator describes both women leaves one surprised at his aloofness and his lack of compassion regarding both individuals as fellow human beings. In fact, the narrator's focus on details and lack of interest in the women who other men apparent find attractive leads the reader to highly question the narrator's own sexual preference. Namely, the narrator appears to be either homosexual or just completely uninterested in the opposite sex in comparison to normal males.

The story line of 'The Vane Sisters' is as follows:

A teacher of French Literature at a college in a small New York town one day in late winter follows the bright drops of melting icicles from eave to eave and street to street in an attempt to detect the shadows of the falling drops. As the day passes, his quest leads him all the way to the edge of town. At dinner time, but far from his usual eating place, he dines in the only restaurant at hand. As he leaves the restaurant, he pauses a moment to observe the shadow of a parking meter, made by a neon sign just above it. Just then, a car pulls up and out comes an old acquaintance, who the author calls only by his initial, D. (using only the first initial of a main character in the classic Russian tradition of Turgenev and Tolstoy), who tells him he has just heard of Cynthia Vane's death.

Thereafter, the story consists of the narrator reviewing his memories of Cynthia and her sister Sybil, a former student in his French course. Several years earlier, Cynthia had once come to him begging him to have D. dismissed as a college instructor unless he would either break off his affair with Sybil or divorce his wife. Unknown to Sybil (who is the narrator's student), the narrator speaks to D., who promptly tells him not to worry since he had already decided to end the affair in any case.

The next day, Sybil appears for a French exam given by the narrator and in addition to doing very poorly on the exam itself, she also writes a suicide note in a mixture of French and English:

Cette examain est finie ainsi que ma vie. Adieu, jeunes filles! Please, Monsieur le Professeur, contact ma soeur and tell her that Death was not better than D minus, but definitely better than life minus D. (Nabokov p. 618)

By the time the narrator marks her test booklet and realizes what she has written, he is too late to help. Sybil has already taken her life. He rushes off to Sybil's apartment, only to find her sister Cynthia there in the aftermath of her sister's suicide.

Months later, in New York City, the narrator begins to see a good deal of Cynthia, who turns out to be a very talented painter, and over time he gradually discovers her obsession with spiritualism and her theory of "intervenient auras":

She was sure that her existence was influenced by all sorts of dead friends each of whom took turns in directing her fate much as if she were a stray kitten which a schoolgirl in passing gathers up, and presses to her cheek, and carefully puts down again, near some suburban hedge-to be stroked presently by another transient hand or carried off to a world of doors by some hospitable lady. (p. 620)

Cynthia called such influences:

intervenient auras... .For a few hours, or for several days in a row...anything that happened to Cynthia, after a given person had died, would be, she said, in the manner and mood of that person. (p. 621)

Thereafter, Cynthia tries to get the narrator to join her circle of believers in the occult. He takes part in a few séances with Cynthia and her friends, but in the end remains highly skeptical. As a result, the two drift apart and eventually stop seeing each other. However, the relationship with Cynthia after Sybil's death has a strong influence on the narrator but he cannot fully understand to what extent since he is unable to see the hidden meanings in the signs and symbols that surround him.

Years later now, when returning home the night that D. informs him of Cynthia's death, the narrator, even though he has always dismissed all of Cynthia's fascination for ghosts, and the hereafter, cannot get to sleep for fear of receiving some sign from Cynthia...some message or communication from her departed spirit. He lay awake all night expecting some secret message from her. He finally is able to fall asleep at dawn and promptly begins to dream of Cynthia:

I lay in bed, thinking my dream over and listening to the sparrows outside: Who knows, if recorded and then run backward, those bird sounds might not become human speech, voiced words, just as the latter become a twitter when reversed? I set myself to reread my dream—

backward, diagonally, up, down — trying hard to unravel something Cynthia-like in it, something strange and suggestive that must be there. (p. 627)

We see the author expecting to receive a message from Cynthia, but he is too obtuse to see the signs... Cynthia's message is then found loudly and clearly in the next paragraph, the last one of the story. Throughout the story, the narrator is shown to be a poor observer of all things around him, and he even demonstrates a lack of consciousness regarding his own narrative since Cynthia's message, her spirit ... along with that of Sybil, both send him a message as follows:

I could isolate, consciously, little. Everything seemed blurred, yellow-clouded, yielding nothing tangible. Her inept acrostics, maudlin evasions, theopathies-every recollection formed ripples of mysterious meaning. Everything seemed yellowly blurred, illusive, lost. (p. 627)

This paragraph is, in fact the message from the two sisters. It is an acrostic, or a secret message based on the first letter of each word in a passage. The message is as follows:

Icicles by Cynthia. Meter from me, Sybil.

