ARCHIVUM
Revistas de la Universidad de Oviedo

LXXV (II), 2025, págs. 153-176

Women, exile, past and other puppeteer's strings in Nabokov's short fiction

Asunción Barreras Gómez
Universidad de La Rioja
asuncion.barreras@unirioja.es

Recibido: 5/9/2024
Aceptado: 27/12/2024

ABSTRACT:

This paper approaches the role of women, past and exile in Nabokov's short story. First, we will understand how Vladimir Nabokov uses the female figure to stand for his lost Russia and to vent his feelings of nostalgia. Nabokov's short stories, especially the first ones, are based on Russian expatriates' loss and loneliness. However, the author finally changes his attitude. Then, different examples of his later production are given in which the author ironizes upon some literary motifs, especially related to female characters, in order to distance himself from his feelings of loss. We will appreciate

I.S.S.N.: 0570-7218
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17811/arc.75.2.2025.153-176

how Nabokov uses the female figures skillfully to create problems and literary puzzles for the reader to solve in his short stories. At the end, the paper sheds light upon how the female figures are associated with problematizing literary conventions as a way of exploring different fictional possibilities in Vladimir Nabokov's last short stories.
KEYWORDS: *women, exile, past, literary puzzle, short stories.*

Mujeres, exilio, pasado y otros hilos del titiritero en la ficción corta de Nabokov.

RESUMEN:
Este artículo aborda el papel de la mujer, el pasado y el exilio en la narración breve de Nabokov. Se explicará cómo Vladimir Nabokov utiliza la figura femenina para representar su Rusia perdida y para dar rienda suelta a sus sentimientos de nostalgia. Los relatos de Nabokov, especialmente los primeros, muestran la pérdida y la soledad de los expatriados rusos. Sin embargo, el autor acaba cambiando su actitud Así, se ofrecen diferentes ejemplos de su producción posterior en los que el autor ironiza sobre algunos motivos literarios, especialmente relacionados con personajes femeninos, para distanciarse de sus sentimientos de pérdida. Se muestra cómo Nabokov utiliza hábilmente las figuras femeninas para crear problemas y acertijos literarios que el lector deberá resolver en sus relatos. Al final, el artículo arroja luz sobre cómo las figuras femeninas se asocian con la problematización de las convenciones literarias como una forma de explorar diferentes posibilidades ficcionales en los últimos relatos de Vladimir Nabokov.
PALABRAS CLAVE: *mujeres, exilio, pasado, rompecabezas literario, narración breve.*

1. Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) is one of the greatest American writers. However, his cultural and literary background differs from that of other American writers. He had to abandon his native language to survive as an artist writing in another language, like Samuel Beckett and Joseph Conrad.

Nabokov's earlier work was written mainly in Russian in those cities where he was forced to live after the Russian Revolution, sharing public acknowledgement of the Russian Nobel prize with Ivan Bunin. When Nabokov arrived in the States he brought with

him his Russian language, traditions, and literature. In America, he kept writing novels and acquiring fame till he, finally, became a famous recognised novelist after publishing *Lolita* (1955).

In this study, we are going to analyze the role of women, past and exile in his short story. There are a few studies focused on the role and types of women in Nabokov's novels, such as Rakhimova-Sommers (2001), Delage-Toriel (2007), Idrisova (2007) and Garipova (2017), but there is not such a study focused on his short stories.

We are going to explain how the author started using these figures in order to deal with the émigré experience in his earlier short production. In this sense, the female figure symbolizes the spirit of the Russian collectivity, as there is always a "close association between collective territory, collective identity and womanhood" (Yuval Davis, 2008: 57). However, the association of the woman with this spirit of collectivity changes. Therefore, we will also study examples in which Nabokov uses the female figures skillfully to create literary puzzles for the reader to solve in his short stories.

2. Nabokov's female characters and the longing for the past

As has already been mentioned, when the Russian revolution took place his new life started in Berlin where the expatriate Russian community had already settled down. They could not go back to their native land, due to their political ideas. Therefore, they maintained their memories, culture, language and customs in their Russian ghettos. It was a way of keeping their national identity in the environment of destruction and loss in exile (Figes, 2002: 539).

Nabokov's short stories, especially the first ones, depict expatriate Russian characters. These stories describe Russian expatriates' loss and loneliness. For example, "The Seaport" (1924) is based on Nikitin's loneliness in a French seaport. In "The Doorbell" (1927), "A Russian Beauty" (1934), and in "A Matter of Chance" (1924), the characters have to get accustomed to living

