
THE THEATRE OF DECEPTION: NABOKOV'S EXPLORATION OF HUMAN NATURE IN HIS SECOND NOVEL "KING, QUEEN, KNAVE"

Pulatova Sabina Sharifovna,
Second-year PhD Student at Bukhara State University

Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's "King, Queen, Knave" (1928) marks a key stage in his literary evolution, blending innovative narrative techniques with a deep exploration of human nature and bourgeois society. This study examines the novel's reinterpretation of the adultery motif, its complex characters—Dreyer, Martha, and Franz—and its interplay of reality and illusion. Using semiotic, psychological, and structural analysis, the article highlights Nabokov's mastery of literary craftsmanship and his use of intertextuality, theatricality, and duality. The novel's playful style and unexpected resolution challenge readers to reflect on identity, morality, and existence. "King, Queen, Knave" not only influenced Nabokov's later works but also solidified his unique artistic vision, making it a cornerstone of modern literature.

Keywords: Adultery motif, human nature, bourgeois society, deception, modernism, postmodernism, intertextuality, theatricality, duality, illusion, character analysis, narrative techniques.

Introduction:

The last two decades of Vladimir Nabokov's years of emigration in Europe (1920-1940) are considered the most prolific period in his creative career, as he never produced as "much and well" in any other phase of his literary activity. All eight of his novels written in Russian were composed and published during these years, and they are classified as the "European group." This group includes works such as "Mary" ("Машенька", 1926), "King, Queen, Knave" ("Король, дама, валет", 1928), "Defence" ("Защита Лужина", 1930) "Despair" ("Отчаяние", 1932), "Invitation to a Beheading" ("Приглашение на казнь", 1936) and "The Gift" ("Дар", 1938).

If his first novel, "Mary", introduced Nabokov to a wide readership as a writer depicting the lives of Russian émigrés living in Berlin, the theme of adultery explored with the deep analysis of human nature in bourgeois society in "King, Queen, Knave", along with the fact that all its characters are of German nationality, has led literary scholars to interpret it as the "least Russian" or "non-Russian" novel among all his works written in Russian, as it does not portray Russian life. For this reason, the novel caused a certain degree of disappointment among émigré writers, as they had accepted Nabokov as a creator who "depicted Russian life in emigration." Nevertheless, they also put forward

the view that “King, Queen, Knave” was “a talented young writer’s attempt to find his own path.”¹

By the late 1920s and after publication of his second novel, Nabokov had become one of the most subtle and skilled masters of form in Russian literature. Contemporary literary critics have described his style in various ways. Yuly Aykhenvald praised it as “brilliant and fluid, entirely free of dullness” (“сплошь блестящим нигде не матовым”), while Gleb Struve characterized it as “sharp” and “possessing a cinematic precision” (“зорким” и “кинематографичным”). Vladislav Khodasevich described Nabokov’s style as “smooth” and “truly masterful” (“скользящим” и “подлинно искусственным”), and Georgy Adamovich acknowledged it as “virtuosic and dazzling, distinguished by a classical brilliance” (“виртуозным, отмеченным ослепительной, классической яркостью”).²

Taking into account the aforementioned observations and considerations, this study attempts to explore main heroine’s and her lover’s nature which lead them planning a murder of her husband analyzing how Nabokov’s artistic style is shaped through examples from the text and the actions of the characters as well as investigating how “King, Queen, Knave” influenced author’s subsequent works.

The aim of the research is to gain a deeper understanding of Nabokov’s creative evolution by thoroughly examining the human nature, the artistic style, and its impact on his later works.

Methods:

In accordance with the research objectives, semiotic, psychological, and structural literary analysis methods were utilized. Consequently, the motif of adultery in the novel “King, Queen, Knave” was examined from a symbolic perspective. Furthermore, the underlying reasons for the characters’ engagement in adultery, the significance of the adultery motif within the narrative structure, and its interrelation with other motifs were systematically investigated. Primary sources included the original text of “King, Queen, Knave”, Nabokov’s autobiographical works “Speak, Memory” and “Другие берега”. Secondary sources comprised B. Boyd’s “Vladimir Nabokov: Russian Years” and Jean Blot’s “Nabokov”.

