

NABOKOV'S SHORT STORY

“SIGNS AND SYMBOLS”:

An interdisciplinary roundtable discussion*

Hal Ackerman, Screenwriter (*UCLA*)

Murray Biggs, Theater scholar (*Yale University*)

John N. Crossley, Mathematician (*Monash University*)

Wayne Goodman, Psychiatrist (*Mount Sinai School of Medicine*)

Yuri Leving, Moderator (*Dalhousie University*)

Frederick White, Literary scholar (*Utah Valley University*)

Approaching the story through film

Yuri Leving: *Could you imagine a screen adaptation of Nabokov's short story "Signs and Symbols"?*

Hal Ackerman: My first glib knee jerk answer is that "Signs and Symbols" would never be made as a feature film, certainly not an American feature film. I knew there'd been a

* This is an excerpt from a book entitled *Anatomy of a Short Story: Nabokov's Puzzles, Codes, "Signs and Symbols,"* Y. Leving (Editor), J. Banville (Afterword), forthcoming from the Continuum (New York). More about the volume see the publisher's website: www.continuumbooks.com.

few successful screen adaptations of short fiction like *Brokeback Mountain* and *Million Dollar Baby*. To my great surprise though I discovered an impressive list of others, hundreds of them, including *Rear Window*, *2001 A Space Odyssey*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, *Memento*, *The Fly*.

Yuri Leving: *If the aforementioned movies were so successful in turning fascinating texts into rich visual narratives, what is the secret then?*

Hal Ackerman: Let's look at what a movie can do. It gives an audience access through two senses, sight and sound. What we can see and what we can hear. Most successful film adaptations from other media begin with material that is rich in these external stimuli. This is why plot driven stories (crime, action) are the most easily adaptable, and why novels that delve into the inner lives of characters – thoughts, feelings, philosophies – are the most challenging and least successful in both commercial and artistic terms.

Yuri Leving: *What would be the hardest part in making a film based on "Signs and Symbols"?*

Hal Ackerman: What do we actually SEE and HEAR in this story? A couple goes quietly on bus and train to a sanatorium where a brief scene takes place with a nurse, after which they return home and eat, have some tea, decide to go again tomorrow and the phone rings. All of the power and intensity of the story is laid in under the surface, in the back-story, in repressed and fractured and delusional hopes, in off-screen implied events. The compression with which Nabokov expresses all of this in spare prose is his genius. A screenwriter would have to deftly and with a light hand, recreate the family's past, the boy's present life and the psychological atmosphere that pervades all of their lives.

Yuri Leving: *Do you think there is any real chance that Nabokov's short story might be translated into a visual language?*

Hal Ackerman: The likelihood of sustaining this delicate web for the duration of a feature film is slim. A more probable film life for this story would be a fifteen-twenty minute short (for which there would be no commercial market) made by a film student and shown in festivals. A festival audience would be far more willing and receptive to the quiet tone, the lack of overt larger-than-life action, and the pulled punch ambiguous ending, all of which inform the essential truth of this story. The cinematic “opening up” would not need to be a gaping yaw, but well-chosen glimpses into the current and past lives of parents and child.

Yuri Leving: *What would be your perfect cast (all the stars’ costs, of course, would be covered)?*

Hal Ackerman: A few possible pairings might be: Helen Mirren / Tom Wilkenson; John Lithgow / Meryl Streep; Paul Giamatti / Laura Linney. Probably not Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie.

Yuri Leving: *If you were asked to write the screenplay, how might you approach it? Would you feel the need to add a great deal of “background material”? Would you count on any special montage techniques or computer-generated imagery (CGI)?*

Hal Ackerman: This is definitely not a CGI movie. Paraphrasing Billy Wilder when asked about special effects, he said, ‘yeah, we have special effects. We call it dialogue.’ To the larger question of creative approach and use of background material, it would depend upon whether an attempt would be made to open the story up to a feature length film, or stay close to its own time frame and write it as a short. In the latter case not a lot would need to be added, though the time taken for the protagonists’ trip to the institution could certainly be used as a hinge for flashbacks into the recent and deeper past. Expanding the project to feature length would be fraught with danger. Even with the lovely hypothetical you propose, that the salaries of the stars is paid for, movies cost a bundle to make. Financing and recouping cannot be completely ignored. But on purely creative considerations, expanding the story, “opening it up” as they like to say, requires

that a screenwriter invent material that in the story is only implied. While there are notable exceptions (David Seidler, Aaron Sorkin, Steve Zaillian, Nicole Holofcener to name a few) screenwriters are not generally thought of (or hired) for their literary chops. You'd want to find a writer and director with the sensitivity and ability to digest the story and transliterate it to the larger narrative canvas. The intense understated intimacy cannot be lost. Whatever back-story was dramatized would have to stand in its own dramatically, and at the same time enhance and blend seamlessly into the original material. The boy's life would inevitably become a tangible onscreen part of a feature film. This was done with great success in *Ordinary People*.