by themselves. They are isolated from their fellow Russians and everything related to their mother Russia. In "The Visit to the Museum" (1939), for instance, a Russian expatriate's return to the USSR is a traumatic, anguishing experience. As in Nabokov's case, all the Russian expatriates had lost their friends, relatives, homes and memories, while fleeing from Russia. Field (1967: 87) comments that madness and suicide were a normal occurrence in that atmosphere. The memories of the old Russia cannot exist within the new USSR. Heldt Monter (1970: 134) remarks that a metaphor of Nabokov Russian expatriates is a man looking for his personal truth. It is a search for a mythical past that can only be recovered by means of memory. Nabokov considered them keys to achieve the recollections of the past in his literary work. On the other hand, one can also appreciate how Nabokov associates the female figure to Russia and his Russian past. A characteristic in line with Pwar's argumentation when he stresses that the female figure is allegorically used to signify the virtues of the nation. In fact, many scholars, such as Yuval Davis and Anthias (1989), McClintock (1995), Christianson (2018), and Yuval Davis (2008) have always asserted that, because of their physical strength and social value, men have the role of defending the country while women are normally symbols of nationhood in passive and controlled roles. Regarding the role of women in Nabokov's novels, Garipova (2017: 64) asserts that "the common feature they share is that all of them personify the Russian cultural legacy in the Russian novels. This cultural legacy becomes an essential spiritual support for the Russian exiles, since it helps them to survive in a foreign country, far from their beloved motherland." However, before Nabokov's success in writing novels, he learned how to write fiction with his short stories in Europe. Here we are going to analyse the early examples of female characters in his narrative work written in Berlin as well as other examples from short stories written in the States.

In "Spring in Fialta" (1947) the narrator is also a Russian immigrant living in different European cities. He searches for his

past and, consequently, for his own identity. In Fialta, Victor, the narrator, meets Nina. She represents the part of his life and identity that he left in Russia. One can understand this association in the following example:

> Wait a moment, where are you leading me, Victor dear?
> Back into the past, back into the past, as I did every time I met her. (Nabokov 1960: 9)

Victor links Nina to his past, to that old Russia he had to flee from. Speaking with her is a way of finding his past. Loving her is a way of searching for his own identity.

Nina, who represents Victor's Russian past, dies in a car accident in this short story. So, Nina becomes a symbol of Victor's definitive departure from Russia. Nina is associated with the old Russia, an idea also used in "A Russian Beauty", where all the White Russians had to flee from Russia. As it was in Nabokov's case, many people had to abandon their homes and belongings. "A Russian Beauty" shows a clear example in a Russian female expatriate's life:

> Her childhood passed festively, surely and gaily. . . A sunbeam falling on the cover of a *Bibliothèque Rose* volume at the family state. . . A supply of memories such as these, comprised her sole dowry when she left Russia in the spring of 1919. Everything happened in full accord with the style of the period. Her mother died of typhus, her brother was executed by the firing squad. (Nabokov 1975: 13)

The short story shows Russian families luxurious lives before the Revolution. However, they fled because they were threatened and some of them sentenced to death. The Czars and his family were murdered. They were opposed, mainly because the new government dispossessed them of their houses, goods and so on. Most of the White Russians who could escape from this nightmare found themselves alone as many of their relatives

had been murdered. They lived in exile. They were away from their native land and completely broke. This was the situation at the time. Nabokov comments upon these events in an ironic way. Consequently, he moves away from what he describes, the end of a country. The old Russia dies when the new Russia was born. There is a metaphor concerning this situation in "A Russian Beauty". In this short story, one understands the protagonist's gradual decay. Olga is born in the old Russia before the revolution. There she is beautiful, young, rich and happy. She flees from Russia. Her brother is murdered and another brother dies of typhus. In Berlin, her father works and she smokes cigarettes. This is another step towards her decay. Her father dies. She has to work as a teacher to support herself and she is no longer young. This is the next step as she has to work for the first time in her life and she is growing old. Finally, a widower marries her; which places her under his control, echoing the influence of a masculinist society in which the man marries a woman and supports the family (Brittan, 1989: 1-2). Later on, she gets pregnant, and she dies in childbirth. The young USSR is born whilst the old Russia passes away. According to Kanchana (2017: 132), "Given their conventional gender roles as reproducers of community in biological, social and cultural terms, women's displacement symbolizes the loss of community and political citizenship in an explicit way. The preservation of community via customary practice during displacement is dependent on women, who are often targeted during cultural conflict as markers of such identity." In this way, one can understand the female figure in some of Nabokov's fiction, as in this case.

One can find another example where a woman is related to the Russian past in "Christmas Story" (1924), in which two writers are described as trying to write a Christmas story. Novodvortsev, one of them, has good entries for his Christmas story,

> He skipped back to the Christmas tree image. . . remember the parlor of a merchant family's house, a large volume of articles and

> poems with gilded pages. . . the Christmas tree in the parlor, *the woman he loved in those days, and all of the tree's lights reflected as a crystal quiver in her wide-open eyes* when she plucked a tangerine from a high branch. It had been twenty years ago or more —how certain details stuck in one's memory. . . (Nabokov 1995: 29; my emphasis)

This woman is associated with a piece of literature and the culture of the old Russia. A traditional association, as women have always given the task of safeguarding culture, responsible for transmitting it to the children and constructing the home for a specific cultural style (Yuval Navis, 2008: 130). Novodvortsev rejects this memory, which springs from his real feelings, his memory and experience in the old Russia. This recollection has to do with one of the most important of Nabovok's features in his work. Most of the writer's early work deals with Russian issues such as the feeling of nostalgia, life in exile, some irony over this situation, a loss of the sense of time and Russian émigré characters. Nabokov asserts, "the loss of my country was equated to me with the loss of my love" (Nabokov, 1969: 189).