The conceptual framework for the second novel emerged during Nabokov’s stay at the Binz resort on the island of Rügen in Pomerania in the summer of 1927. “King, Queen, Knave” (1928) is characterized as a literary work with a playful narrative style, tailored for a broad Western readership. This interpretive approach is underscored by the author in the foreword, where he remarks: “Of all my novels, this “steed” is the most cheerful” (“из всех моих романов этот скакун - самый веселый”).³

¹ Tsetlin, M. O. “Retz: Korol, Dama, Valet.” Klassik bez retushi. Literaturnyi mir o tvorchestve Vladimira Nabokova [Classic Without Retouching: The Literary World on Vladimir Nabokov’s Work], edited by N. G. Melnikov, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000, pp. 43–44.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. King, Queen, Knave. AST, 2023.p-8.

³ Nabokov 1997v. Т.1, 57 - Набоков, В.В. / Собр. соч. американского периода. В 5 т. / В.В. Набоков. - СПб.: Симпозиум, 1997а].

The novel was completed in June 1928 and published by the Berlin publishing house “Slovo.” In the same year, Nabokov was commissioned by the “Ullstein” publishing house to translate the novel into German, resulting in its initial translation by the author under the title “King, Queen, Knave – A Game of Destiny”.⁴

In the novel, a detective plot is used as a modeling matrix, and the crime itself becomes a subject of literary play in its aesthetic sense. This intensifies the reader’s interest. According to the literary critic M. Tsetlin, who studied the works of Russian writers and poets forced to leave their homeland, “the novel is read with unrelenting and gripping attention.”⁵

The reason for this is that, at first glance, Nabokov seems to address the theme of adultery in a manner reminiscent of classic works like Leo Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina” and Gustave Flaubert’s “Madame Bovary”. However, the reader soon realizes that the author aims to reflect the main plot elements through a fresh and innovative approach. The characters—husband Dreyer, his wife’s lover Franz, and the scheming mistress Martha—demonstrate Nabokov’s skill in creating complex, postmodern figures. While Martha’s plan to eliminate her husband initially evokes the image of a “bourgeois Lady Macbeth,” it ultimately loses its dramatic tension. Dreyer’s passion for wealth and technology (his project involving robot mannequins) saves him. Readers who expect the story to conclude with Dreyer’s tragic death, as per Martha’s scheme, are in for a surprise, as Nabokov delivers an unexpectedly comical resolution. Martha dies from pneumonia, Dreyer sinks into grief, and Franz embraces freedom with laughter.⁶

As J. Connolly has noted, V.V. Nabokov “equates the murder plot with the construction of the novel’s narrative”⁷ and transforms crime into a creative act, a characteristic of modernism. At the same time, his use of playful techniques with the reader is a hallmark of postmodernism.

Results:

The thematic foundations, narrative techniques, and character development in the novel can be studied through several important methods, all of which reflect Nabokov’s unique artistic vision.

The novel’s particular value lies in its experimentation with narrative style and innovative ways of engaging the reader. Nabokov transforms familiar plots and forms in unexpected ways, drawing the reader into the intricate development of events. The reader feels at home in a familiar setting while observing the changes and dramatic

⁴ Набоков, В. Король, дама, валет. М.: Издательство аст, 2023. –С. 8.

⁵ Tsetlin, M. O. “Retz: Korol, Dama, Valet.” Klassik bez retushi. Literaturnyi mir o tvorchestve Vladimira Nabokova [Classic Without Retouching: The Literary World on Vladimir Nabokov’s Work], edited by N. G. Melnikov, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000, pp. 143.