This secret message suddenly sheds new light on the opening pages of the story, where the narrator has just spent an afternoon following the magical shadows of icicles across town. Finally, ending up in a strange part of town and after dinner in a restaurant located at a place where the icicles have led him, he again becomes mesmerized by the strange shadows of a parking meter in the glow of a strange neon light and, as a result, meets his old friend D., who immediately informs him of Cynthia's death.

Now the reader needs to go back to the beginning and reread the first few pages to see how Cynthia is communicating to the narrator through the magical icicles and Sybil is sending her message through the strange shadow of the meter.

The narrator even telegraphs the fact that the plot twist will come by means of an acrostic in the last paragraph of the story when he very innocently describes how Cynthia sometimes received messages from departed friends through the first initials of phrases or quotations and then he further comments:

And I wish I could recollect that novel or short story (by some contemporary writer, I believe) in which, unknown to its author, the first letters of the words in its last paragraph formed, as deciphered by Cynthia, a message from his dead mother. (p. 622)

The importance of this seemingly innocuous passage is immense since the short story that the narrator is alluding to happens to be the very same story that he is telling right now! The reader can plainly see that Nabokov is having a lot of fun with his word games and subtextual messages.

It is also interesting to note that Nabokov himself was not exactly sure whether his experimental use of an acrostic to solve the story in the last paragraph would be successful or not. In a letter sent to the editors of the *The New Yorker* Nabokov explains:

The last paragraph is revealed to be an acrostic, confirming the posthumous participation of the sisters in the construction of the story, a trick that can be tried only once in a thousand years of fiction. Whether it has come off is another question!  
(Nabokov, Selected Letters 1940-1977, p. 134)

Today, most readers would agree that Nabokov did indeed pull it off!

‘The Vane Sisters’ is an intriguing short story on many different levels. The gossipy tone is humorous and interesting as it depicts small town life in a college town in the 1940’s. It is also filled with little tidbits of Americana that Nabokov loved to describe. Nabokov’s descriptive use of language alone, makes the story a joy to read. Based on language alone, it is clearly one of Nabokov’s finest works. No work of Nabokov’s fiction has looked with more clarity of vision than this, as it minutely describes all the surprises of a sunny day in a snowy landscape in a sleepy little New York town. The first page alone is a splendid example of Nabokov’s fascinating use of color and light in his imagery:

The day, a compunctious Sunday after a week of blizzards, has been part jewel, part mud. In the midst of my usual afternoon stroll through the small hilly town attached to the girls’ college where I taught French literature, I had stopped to watch a family of brilliant icicles drip-dripping from the eaves of a frame house. So clear-cut were their pointed shadows on the white boards behind them that I was sure the shadows of the falling drops should be visible too. But they were not. The roof jutted too far out, perhaps, or the angle of vision was faulty, or, again, I did not chance to be watching the right icicle when the right drop fell. There was a rhythm, an alternation in the dripping that I found as teasing as a coin trick.....and as I looked up at the eaves of the adjacent garage with its full display of transparent stalactites backed by their blue silhouettes, I was rewarded at last, upon choosing one, by the sight of what might be described as the dot of an exclamation mark leaving its ordinary position to glide down very fast-a jot faster than the thaw-crop it raced. This twinned twinkle was delightful but not completely satisfying; or rather it only sharpened my appetite for other tidbits of light and shade, and I walked on in a state of raw awareness that seemed to transform the whole of my being into one big eyeball rolling in the world’s socket. (p.615)

The way that Nabokov has carefully used all of his linguistic talents to describe the above scene is truly a joy and a pleasure to experience.

Finally, ‘The Vane Sisters’ is intriguing since Nabokov forces his readers to pay especially close attention to what is being told while also setting numerous traps to mislead their expectations. However, in contrast to some of Nabokov’s less successful efforts, ‘The Vane Sisters’ is filled with

sufficient evidence to enable a careful reader to work out the truth of the story and comprehend the author's main objective in telling his tale. It is therefore doubly ironic that this story was rejected by Katherine White, the chief editor of *The New Yorker* magazine. Nabokov tried his best to explain and defend his novel, but to no avail. His detailed explanations to White in a letter provide fascinating insight into how Nabokov suggests that his short stories should be read:

You may argue that reading downwards, or upwards. Or diagonally is not what an editor can be expected to do; but by means of various allusions to trick-reading I have arranged matters so that the reader almost automatically slips into this discovery, especially because of the abrupt change in style.