The female figure transports the protagonist to the past or he believes she is joined to that past, although he is just confused. For example, in "The Seaport" Nikitin mistakes a whore for a girl he met some time ago. So he tries to speak in Russian with her:

> She wore a long jacket like a top of knitted emerald silk that adhered low on her hips. . . forgetting about his beer, he followed her. . . *"listen" he said in Russian, simply and softly. "We've known each other a long time, so why not speak our native language?* She raised her eyebrows. Inglish? Yew spik Inglish? Nikitin gave her an intent look, then repeated helplessly. . . "T'es Polonais, alors?, inquired the woman. (Nabokov 1995: 65; my emphasis)

In this quotation, one can appreciate again the protagonist's confusion between his reality and what he thinks he sees associ-

ated with a woman. This is in line with Delage-Toriel (2001: 130): "this intense nostalgia, which abolishes one type of reality and substitutes it with a more personal one, echoes the character's yearning for a return to Russia, and constitutes one of Nabokov's most recurrent leitmotifs."

3. Female characters in Nabokov's literary puzzles

Another female figure associated with the past is Mademoiselle O. In "Mademoiselle O" (1939) the author does not follow the usual characteristics of an autobiography. In 1936, Nabokov thought of writing a narration based on his former governess in Russia (Boyd, 1993: 422). In fact, it is an episode in his autobiographies *Conclusive Evidence* (1951), *Drugie Berega* (1954) and *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1966). Moreover, it was published as a short story in French in *Mesures* in 1936 before going to the United States. Then it was published in English in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1943 and later in the *Nine Stories* in 1947 and in 1958 in *Nabokov's Dozen.* Burt Foster (1993: 111) stresses an ambivalent feature in this short story, as it was rewritten several times and depends on its fictitious or autobiographical characteristic. In this example, Nabokov uses the female figure of Mademoiselle O to escape from the feeling of nostalgia. According to Quennel (1979: 4), Nabokov's reader can appreciate a certain sense of loss in his literary work. However, the author escapes from that nostalgia by problematizing and defamiliarizing the literary conventions of the autobiography.

> Every now and then, she looks back to make sure that a second sleigh, bearing the trunk and hatbox, is following. . . Let me not leave out the moon —for surely there must be a moon. . . So there it comes., steering out of a flock of small dappled clouds, which it tinges with a vague iridescence; and as it sails higher, it gazes the runner tracks left on the road, where every sparkling lump of snow is emphasized by a swollen shadow. (Nabokov 1960: 145)

In this example, the narrator describes Mademoiselle O's arrival in a conventional way. However, the narrator addresses himself to the reader, acknowledging his role as a narrator and adding the typical motifs in a context like that, such as the moon or the clouds.

In other examples, the American ego of the writer appears in the narration itself:

> I can visualize her, by proxy, as she stands in the middle of the station platform, where she has just alighted, and vainly my ghostly envoy offers her an arm that she cannot see. (*ND* 144)
> that great heavenly O shining above the Russian wilderness of my past. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, forty-five years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers. (Nabokov 1960: 145)

Here the narrator mixes the past time with the present time. Tulving (1993: 67) comments that "the act of remembering a personally experienced event, that is, consciously recollecting it, is characterized by a distinctive, unique awareness of re-experiencing here and now something that happened before, at another time and place". By doing so his memories are perceived with vividness and freshness by the reader (Rowe, 1976: 65). So the snow from the Russian of his past ends up in Nabokov's American present. The relevant role of memory in Nabokov's work has been stressed by several researchers such as Rowe (1971), Quennel (1979), Roth (1982), Shloss (1982), Long (1984), Figes (2002), Barreras (2003, 2008), and Garipova (2013). However, in "Mademoiselle O" the narrator is conscious that he is constructing an image different from the real governess:

> The man in me revolts against the fictionist and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle. (Nabokov 1960: 143)

When he remembers, memories and imagination are mixed. However, those memories lose authenticity. That is why the man who remembers fights against the writer to write about the governess. Sicker (1987: 265) comments: "Creative recollection… involves the evocation of a past atmosphere and the distillation of its sensory and emotional impact… his discovery… generates another kind of truth". So imagination is a way of remembering but also a way of forming something different from the original. Memory and imagination deny the pass of time but the result provides a vivid image slightly different from the original. Moreover, Nabokov also uses the female character of Mademoiselle O to parody the conventions of autobiographies. It is again, a way of detaching himself from his memories.