Approaching the story through theatre

Yuri Leving: *If you were asked to stage Nabokov's short story, what would be your possible course of action? Would you need to make any amendments or revisions to the storyline? What would you want to highlight and what, possibly, would you want to diminish? Would you keep the open end? Would you create an alternative climax in the story?*

Murray Biggs: Since the story itself hardly needs improving, a theatre adaptation could and should hew closely to Nabokov's narrative line. The original highlights the mother's character and situation and her relationship with her husband especially as conditioned by their son's ailment. This should provide the core of the drama. The story's Pinteresque open end lends itself to reproduction on stage, especially in the modern theatre, whose audiences are used to, and enjoy, being left with an ambiguous future for the action and its players.

Yuri Leving: *What would be the most obvious challenges in adapting “Signs and Symbols” for a theatrical performance?*

Murray Biggs: Given that this theatre piece would work best as a one-act rather than a longer play, the main challenge would be reducing the cinematic sequence of several locations to, at most, two. My choice would be to start the play in the waiting-room of the sanatorium, where the couple’s conversation could establish whatever “back-story” is necessary before the entrance of the nurse (the only other character in the adaptation) and her account of the son’s present condition. A significant challenge here, as throughout the drama, would be to create the spoken dialogue that Nabokov mostly omits. His clues, however, are sufficiently specific to make this a manageable task.

The waiting-room being sparsely furnished, it would not take long to switch to the second set, the couple’s living-room. Ideally the stage would simply swivel to reveal it. The second scene would start with the husband inside the room, rather than on the steps outside, waiting for his wife’s arrival with the fish. He could here accomplish some of the solo business described in the story, perhaps adding a monologue (to the mirror) reflecting on his and the family’s latest situation.

It would be possible, during the scene change, to add back-projections of the couple’s weary journey home by bus and subway, although it’s not obvious to me at this early stage that that would be necessary. Rather it might diminish the concentrated impact that a *short* play needs.

An important element of the story is the wife/mother’s collection of memorabilia. Although this would be better represented on film (in close-up), it should be given a central place in the action of the play, accompanied by such text as is necessary, perhaps in monologue, although more credibly in the theatre – in a perhaps necessary departure from the story – in dialogue with the man. The couple’s souvenirs both mirror the loss of their son and compensate for it.

Yuri Leving: *Imagine directing a play based on “Signs and Symbols”: What would be your genre choice? Would you resort to any special effects? Costume designs? Preferable setting? Your type of a music score? (Give free rein to your fantasy!)*

Murray Biggs: If I *had* to name a genre, I suppose it would be “situation drama”. Apart from the possibility of back-projections, there would be no special effects. The story is driven, after all, by the two older people with their shared history and psychology; it’s principally a study of character in a particular series of distressed situations. Their drab costumes should express all of that as realistically as possible, indeed as prescribed in the story. Any musical accompaniment (say for beginning, scene-change, and end) should quietly underscore the sadly plausible distortions of their lives: a piano piece by Russia’s own Scriabin, perhaps?

A theatrical version of Nabokov’s story would also need, and gain by, several gaping silences, in which what we in theatre call ‘subtext’ would speak up loud and clear.

Yuri Leving: *Could you list an ideal cast for such a play and briefly defend your selection in each specific case (appearance, psychological characteristics, previous roles, etc)?*

Murray Biggs: I could imagine an experienced international cast, with Judi Dench and Michael Gambon, and Fiona Shaw as the nurse. The faces of these two principals, neither conventionally romantic, speak for themselves. Each can convey hidden abysses of nuance and emotion. Fiona Shaw comes to mind as the strong, even stern, woman of authority, as in the film *The Last September* (also featuring Michael Gambon as a put-upon husband). An alternative to Dench would be the Irish actress Cathleen Delaney, whose face (as in John Huston’s film of *The Dead* or Neil Jordan’s *The Miracle*) perfectly expresses Shakespeare’s “ravel’d sleeve of care.”

But why not an all-Canadian cast drawn from the two notable Ontario theatre festivals: Michael Ball and Mary Haney from the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and Seana McKenna from Stratford as the nurse?

Yuri Leving: *The central thematic question of “Signs and Symbols” (as formulated by J. Hagopian) is whether the boy and his parents are deluded in thinking that nature and the universe are hostile to them: Is the boy’s paranoid interpretation, in fact, a*

delusion? How should one tackle this dichotomy, which is easily accomplished in fiction, but becomes another matter when transferred to the visual or performative medium?