⁶ Pulatova, S. Vladimir Nabokovning “Qirol, dama, valet” asarida postmodernism va burjua hayotining satirasi. “Ilm fan taraqqiyotida raqamli iqtisodiyot va zamonaviy ta’limning o’rni hamda rivojlanish omillari” nomli respublika ilmiy-uslubiy konferensiyasi. Volume 1 No.2. Yanvar-2025.196-203 betlar.

⁷ Konolli, 2001: 606- 155. Коннолли, Дж. «Король, дама, валет» / Дж. Коннолли // В. Набоков: pro et contra. - СПб.: РХГИ, 2001. -Т.2. - С.599-618.

twists within it with keen interest. This approach is a key aspect that distinguishes Nabokov's works from other literary movements.

V.V. Nabokov focuses less on analyzing reality and more on creating it through his distinctive writing techniques, seeking beauty within reality.⁸ For example, in the description of the city where Franz travels, the author employs descriptive writing techniques to create an artistic "pattern" of an impressionistic landscape, where precise contours are absent, but there is ample room for imagination: "каждый фонарь, звездой расплювшился во мраке, каждый румяный отблеск, каждое содрогание перемещавшихся, перекликавшихся огней, и черные фигуры, поверявшие друг другу душные, сладкие тайны в углублениях подъездов, и чьи-то полураскрытые губы, скользнувшие мимо, и черный, влажный асфальт, - все приобретало значение, сочеталось в одно, получало имя..."⁹ - "each streetlamp, a star dissolving in the darkness, each rosy reflection, each tremor of moving, echoing lights, and the black figures confiding stifling, sweet secrets to one another in the recesses of doorways, and someone's half-parted lips gliding past, and the black, wet asphalt—everything acquired meaning, merged into one, received a name..." In V.V. Nabokov's imagination, this artistic and decorative theatrical world transforms into a crime scene.

Thus, "King, Queen, Knave" represents a significant stage in Nabokov's creative evolution, paving the way for a deeper understanding of his later works and serving as a unique experimental field for his literary craftsmanship.

In "King, Queen, Knave", the author initiates a complex game with the reader. At first, the story seems like a simple adventure or romantic drama. However, as the plot unfolds, Nabokov begins to guide the reader in ways they do not immediately perceive. The seemingly superficial motif of adultery in the novel—deception leading to the breakdown of a family—transforms into a mystification, a game. This lures the reader into an optical illusion, encouraging them to perceive the events as one-sided, clear, and simple, while concealing the deeper meanings and ushering them into a world of ambiguities and complexities. This is characteristic of Nabokov's style, as his distorted mirror also reflects another facet of the novel's direction: portraying murder as an art form. The intertextual elements in the novel are expressed through various attributes of well-known plots and motifs, such as dances, Martha's illness, the characters' dreams, religious imagery, mannequin-automata, and so on.

V.V. Nabokov revives the motif from Andersen's fairy tale—the idea of replacing living people with card-like figures. By choosing playing cards and automata as prototypes for his characters, he expands the possibilities for creating fantastical situations and unusual images for the writer. Unlike H.C. Andersen, in Nabokov's work, toy-automata and cards replace living people, embodying the principle of carnival dualism. As in a

⁸ Quronov, D. Adabiyotshunoslik lug'ati [Dictionary of Literary Studies]. Akademnashr, 2013.p-228.

⁹ Nabokov, Vladimir. King, Queen, Knave. AST, 2023.p-28.

carnival, serious matters are replaced by comedic elements, and the individual is forced to play the role of an actor-clown.

Like Carroll's Alice, the young protagonist Franz perceives all the unfolding events through the prism of mystical dreams and reflections in a blurred mirror. It is as if he, too, has fallen into a Wonderland, seeing the capital city described by the author as follows: "Внизу, по улице, как медузы, скользили люди, среди внезапно замершего автомобильного студня, - потом все это опять двигалось, и смутно-синие дома по одной стороне, солнечно-неясные - по другой текли мимо, как облака, незаметно переходящие в нежное небо." ¹⁰