In his *Dictionary on Philosophy*, Ferrater Mora (1988: 1760-1761) stresses that the general feature of irony is that of filling gaps in the human life, so it happens after a personal or collective crisis. Nabokov uses the female figure to stand for his lost Russia and to vent his feelings of nostalgia for his past. However, as time goes by the author learns to use it in order to distance himself from that feeling of loss. Consequently, the female figure acquires a different tinge. This is the case of the short story "The Veneziana" (1924). The plot of this story takes place in the Coronel's castle. There is a portrait of a young Venetian girl, which was painted at the beginning of the 16th century. The girl in the portrait and the Colonel's art dealer's wife, Maureen, look exactly alike.

> The painting was very fine indeed. Luciani had portrayed the Venetian beauty. . . Tilting his head slightly to one side and blushing instantly, he said, "God, how she resembles —"
> "My wife," finished McGore in a bored voice. . .
> "Sebastiano Luciani," said the Colonel. . . "was born at the end of the fifteenth century in Venice and died in the mid-sixteenth in Rome." (Nabokov 1995: 94)

In the castle there were a number of people visiting for a few days. They were the Colonel, Maureen, her husband, Frank (the Colonel's son) and Simpson (a friend from university). The latter falls in love with the girl in the portrait and he gets into the portrait. However, the spell is broken when Frank's letter written to his father appears. There Frank explains that he has escaped with Maureen. Moreover, he says that the girl in the portrait was painted by him while spending some days with Maureen in Venezia.

In this short story, there are two relevant events: Maureen's double and Simpson's getting into the portrait. They make "The Veneziana" another example of bewitching pictures. There are other examples belonging to the Russian literary tradition such as Nikolái Vasílievich Gogol's "The Portrait", a short story written in 1833, and the poem entitled "The Portrait", written by Alexéi Konstantínovich Tolstoi in 1875. They have common roots with that of reflections in a mirror. As Ziolkowski (1977: 78) asserts, many primitive tribes considered the drawings of human beings —along with the images reflected in mirrors and shadows— as projections of the human soul. The subject of the bewitching picture in this short story can be influenced by Hoffmann's "King Artús' lounge ". Here the protagonist falls in love with a young girl in a portrait. She is dead but her image on the portrait becomes alive. Finally, her image on the portrait ends up marrying a magistrate from a nearby town. However, the difference between both stories is that in Nabokov's story the subject of the bewitching portrait is playfully used. Once the reader believes that Simpson has got into the portrait, there is a second end in which everything appears as one of Frank's tricks. Consequently, a surprising, ironic effect is achieved in the subject of the bewitching portrait of the Veneziana. Shrayer makes the following reference to "The Veneziana:"

> It employs elements of the fantastical in order to explore the connections among desire, painting, and the otherworld as sources of artistic inspiration and expression. (Shrayer, 1998: 46)

In general terms, this short story shows that the Veneziana's ideal beauty exists. It also shows that Simpson understands it, as it is also true in the protagonist of Hoffmann's "King Arthúr's Lounge".

On the other hand, the short story also shows the down-to-earth model (Maureen, who escapes with Frank, or she who marries the magistrate in Hoffmann's story). It is the first time Nabokov uses a feminine character to build a game of doubles. Taking into account that Nabokov's characters' are obsessed with their Russian past, it is interesting to stress that the search for identity is not only expressed with the character's fixation upon the past but also with the motif of the *Doppelgänger*. This is a device, which is characteristic of an identity crisis. In fact, Northrop Frye places the *Doppelgänger* in the stage of decay in the romance. This stage is characterized by the loss of identity and the search for wisdom (in Burns, 1979: 511).

Moreover, in "The Veneziana" one understands the opposing ideas between the ideal of beauty on the portrait and its original. This idea will be later used and developed in *Lolita.* Humbert will only be able to see Lolita as a nymphet instead of as an average American teenager. That is why Humbert calls her Carmen: 'My Carmen', I said (I used to call her that sometimes)" (Nabokov, 1986: 242). Here Mérimée and Bizet's Carmen are mentioned. Additionally, one is conscious of the fact that Humbert sees Lolita as a sculpture he has shaped. That is why he calls her Carmen. According to the Latin dictionary, it means a song, a poem and even a magic spell. Then it is linked to the construction made by Humbert, as it happens within a poem. Moreover, the name Carmen is connected with magic. Consequently, there is a connection with the idea that "A nymphet is magical always" (Long, 1984: 142 & Barreras, 2005: 68) because Humbert speaks about the "demoniac" nature of nymphets (Nabokov, 1986: 16). Again Nabokov points out the ideal beauty as opposed to the original. Once again employing a feminine character for this purpose.

Nabokov became world famous with *Lolita.* This novel possesses many of the characteristics with which he started working

as a short story writer and as a poet during his time of exile in Berlin. In fact, a seed of *Lolita* can be found in his short story "A Nursery Tale" (1926) (Lee, 1976: 31; Naumann, 1978: 117 & Barreras, 2003: 128). Everyday Erwin sits on a bench in order to look at the streetcar. There he collects a number of teenagers for his imaginative harem. One day he was sitting at a café, where he could admire a group of girls, and he meets Frau Monde. She is the devil. She offers him the chance to have all those teenagers in a real harem if the number of chosen girls is uneven before midnight. However, Erwin fails to reach an odd number because his last chosen girl had been previously selected in the morning so his final number is even.