Most of the stories I am contemplating (and some I have written in the past - you actually published one with such an "inside" - the one about the old Jewish couple and their sick boy) will be composed on these lines, according to this system wherein a second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial semitransparent one. I am really very disappointed that you, such a subtle and loving reader, should not have seen the inner scheme of my story." (Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940 to 1977*, pp. 116—117).

It is clear from Nabokov's pleading for White to try and understand his story that the author was deeply hurt that even highly trained literary specialists sometimes missed what he was trying to convey in his works.

This story begins with such an intensive scrutiny of the visible world with the author so carefully following the colors and reflections of melting icicles. However, Nabokov contrasts the clarity of the visible world with fascinating speculations on the invisible world of the hereafter, especially regarding the meaning of elusive signs that are difficult to see, for both the narrator and the reader.

As the narrator is hunting for answers during his investigations of icicles and parking meters on the first pages of the story, Nabokov is hinting to the reader straightaway that the reader too should take out his magnifying glass and be ready to investigate while reading along in the story.

'The Vane Sisters' is a great example of Nabokov's artistic purpose and objectives regarding fiction in general and the short story in particular. Boyd elaborates: "The Vane Sisters' sums up a great deal of Nabokov's art: meticulous attention to the outer world of shine and sludge, an exact eye for the inner world of desire, despair, detachment, and yet an urgent compulsion to discover something that might lie beyond; a brilliant command of the normal virtues of fiction, but at the same time a shimmering promise behind the words: a problem set before us ( why does that last paragraph sound so strange?), indirect hints that our imaginations can turn toward a solution, and a chance for us to experience the surprise of a discovery that utterly transforms the story and its world." (Boyd, pp. 194 & 195).

Nabokov seems to be suggesting that we along with the narrator may also be missing the signs and symbols of our own daily lives that we could so readily see if only we were to look more closely, more perceptively, not just with our eyes, but with our hearts and souls. Nabokov appears to indicate that most men are perhaps much like the narrator, taking great pride in their ability to accurately



ly see and perceive the details and events around them, while in reality missing so much of the nuances and shadows that also make up the world we live in, especially that unseen world beyond the superficial experiences of our daily lives. Just as the narrator is able to superficially describe the Vane sisters in remarkable detail while constantly missing their essence, both in life, and by the end of the story, and in death.

In conclusion, in 'The Vane Sisters', as in many of his other works, Nabokov continually shows the reader to look in the nooks and crannies of the world around us to find the hidden joy and pleasure that awaits those who truly learn how to see simultaneously on many different levels.

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## Abstract

In addition to his better known novels, Vladimir Nabokov also published sixty-five short stories in Russian, French and English. His penultimate English short story, 'The Vane Sisters', was written in 1951. Nabokov himself regarded this tale as being one of his three best efforts in this genre. 'The Vane Sisters' is an attempt by Nabokov to look into the world of spiritualism through the eyes of a somewhat obtuse French professor who tends to focus on the details of life around him while missing all the meaning and significance behind many of those details. The story demonstrates the author's amazing descriptive abilities to capture an image or a moment as he both records and relates all the hidden surprises of a sunny day in a snowy, rural New York college town. The story is carefully told by the French professor who prides himself in having a sharp eye and extremely accurate visual sense. In addition, to the physical details that surround him, the narrator also finds great satisfaction in noticing the little secrets and scandals of all the people that cross his path in life. He is always serenely satisfied with himself and condescendingly critical of others. He happens to become involved with two sisters who both ironically die in the story. One of the sisters was his French student who committed suicide after a failed love affair. The other is her older sister who tried to get the narrator to stop the affair and later died from some unknown cause. The older sister had a strong belief in the spiritual world of afterlife and beyond. Her relationship with the author after her sister's suicide has had a strong influence on the narrator but he cannot fully understand to what extent since he is unable to see the hidden meanings in the signs and symbols that surround him.

'The Vane Sisters' is a great example of Nabokov's artistic purpose and objectives regarding fiction in general and the short story in particular. Nabokov shows meticulous attention to the details of the outer world, and a clear eye for the inner world of human desire, despair and compulsion. In this story, Nabokov also provides the reader with a promise of the existence of something that lies beyond the world of sight, sound and perception. This story is told on different levels at the same time. It is a pleasant experience for the reader to slowly discover that the main story has been woven into the superficial one that the reader encounters on the surface level. Nabokov allows the reader to speculate with him on the nature of a spiritual world that seems to pervade his story yet constantly remains elusive. The key to the story is quite interestingly found in the last paragraph which helps us to solve the mysterious spiritual message that the narrator has been searching for from the deceased sisters.