Murray Biggs: I would distinguish sharply between the parents' and the boy's perceptions of reality. The boy seems to be genuinely and totally deluded, whether or not the given medical description of his state is authentic. Some of the pathos of the writing comes from the parents' empathy with their son's mental world but at the same time their divorce from it.

Approaching the story through mathematics

Yuri Leving: *Prose and, especially, poetry, like mathematics, have developed rules for working with strings of symbols. Akin to mathematicians, the readers of fiction are looking for meanings behind the signs and symbols. By analyzing the writer's syntax (the study of the way that language is put together from symbols), how might this influence our understanding of the general semantics of art?*

John N. Crossley: Many mathematicians, including this one, are obsessed with the notion of (abstract) structure. There are two levels (at least) at which we may look at the syntax. For this short story there is the overall structure and then the structure at sentence level. Nabokov's overall structure is almost conventional, but not quite. The scene is set. A disturbing element is introduced (the son's illness). The parents go away to try to resolve the situation. A solution is proposed. Then there is an unexpected element, the phone calls. But then, instead of resolving the situation, Nabokov leaves the reader hanging. There is one obvious ending, but isn't Nabokov smarter than that? So you look for other possibilities.¹

¹ For further comments see the very end of this section for these answers.

When we look at the sentence structure we find that Nabokov's approach is Orwellian: he uses simple words. This conveys a sense of mundanity and the drabness of the parents' existence. It also builds up an oppressive feeling. In addition Nabokov has provoked the reader by titling his story "Signs and Symbols" so the reader is on the lookout for them. Numbers and playing cards are the most obvious items with symbolic power. Let me consider the cards first.

Turning up the ace of spades even in an innocent card game always struck fear into my superstitious mother. To her, and to many others, it symbolized death, though the card is also interpreted simply as calamity of some sort of other. The knave of hearts in turn symbolizes some young man. The reference here, at least in the reader's and the mother's mind, is virtually unambiguous—it is to the son. The nine of spades is more ambiguous. In the *Arcana arcanorum* it is interpreted as "Taking one's position too seriously; overconfidence."² In the Tarot, the nine of spades does not occur but the nine of swords has the meaning of sorrow and anguish.³ It is perhaps worth recalling that one of the secrets of success of (some) astrologers is their making the appropriate interpretation of such an ambiguous turn of cards.

Now let me turn to numbers. In the space of just over 2000 words or about four pages, I counted ten mentions of specific (whole) numbers plus another three implicit ones and, on top of those, the reference to calculation: "the incalculable amount of tenderness contained in the world." This density of number words is greater than my use of specific numbers in a recent book on mathematical ideas of number!⁴ Nabokov's explicit numbers are all even ones: 0, 2, 4, 6, 10, and 40. These are feminine numbers according to Pythagoras (and Plato) and this corresponds to the dominance of the mother in the story. Was this Nabokov's intention? We do not know.

From ancient Greek times 6 has been called the first perfect number.⁵ For Jung the number four indicates completion or perfection. The received wisdom is typified by the statement that Jung "found the quaternity to be the archetypal foundation of the

² <http://www.alcyone.com/arcana/oracle.html>

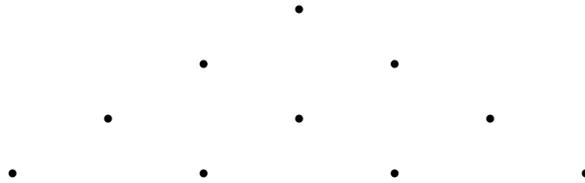
³ See e.g. <http://www.learn-tarot.com/s9.htm>.

⁴ John N. Crossley, *Growing Ideas of Number* (Camberwell, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2007).

⁵ A number is "perfect" if it is the sum of its divisors. The first two perfect numbers are $6 = 1 + 2 + 3$ and $28 = 1 + 2 + 4 + 7 + 14$. Finding larger and larger perfect numbers has long intrigued mathematicians.

human psyche.”⁶ There is a strong correspondence between numerical aspects of Jung’s psychology and Pythagorean number symbolism.⁷

Does ten signify what Pythagoreans called the *tetraktys*? If so, it signifies completion for the *tetraktys* is comprised of a triangular array of ten dots or pebbles arranged in four rows to form a triangle, thus



It contains $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$ pebbles. Forty, perhaps reinforcing this, combines both four and ten.