As it is the case of *Lolita*, in this short story the reader finds some sensual descriptions as they are given from Erwin's perspective. Feminist critics often draw attention to the fact that women have always been considered as an object by men. Women have always been related to passivity because they are constructed by men (Moi, 1991: 92). Here are some examples belonging to "A Nursery Tale":

> Then, feigning casual abstraction, he looked-shameless Erwin did look –following her receding back, swallowing her adorable nape and silk-hosed calves, and thus, after all, would he add her to his fabulous harem! (Nabokov 1981: 46)

> The lustrous leaves of the lindens moved in the wind; their ace-of-spades shadows quivered on the graveled path and climbed in an airy flock the trouser legs and skirts of the strollers, racing up and scattering over shoulders and faces. (Nabokov 1981: 51)

> […] her eyelashes beat so brightly as to look like raglets of her beaming eyes; but most enchanting, perhaps, was the curve of her cheek. (Nabokov 1981: 51)
> Erwin stared at these magnificent legs, naked nearly up to the groin and pedaling with passionate power. (Nabokov 1981: 56)

> She walked swinging her hips very, very slightly, her legs moved close together. (Nabokov 1981: 57)

In these quotations one can appreciate the narrator's voice mixed with the character's, which tinges the descriptions with sensuality. Consequently, the reader can understand Erwin's inner perspective.

Taking into account the content of the plot, Barreras (2003: 129) explains the irony of the title of the short story, as it is not entitled to an infant audience (Naumann, 1978: 116). However, it could be considered a fantastic story because of the appearance of the devil in a female shape, Frau Monde.

Naumann (1978: 117) argues that there is a genre of short narrative in the Russian language called Skazka. It is a Russian fairy tale, in which there is always a magical being. This is the case of Frau Monde in "A Nursery Tale". But it could also be the case of Clear Quilty in *Lolita*. Humbert wants to kill him but that murder becomes almost impossible to perpetrate. Humbert has to convince Quilty that he is going to kill him: "Concentrate. Try to understand what is happening to you" (Nabokov, 1986: 296). Moreover, while Humbert is shooting Quilty, he thinks:

> I understood that far from killing him I was injecting spurs of energy into the poor fellow, as if the bullets had been capsules wherein a heady elixir danced. (Nabokov, 1986: 302)

Phantoms do not die easily. Neither does a *Doppelgänger* in a story, as it is the case in *Lolita*. Moreover, there is a moment in which both Humbert and Quilty fight for the gun. In that precise moment, they seem to blend into each other:

> He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us. (Nabokov, 1986: 297)

Frau Monde and Clear Quilty are special characters in the development of both plots. In the case of Frau Monde, she is a middle-aged German lady, who introduces herself to Erwin as follows:

> The shed glove revealed a big wrinkled hand with long, convex, beautiful fingernails. 'Don't be surprised', she said with a wry smile. She muffled a yawn and added: 'In point of fact, I am the Devil.' (Nabokov 1981: 47)

As Escartin (1996: 230) points out that the female figure can be associated as much as to virtue as to vice. In fact, women have often been a symbol of evil. For example, the medieval misogyny based on the story of the creation and fall in the Bible. According to Formaini (1990: 165-168), this supported the belief of women's inferiority and the biblical view of women as temptresses. Two ideas, which are ironically portrayed in this short story. Because Frau Monde is the superior being who can give Erwin what he really wishes for, and because she does not behave as a sexual temptresses at all.

In this story, there are some ironic connotations because Erwin's pact with the devil is going to be different. Frau Monde and Erwin talk about the condition imposed on him to achieve his harem.

> One condition, nevertheless, must be set. No, it is not what you are thinking. As I have told you, I have arranged my next incarnation. *Your* soul I do not require. Now this is the condition: the total of your choices between noon and midnight must be an odd number. (Nabokov 1981: 49)

When talking about dealing with the devil, both the reader and the character have a number of expectations. For example, the condition of selling Erwin's soul as Frau Monde has confessed, she is the devil. However, this devil in a female body is

not an average one and his role in this story is going to be different from the examples in literature (Connolly, 2000: 32-33). This story is not mysterious and Frau Monde's characterization deviates from the devil prototype.

In "The Vane Sisters" (1958), the female characters Sybil and Cynthia Vane are the protagonists of another story whose mystery is very different from that of ghost stories. The first one commits suicide because D, a married man with whom she has had an affair, does not love her back. The narrator receives her last message in a French exam. He informs her sister, but it is too late. Her behaviour is emotional, which is a characteristic of femininity (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992: 20). On the other hand, Cynthia is interested in the afterlife. She even develops a theory on auras. She thinks that when a person dies, some way or another he will have an influence on the people around him in life. The narrator is involved in several sessions of spiritualism and the occult, but he ends up forgetting everything with increasing skepticism. Later on, he is told that Cynthia is also dead.