Just as Carroll's Alice "jumps" into the next compartment with the help of a train, Franz also "flies away" to another world in a fantastical game for a happy life. The boundary marker that defines the playful contrast between artificial and living spaces is "огромная, черная стрелка часов..., сейчас вот дрогнет, и от ее тутого толчка тронется весь мир,"¹¹ transporting him to another dimension of time. Here, time serves a mythological function for the character, marking the sacred beginning of a new life. This new life awaits Franz the knave in the big city—much like Carroll's Wonderland. In the end, it becomes clear: Franz's ideal of Wonderland collapses like a house of cards, and he himself transforms into the figure of a Joker-clown, disappearing somewhere. He has fallen into the role of Andersen's knave, and his hopes remain unfulfilled.¹²

Analysis:

The characters in the novel are portrayed by the author as puppets, automata devoid of living emotions, resembling figures in a comedic farce. V.V. Nabokov conceived his characters as players in a merciless theatrical game, and, as A.M. Zverev puts it, they "сходятся, друг в друга перетекая, живое, но родственное автомату, и механическое, но притворившееся живым."¹³

Nabokov's character Martha depicts cruelty through her inner fantasies: "... она снова воображала, что по мере того, как блаженство близится, Драйер гибнет, что каждый торопливый удар ранит его еще глубже, и что наконец он слабеет, валится, растворяется в нестерпимом блеске ее счастья."¹⁴ In this way, Martha imagines the scene of "killing" her husband.

Franz, who chases easy wealth and career advancement, appears throughout the novel as a character reminiscent of an actor. He is interpreted as a "веселой кукла"¹⁵—a "cheerful puppet" or a wax actor, a point repeatedly emphasized by the author. Franz moves from one theater to another: "сначала это маленький грязный, ненавистный ему городок, затем блестящий столичный рай, своего рода мифологический

¹⁰ Nabokov, Vladimir. King, Queen, Knave. AST, 2023. p-32.

¹¹ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.116.

¹² http://www.e-reading.mobi/chapter.php/1026192/44/Podarok_trollya.html

¹³ Zverev 2001- 129. Зверев, А.М. Набоков [Электронный ресурс] / А. М. Зверев. - М.: Молодая гвардия, серия ЖЗЛ, 2001 - 786 с.- URL: <http://www.informaxinc.ru/l ib/zhz/nabokov/>.

¹⁴ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.236.

¹⁵ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.208.

переход “из пасти дьявола в ликующий парадиз.”¹⁶ In this way, the author forms a fairy-tale-allegorical space of his fantasies. In Nabokov’s metatext, truth is not lost but deconstructed. In this theater, it is not living people who act, but actors.

Franz’s artificial life, filled with illusions, resembles a tormenting dream: “мучительным сном, в котором есть и усилие неимоверное, и тошнота, и ватная слабость в икрах, и легкое головокружение...”¹⁷ The character exists as if in a daze, devoid of his own will. When he unquestioningly accepts Martha’s plan to kill Dreyer, Franz seems to live in a hypnotic dream, subordinated to queen’s will: “Я все готов сделать... Я на все готов. Я тоже думал... Я тоже...”¹⁸

The strangeness of the world in which Franz and Martha live is interpreted by Nabokov through a system of distorting mirrors, in which the characters constantly reflect their alien and false essence. Unlike the reality of objects, these mirrors separate the characters from truth and provide a fantastical reflection of things, depicting their lives in bizarre forms at the level of illusion: “Франц с удовольствием отмечал свое отражение в зеркалах.”¹⁹ Martha, on the other hand, sees in the mirror “отражалась его (Драйера) широкая, светло-серая спина, теневые перехваты на сгибе рукава, желтые пряди приглаженных волос.”²⁰

Franz and Martha are bound not by mutual love but by a desire to possess valuable yet useless objects. The following excerpts from the text serve as clear evidence of this idea: “Значит, вилла. Со светлым холлом. Ковры, картины, серебро. Так? И небольшой сад. Газон. Фруктовые деревца. Магнолии”. Таким видят они свое “первоклассное счастье.”²¹ “Моя столовая, мой сервиз, мой Франц.”²²

