European Journal of Language and Literature Studies
Volume 11, Issue 3, 2025 · ISSN 2411-9598 (Print) · ISSN 2411-4103 (Online)

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

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Submitted: 2025-08-28 · Accepted: 2025-11-28 · Published: 2025-12-28

DOI: 10.26417/8xrgt197

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the model and function of infidelity in one of V. Nabokov's Russian-language novels, The Laughter in the Dark. The infidelity motif plays a key role in character creation and the development of the action. The characters are immersed in a complicated infidelity scheme, interchanging and forming an unusual plot spider web. The novel under discussion, in terms of structure and subject, recalls the previous novel by the Russian-American author – King, Queen, Knave. Moreover, the infidelity motif is additionally complemented by other motifs recurring in Nabokov's works (butterflies, mirrors, crime and punishment, and more).

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

Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov is a writer who has attracted and intrigued many critics and literary scholars with his works. Although his last completed novel was published in 1969, and nearly forty years have passed since the death of the author, new interpretational concepts of his works continue to emerge. The multilevel nature of this unique Russian-American writer's novels never ceases to amaze researchers. Literary scholars constantly notice new peculiarities in his work, forcing them to reinterpret and revise predefined positions.

Nabokov's phenomenon lies in his tendency to play not only with regular readers, but also with literary scholars. The writer created many interpretation routes on purpose. He added forewords to many of his novels (often only after many years), through which he cleverly manipulates the reader, leading him to a specific way of perceiving the novel. Some scholars maintain that everything said directly by the author may turn out to be a trap (e.g. Toporov, 1990). Nabokov's books resemble

chess puzzles, which the writer loved to create. One wrong conclusion at the beginning of the book is enough to condemn the reader to interpretive defeat.

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

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 the author often mentions moments that never actually 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 [Belobrovtseva, 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.

The famous Polish literary scholar Z. Lempicki, in his work (Lempicki, 1966, p. 177), argues that a motif should be considered from the perspective of the author's individuality. Motifs, which are a general form of interpersonal contact, are closely related to the 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 a matter of coincidence when a given motif appears in nearly every work of the examined author.

One such motif in Nabokov's works is infidelity. This paper focuses not on the reasons for the frequent appearance of a given element in many novels, but tries to determine its importance in a specific work written in 1933 in Russian (titled *Камера обскура*), the novel *Laughter in the Dark*. The first English translation was made in 1936 by Johnathan Long, but Nabokov was so displeased that he translated the book himself. Nabokov's English version was published in 1938. For this paper we used both versions. Names and quotes are from the 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 the English version, the character from a cartoon series by Robert Gorn (Axel Rex). There are also plenty of other differences, yet we are not going to discuss them in depth.

The infidelity motif fulfills different functions. It may, firstly, be a main motif, shaping the plot and organizing the whole work, as is the case in the described novel (and also in *King, Queen, Knave*), or, secondly, create a seemingly insignificant background for events (*Lolita*). Moreover, in some works it has a supporting function, aimed at exposing an unreliable narrator (*Despair*).

In this paper, the main characters will be characterized. We will also attempt to present and describe the multilevel structure of infidelity in the novel and its relationship to Nabokov's other works. Moreover, we will characterize elements associated with the described phenomenon (caricature, the theatre of the absurd, the motif of crime and punishment, art).

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

The novel's plot is based on the complicated structure of infidelity, which creates characters' 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 of and frequently appearing in art, reproduces already known schemes. The next one inverts the situation of the first, and Albinus transforms from betrayer into the betrayed. Such a scheme also appears in *Lolita*. Humbert marries Dolores's mother in order to have a sexual relationship with the girl, who later betrays him with a well-known dramatist and screenwriter (Quilty). He is characterized by absurdity and ruthlessness towards the character who betrayed first.

Albert Albinus had an enduring relationship with his wife for nine years. Not once had he cheated on her during this time, but thoughts about betrayal had pursued him all the time. When Elisabeth, Albinus's wife, spent three weeks in hospital before childbirth, he faulted himself for being a coward because he had not managed 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.

Bored with everyday life, he lived out his fantasies at night by dreaming about „young girl lying asprawl on hot lonely beach" (p. 17), but subconsciously he was afraid that his wife might catch him red-handed.

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

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

Peters met Albinus when she was seventeen (sixteen in the Russian edition). She came from a poor middle-class home and had a sad enough childhood. She dreamt of being an actress; she worked as a model (nude) and as an usherette at the cinema. Horn was her first love, who, overwhelmed by his own feelings, 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 with unpleasant connotations: „[…] 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 evoke the serpent in the Garden of Eden, which contributed to the fall of the first human beings. The serpent is a symbol of deception, sin, evil, and the Devil in the Christian tradition. Vipers are venomous, and an encounter with them threatens death. Nabokov applied a similar device in an earlier work (*King, Queen, Knave*) in order to render the heroine's nature as morally corrupt. Franz noticed twice 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).

Moreover, she has a lot in common with the juvenile Dolores, Humbert's miserable love, who is the main character of *Lolita.* Albinus's lover is a representative of the so-called nymphet, which frequently appeared in Nobakov's works. According to Humbert, nymphets are girls from nine to fourteen years old. She had her first touch of love as a thirteen-year-old girl (in the Russian version). When she was sixteen (fourteen in the first version of the book), she went on a motorbike ride with a stranger; 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, she posed naked in the studio.