> The night D informed me of Cynthia's death… and found myself idiotically checking the first letters of the lines to see what sacramental words they might form. (Nabokov 1981: 217)

He tries to find a hidden message, following Cynthia's theory on auras. He does not find the message but he gives the reader the clue to find it. Moreover, one knows in the story that he has tried to convince Cynthia of her mistake:

> I tried to argue that she might not always be able to determine the exact source since not everybody has a recognizable soul; that there are anonymous letters and Christmas presents which anybody might send. (Nabokov 1981: 211)

Nabokov had to be familiarized with spiritualism in order to characterize Cynthia and the environment of her spiritual

sittings. Ristkok (1976: 31-34) comments about some real cases mentioned in "The Vane Sisters". For example, Frederick Myers is one of Cynthia's friends. This name is similar to William Henry Myers, founder of the *Society for Psychical Research* (for the research of the occult) in England in 1882. The sisters Fox from Hydesville, who said they had witnessed some paranormal phenomena in 1848, are also mentioned: "I reviewed in thought the modern era of raps and apparitions, beginning with the knockings of 1848, at the hamlet of Hydesville, New York … of the Fox sisters" (Nabokov 1981: 218).

In this context, the narrator tells his transcendental experience with Cynthia and her theory of auras:

> She was sure that her existence was influenced by all sorts of dead friends each of whom took turns in directing her fate. (Nabokov 1981: 210)

Moreover, she has already taught him how to decipher the encrypted messages:

> I plunged into Shakespeare's sonnets –and found myself idiotically checking the first letter of the lines to see what sacramental words they might form– (Nabokov 1981: 217)

The result of the story is a fascinating puzzle. At the end the narrator ends the story like this:

> *I c*ould *i*solate, *c*onsciously, *l*ittle. *E*verything *s*eemed *b*lurred, *y*ellow-*c*louded, *y*ielding *n*othing *t*angible. *H*er *i*nept *a*crostics, *m*audlin *e*vasions, *t*heopathies —*e*very *r*ecollection *f*ormed *r*ipples *o*f *m*ysterious *m*eaning. *E*verything *s*eemed *y*ellowly *b*lurred, *i*llusive, *l*ost. (Nabokov 1981: 219; my emphasis)

The Vane sisters send him a covert message in his last paragraph but he cannot appreciate it. As it can be read, the message

is "Icicles by Cynthia meter from me Sybil". Wood (1994: 75) stresses that "both Cynthia and her sister Sybil, also dead, have written themselves into his prose, in the form of an acrostic in the last paragraph, indicating both their continuing presence and the nature of their invention in his life… Although he cannot see them, both Cynthia and Sybil are inside his language, possessing his initial letters." A trick has been played upon this rational narrator (Eggenschwiler, 1981: 33). He has all the information, he has the clues to understand the hidden messages, but he cannot apply it. So he stands his ground on skepticism. This is in line with the emphasis of masculinism about rationality (Brittan, 1989: 29). However, the narrator does not know that he has been the victim (Hutcheon, 1995: 15) of the ironical end provided by the Vane sisters. Only a good re-reader is able to understand this end. Moreover, the message takes the reader to the beginning of the story. As Ristkok (1976: 41-42) and Boyd (1993: 194) stand out, the narrator of the story comments:

> I had stopped to watch a family of brilliant icicles drip-dripping from the eaves of a frame house… I walked up, and I walked down… The lean ghost, the elongated umbra cast by a parking meter upon some damp snow, had a strange ruddy tinge. (Nabokov 1981: 204)

This repeated reference is another hint to make clear the artificial nature of the narration. In addition to this, Nabokov has used the figure of the Vane sisters to manipulate the narrative conventions to write a puzzle for the reader to solve, as he did in *Lolita,* "a riddle with an elegant solution" (in Rampton, 1984: 119).

4. Conclusions

Nabokov started writing in those years of exile in Berlin, where he had to accustom himself to the banishment of Russia and the formation of the USSR. In his writings, Nabokov's char-

acters try to create a narrative structure based on the chaos of their experiences as they feel a gradual disorientation in the real world, which surrounds them. The feeling of nostalgia has led Nabokov's protagonists to associate female characters to death as it is the case in "A Russian Beauty", to the confusion between past and present, as is the case in "A Spring in Fialta" or "The Seaport" or to the repression of memories of those days in the Russia before the revolution, as is the case in "Christmas Story". In fact, Nabokov asserts this in his first literary writings:

> I do feel Russian and I think that my Russian works, the various novels and poems and short stories that I have written during these years, are a kind of tribute to Russia. (Nabokov 1990: 13)

That tribute to Russia is always associated with the female figure during that period. In the latter years, Nabokov kept on writing. He improved his skill as a writer and learned to distance himself from those sad feelings. He dealt with this topic and others, but his perspective changed. Then he had no social purpose or moral message in his writing (Nabokov 1990: 16).