The author frequently compares Franz to an inanimate being: he is described as a “восковая фигура”—a “wax figurine,” a “веселая кукла”—a “cheerful doll,” and a “мертвая кукла”—a “lifeless doll.” As a result, Franz completely loses his human appearance and becomes an automaton driven by mechanical movements: “... автомат останавливался, чтобы через восемь часов опять прийти в действие.”²³ Franz’s external appearance also increasingly loses its humanity and takes on mechanical characteristics, especially as the murder plan approaches its execution: “скользкий, мутный блеск стоял в его зеленоватых глазах”²⁴ serves as proof of this observation. Like Franz, Martha is also a game piece or holds the status of a queen in a card game. V.V. Nabokov likens Martha’s image to a doll as well. Her desire for wealth is as soulless as she is. Resembling a puppet-automaton, Martha trusts not in people but in cold logic and calculated reasoning to carry out the murder: “... ей казалось, что она действует

¹⁶ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.121.

¹⁷ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.115.

¹⁸ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.216.

¹⁹ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.163.

²⁰ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.216.

²¹ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.198.

²² Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.191.

²³ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.237.

²⁴ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.214.

так обдуманно, так рассудительно..., ее спасение - в простоте строгости, обычайности; искомый способ должен быть совершенно естественным и чистым.”²⁵

Martha's pursuit of murder for material reasons further underscores her loss of humanity. In this world, she feels happy alongside the lifeless puppet Franz and accepts the idea that every wealthy woman should have a lover as a necessary element of a prosperous bourgeois life: “Просто - у меня любовник. Это должно украшать, а не усложнять жизнь.”²⁶

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the novel is Nabokov's ability to enrich a seemingly simple and even banal plot with astonishing artistic solutions. This method can be likened to a classic chess opening, where simple moves conceal a hidden trap to ensnare the opponent. In this way, Nabokov ensnares not only his characters but also the reader in this trap.

The novel becomes a field for Nabokov to shape and experiment with his unique style. The vividness of erotic scenes and the depth of descriptive artistry demonstrate his literary craftsmanship. This style further develops in Nabokov's later major works. At the same time, Martha's extremely cunning image marks the early signs of an internal animosity toward women in Nabokov's oeuvre.

The novel's particular value lies in its experimentation with narrative style and innovative ways of engaging the reader. Nabokov transforms familiar plots and forms in unexpected ways, drawing the reader into the intricate development of events. The reader feels at home in a familiar setting while observing the changes and dramatic twists within it with keen interest. This approach is a key aspect that distinguishes Nabokov's works from other literary movements.

Thus, “King, Queen, Knave” represents a significant stage in Nabokov's creative evolution, paving the way for his later works and serving as a unique experimental field for his literary craftsmanship.

Conclusion

Vladimir Nabokov's novel “King, Queen, Knave” stands out as a significant milestone in the author's artistic style and literary experimentation. The main characters of the novel—Dreyer, Martha, and Franz—embody the conflict between human emotions and personal ambitions, and through their actions and perspectives, the author delves deeply into the inner world of humanity. Nabokov reworks this conventional theme in his unique style, presenting it not merely as a romantic drama but as a means for profound reflection on the internal struggles of humanity and its place in society. Through the use of semiotic, psychological, and structural analysis methods, the novel showcases Nabokov's mastery in character portrayal and the subtleties of their development. “King, Queen, Knave” played a crucial role in Nabokov's subsequent

²⁵ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.234.

²⁶ Nabokov, 1990. Т.1, 115- Набоков, В.В. Собр. соч. В 4 томах / В.В. Набоков. - М.: Правда, 1990. - С.183.

works, serving as a foundational stage in the evolution of his artistic style and thematic concerns.

Nabokov's novel is significant not only for its innovative interpretation of the adultery motif but also as a medium for deep reflection on the inner world of humanity, personal ambitions, and their place in society. Through its characters, the author explores human emotions, desires, and their consequences, making the novel one of the brightest examples of modern literature.

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