Seventeen-year-old Margot is characterized by childishness and immaturity, whereas passages describing her appearance resemble the characterization of Lolita when it comes to 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**. b. *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**. c. *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 had earlier used only with his eight-year-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. Humbert got Little Lo into tennis, while Margot was taught to play by a certain American. She dreamed of an acting career and played a supporting role in a movie financed by Albinus, while Lolita took part in a theatre production. Moreover, the playwright Quilty abandoned Dolores when she refused to star in a porn movie.

Margot's lover and at the same time her first love is Axel Rex, a caricaturist, an immoral man who was, one would think, deprived of any feelings. An exception that the artist could not understand was Margot, the memory of whom "was solely pure and beautiful". Frightened by his own feelings towards the young Peters, Axel returned to America. The girl ignited a feeling which, after their separation, he characterized as acute sorrow – a feeling that had been unknown to Rex earlier.

The character left his mentally challenged mother, who died soon after his escape to America. The narrator's words complete his characterization:

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).

This description brings to mind the famous British actor and comedian Charlie Chaplin. Moreover, the Russian scholar N. Dolgova (Dolgova, 2013), in her work analyses fragments of *Laughter in the Dark* and *Lolita*, which express the theatrical tradition of carnival performed by common people (Dolgova, 2013, online) (e.g. Pietrushka theater—in the 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 the character's theatricality is that Axel played the role of a homosexual in front of Albert, so that he would not suspect that someone was 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).

The duel scene between Humbert and Quilty, with its absurd and caricatural nature, is clearly similar to the meeting scene between Paul (Albinus's brother-in-law) and Rex. In both scenes, there is nudity and theatrical behaviour from the attacked characters, who, despite receiving blows, keep smiling.

[…] *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 n 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 the theatre of the absurd, where the traditional roles assigned to tragedy and comedy are turned upside down – tragedy becomes a

carrier of comic content, and comedy of tragic content. Besides, the gifted caricaturist often takes the role of a spectator, who is pleased by witnessing a 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 directions appear, which, once again, direct the reader to the structure of a dramatic text.

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

A similar situation appears in *King, Queen, Knave*, where Martha not only cheated on her husband, but also decided to kill him. During a temporarily postponed murder attempt, she fell ill with pneumonia and died soon after.

The motif of infidelity is also mixed with the motif of art. In her work, E. Antoshina (Antoshina, 2010, p. 186-191) examines the motif of the animated portrait. The introduction to this phenomenon is the story of a guinea pig, the hero of a caricature series by Axel Rex, which won the hearts of the Western world. The image of the guinea pig "comes alive" in the movie, during a screening when Albert meets Margot. According to the researcher, young Peters sustains this motif through the variation of the animated statue/waxwork (Antoshina, 2010, p. 189). This is proved by Albert's thoughts: "Albinus' specialty had been his passion for art; his most brilliant discovery had been Margot" (p. 257). Moreover, E. Antoshina states that Margot functions as a psychopomp (Antoshina, 2010, p. 190) (in Greek mythology: a guide of souls to the place of the dead). This is a very accurate remark, considering the finale of this novel (the metaphorical psychopomp leads Albert to the world of death by killing him).

In this novel, art has an unmasking function. Confident in her talent, Margot acted in a movie that turned out to be a disaster. The film, a vivid portrait, presents a caricatured character whose appearance discourages and repels:

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 art that Albinius finds out about Margot's infidelity. His old friend, whom he met accidentally after so many years, reads him an excerpt from his own story, based on the fatal meeting between Margot and Axel in a train compartment. The young people use the opportunity of Albert's absence to talk about events so familiar to the deceived Albinius. The cheated character goes berserk; he wants to kill Margot, but instead he takes her from the hotel, crashes his car, and loses his sight.

The infidelity scenes are also filled with caricature, which is so important to Rex. During the first meeting of all three, a confused Margot sits between her admirers. Under the table, Albert grabs one of her knees, and Axel grabs the other. When, during a visit to Albinius's house, Rex leans in to kiss Margot and the householder enters the room, Axel cannot disentangle himself from the lace of Peters's scarf. On the way south, they stop at a hotel where Axel's and Albinius's rooms share a bathroom. In the evening and in the morning, Margot locks herself in the shared room, runs water into the tub, and sneaks off to Rex. Axel's crowning achievement is organizing a shared living arrangement with the blind Albert. Together with Margot, they never miss a chance to gloat over the misfortune and helplessness of Albinius. We have already mentioned Rex's passion, which was realized through transforming different situations into a living caricature.

To summarize the above, the motif of infidelity plays a crucial role in the novel. It is the main element organizing the whole work and motivating the characters' conduct, which also influences Nabokov's later novels (e.g. *Lolita*, where they serve as prototypes of Humbert, Lolita, and Quilty). This phenomenon interacts with other themes and traditions (the theatre of the absurd, caricature, art, and the motif of crime and punishment). The multi-levelled structure of infidelity becomes an intertextual bridge connecting *Laughter in the Dark* not only with other works by the Russian-American writer, but also with the traditions of world literature. It is one of the most frequently appearing motifs in Nabokov's work, which, depending on the novel, fulfils different functions.

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