Nabokov explores the fictional possibilities by means of parody of its own narrative devices. There are frequent interruptions of the narrative by the narrator in order to address the reader directly and in order to remind him that he is dealing with an imaginary creation. He ironized upon some literary motifs, such as the Doppelgänger or bewitching pictures. From then on the female figures are associated with problematizing literary conventions from "Mademoiselle O" or "A Nursery Tale" to "The Vane Sisters." His memories and his literary knowledge are the basis for the puzzles he writes for his readers. His original nostalgia is later overcome by his wit and irony. He develops his sense of intellectual game in literature, in which his reader has an important goal. His readers have to end the story or to understand all the implications. As a good puppeteer, Nabokov uses his memories about women, exile and past like strings to move

the puppet of his literary creation for his audience, that is, his re-readers.

5. Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to the anonymous referees for their insightful comments.

This paper is part of the project PID2023- 146582NB-I00, funded by MCIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/FEDER, UE

6. Bibliographical references

Baddeley, A. & Weiskrantz, L. (Ed). (1993). *Attention: selection, awareness, and control. A tribute To Donald Broadbent*. Oxford University Press.

Barreras Gómez, A. (2003). *El juego intelectual. Ironía y textualidad en las narraciones breves de Vladimir Nabokov.* Servicio de publicaciones de la Universidad de La Rioja.

Barreras Gómez, A. (2005). *El estudio de los relatos de Vladimir Nabokov. Su narrador, su lector y sus personajes.* Servicio de publicaciones de la Universidad de La Rioja.

Barreras Gómez, A. (2008). Releyendo 'The admiralty spire' en la obra de Nabokov. In Torres, J. & S. Nicolás (Eds.). *Estudios de literatura norteamericana: Nabokov y otros autores contemporáneos.* (pp. 13-39). Editorial Universidad de Almería.

Boyd, B. (1993). *Vladimir Nabokov, the American years.* Vintage Edition.

Brittan, A. (1989). *Masculinity and power.* Basil Blackwell.

Burns, D. (1979). *Bend Sinister* and 'Tyrants destroyed:' short story into a novel. *Modern fiction studies,* 25, 508-513. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26282316

Christianson, A. (2018). Gender and nation: debatable lands and passable boundaries. In Smyth, G. & Norquay, G. (Eds.), *Across the margins: cultural identity and change in the Atlantic archipelago.* (pp. 67–82). Manchester UP. file:///Users/mabarrer/Downloads/Gender_and_nation-1.pdf

Connolly, J. (2000). Nabokov's approach to the supernatural in the early stories. In Kellman, S & I. Malin (Eds). *Torpid smoke. The stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. (pp 21-34). Editions Rodopi BV. file:///Users/mabarrer/Downloads/Torpid_Smoke_The_Stories_Of_Vladimir_Nab.pdf

Crowley, H., & Himmelweit, S. (Eds). (1992). *Knowing women: feminism and knowledge.* Polite Press.

Delage-Toriel, L. (2001). *Ultraviolet darlings: representations of women in Nabokov's prose fiction.* [Ph.D. diss. University of Cambridge]. https://thenabokovian.org/bibliography/delage-toriel-lara-ultraviolet-darlings-representations-women-nabokovs-prose-fiction-0

Eggenschwiler, D. (1981). Nabokov's 'The Vane sisters': exuberant pedantry and a biter bit. *Studies in short fiction,* 18 (1), 33-39. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1297935394?parentSessionId=dZznSCBfXtWKiKIkiIUAGSvwyAulfTrtA5nzbBYst5Y%3D&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals

Escartín Gual, M. (1996). *Diccionario de símbolos literarios*. PPU

Ferrater Mora, J. (1988). *Diccionario de filosofía*. Editorial Sudamericana. https://profesorvargasguillen.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/jose-ferrater-mora-diccionario-de-filosofia-tomo-i.pdf

Field, A. (1967). *Nabokov: his life in art.* Hodder and Stoughton.

Figes, O. (2002). *Natasha's dance: a cultural history of Russia*. Allen LanePenguin. https://archive.org/details/natashasdancecul0000fige_k3a6

Formaini, H. (1990). *Men: The darker continent.* Heineman.

Foster, J. (1993). *Nabokov's art of memory and European modernism*. Princeton University Press.

Garipova, N. (2013). *Lengua y cultura en las novelas de Vladimir Nabokov*. Editorial Universidad de Almería.

Garipova, N. (2014). Women in Nabokov's Russian novels. *Alicante journal of English studies,* 27, 61-77. https://raei.ua.es/article/view/2014-n27-women-in-nabokovs-russian-novels

Hutcheon, L. (1995). *Irony's edge. The theory and politics of irony*. Routledge.

Idrisova, M. (2007). *Kontseptsiya zhenskogo mira v romanaj Nabokova. Makhachkala [The concept of the female world in Nabokov's Russian novels].* [Ph.D. diss. University of Dagestan]. https://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/46823/1/RAEI_27.pdf

Johnson, D. (1979). Contrastive phonetics or why Nabokov gave up translating poetry as poetry. In C. Proffer (Ed.). *A book of things about Vladimir Nabokov* (pp. 28-41). Ardis.

Kanchana, Mahadeva. (2017). Constitutional patriotism and political membership: A feminist decolonization of Habermas and Benhahib. In M. McLaren (Ed.). *Decolonizing feminism: transnational feminism and globalization* (pp 119-151). Rowman & Littlefield.

Kellman, S,. & Malin, I. (2000). *Torpid smoke. The stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. Editions Rodopi BV. file:///Users/mabarrer/Downloads/Torpid_Smoke_The_Stories_Of_Vladimir_Nab.pdf

Lee, L. (1976). *Vladimir Nabokov.* Prior. https://archive.org/details/vladimirnabokov00leel

Long, M. (1984). *Marvell and Nabokov: childhood and Arcadia*. Clarendon.

Mir, J M. (1982). *Diccionario ilustrado latino-español español-latino.* VOX.

McLaren, M. (Ed). (2017). *Decolonizing feminism: Transnational feminism and globalization.* Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham.

McClintock, A. (1995). *Imperial leather: race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial contest*. Routledge.

Moi. T. (1985). *Sexual/textual politics.* Methuen.

Monter, B. (1970). 'Spring in Fialta:' the choice that mimics chance. *Triquarterly,* 17, 128-135.

Nabokov, V. (1960). *Nabokov's dozen*. Penguin.

Nabokov, V. (1969). *Speak, Memory*. Penguin.

Nabokov, V. (1990). *Strong opinions.* McGraw-Hill Book Company.-

Nabokov, V. (1975). *A Russian beauty and other stories*. Penguin.

Nabokov, V. (1981). *Tyrants destroyed and other stories*. Penguin.

Nabokov, V. (1986). *Lolita.* Penguin.

Nabokov, V. (1995). The Christmas story. *The New York review* 19, 28-29.

Nabokov, D. (Ed). (1995). *Vladimir Nabokov. The collected stories.* Ed. Nabokov, Dmitri. Penguin.

Naumann, M. (1978). *Blue evenings in Berlin: Nabokov's short stories of the 1920s*. New York University Press.

Nicol, C., & Rivers, J. (1982). *Nabokov's fifth arc.* University of Texas Press.

Proffer, C. (Ed). (1979). *A book of things about Vladimir Nabokov.* Ardis.

Puwar, N. (Ed). (2004). *Space invaders: race, gender and bodies out of place*. Berg.

Quennell, P. (Ed) (1979). *His life, his work, his world: Vladimir Nabokov. A tribute.* Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Rakhimova-Sommers, E. (2001). *The ona (she) of Nabokov's hereafter: female characters as otherworldly agents in Nabokov's fiction.* [Ph.D. diss. University of Rochester]. https://thenabokovian.org/bibliography/all?page=4

Rampton, D. (1984). *Vladimir Nabokov.* Cambridge University Press.

Ristkok, T. (1976). Nabokov's 'The Vane sisters' once in a thousand years fiction. *University of Windsor review,* 11, 27-47.

Roth, P. (1982). Toward the man behind the mystification. In C. Nichol & E. Rivers (Eds.). *Nabokov's fifth arc* (pp 43-59). University of Texas press.

Rowe, W. (1971). *Nabokov's deceptive world.* New York university press.

Rowe, W. (1976). Nabokovian superimposed and alternative realities. *Russian literature triquarterly,* 14, 59-66.

Shloss, C. (1982). Speak Memory: The aristocracy of art. In C. Nichol & E. Rivers (Eds.). *Nabokov's fifth arc* (pp 224- 229). University of Texas press.

Shrayer, M. (1997). Mapping narrative in Nabokov's short fiction. *Slavonic and east European review,* 75(4), 624-641. doi:10.2307/4212487

Shrayer, M. (1998). A dozen notes to Nabokov's short stories. *The Nabokovian,* 40, 42-63.

Sicker, P. (1987). Practicing nostalgia: time and memory in Nabokov's early Russian fiction. *Studies in twentieth century literature,* 11 (2), 253-270. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273289881_Practicing_Nostalgia_Time_and_Memory_in_Nabokov%27s_Early_Russian_Fiction

Smyth, G., & Norquay, G. (2018). *Across the margins: cultural identity and change in the Atlantic archipelago.* Manchester university press.

Torres Núñez, J., & Nicolás Román, S. (Ed). (2008). *Estudios de literatura norteamericana: Nabokov y otros autores contemporáneos*. Editorial universidad de Almería.

Tulving, Endel. (1993). Varieties of consciousness and levels of awareness in memory. In A. Baddeley & L Weiskrantz (Eds.). *Attention: selection, awareness, and control. A tribute to Donald Broadbent* (pp 283-299). Oxford University Press.

Wood, M. (1994). *The magician's doubts. Nabokov and the risks of fiction*. Chatto & Windus. https://archive.org/details/magiciansdoubtsn0000wood_b6q5

Yuval D. (2008). *Gender and nation*. SAGE publications.

Yuval D., & Floya, A. (1989). *Woman-nation-state*. Macmillan.

Ziolkowski. (1980). *Imágenes desencantadas.* Taurus.