Now the dangers of interpreting such numbers, or sequences of numbers, are great. Unless the author explicitly explains their significance, each number can have many different interpretations. So to say that a text encodes a message it is necessary to have a consistent interpretation throughout the work. An author may provide such. In rare cases, such as an acrostic, the message may be visible. By employing codes, the opportunities given to the reader to interpret them are multiplied and this can be a large part of what makes the story interesting. While it is clear that possible codes can be profitable is, on the one hand, clear in the commercial sense from books such as Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, but in an intellectual sense the value is much less obvious.

Yuri Leving: *In his “Signs and Symbols” Nabokov mixes two domains, e.g. people and natural numbers. Could you offer a mathematical model for this particular short story?*

John N. Crossley: “Silence is one of the most important parts of music.” This was the opinion of John Cage a long time ago and many other composers have expressed similar

⁶ J. Jacobi, *Complex, Archetype, Symbol in the Psychology of C. G. Jung* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1974), 168.

⁷ For more details see Barry Jeromson, *Jung and Mathematics in Dialogue: A Critical Study*, PhD thesis (University of South Australia 1999 - School of Communication and Information Studies).

sentiments. Nabokov's short story has many silences, though on first reading one is suddenly catapulted headlong into the abyss of the soliloquy on the madness of the son. On second reading, or when reading the story aloud, a long pause is called for at this juncture. The silences are the holes in the dark, even dull, tapestry of the lives of the protagonists — a tapestry that is vermiculated with the harsh, startling thread of the son's madness. The holes do not let in light but darkness. But they also allow the reader to participate in the story in the same way that a good painting involves the viewer and makes him or her construct a picture that is, at least partially, their own.

So in looking at the structure of the story I see a tapestry with lots of holes in it. The holes are traps for the reader who is forced to make decisions at each void. In some places the choice seems predetermined — for example at the beginning of the soliloquy one feels compelled to go on reading to find out what is happening. At the very end, on the other hand, there is a void that can be filled in one obvious way: the suicide of the son. But Nabokov is cleverer than that. He draws you in so that you feel involved and care about the son, and the parents. Part way through the story the mother thinks of “the endless waves of pain ... she and her husband had to endure”. What pains? Surely not just of the son's illness: from Minsk they had gone back and forth trekking across Germany. Were they fleeing the Nazis? They had ended up in America so this seems very likely, but they were not strict Jews for they had been riding public transport after dark on the eve of Shabbat. The pains filled their lives, especially the living death of their son. If the son committed suicide, what would fill the void in their lives? Their whole days circled around the son, even if they did not see him.

Later you think about the end, and whether there is a less obvious ending. Then you go back to look at other signs and symbols in the story, trying to find clues to what is “really” going on. Are the numbers significant? What do the photographs tell us? Are the playing cards clues for us, or for the mother?

Yuri Leving: *John Nash, a mathematical genius struggling with paranoid schizophrenia, who lent his story to the main character of A Beautiful Mind (Dir. Ron Howard, 2001), exclaims in the Hollywood movie: “What truly is logic? Who decides reason? My quest has taken me to the physical, the metaphysical, the delusional, and back. I have made the*

most important discovery of my career – the most important discovery of my life. It is only in the mysterious equations of love that any logic or reason can be found.” To what extent can this formula be applied to the problems raised by Nabokov’s short story (parental love, loss of loved ones, the inability to control the physical laws of nature, and the very notion of “reason in fiction”)?

John N. Crossley: In extreme states of mind the sufferer often makes interpretations that a more ordinary person would not. This can be both a boon and a bane. On the one hand it can reveal unsuspected connections and on the other it may lead to nonsense. The problem is deciding which is which, something the sufferer may not be able to do. So although I display enthusiasm, even passion, for some results in mathematics, I do not describe these in terms of the usual affective emotions, such as love, hate, fear, etc. Instead they are emotions such as excitement, surprise, and delight. In the case of the Nabokov story I am drawn in by compassion for the parents and concern for the son. I have known people in circumstances akin to those in the text and the story rings true; it evokes memories that are disturbing and confronting. It reveals the way that one reacts to these overwhelming difficulties.

There is a logic to our feelings, but at present, and for the foreseeable future, it is not explained in a neat formal language such as mathematics uses. Even Jung, who started investigating the connections between the psyche and number, made little progress.⁸ Psychologists and philosophers still have a long way to go before we shall have such languages.

Yuri Leving: *In the essay, “Narrative Entrapment in Pnin and ‘Signs and Symbols’,” David Richter states that the author “makes the reader his ironic victim by seeming to license a response, then turning and attacking him for this presumptuous collusion” (A?). What will be the likely results if one is to apply ideas of mathematical logic to*

⁸ See the last chapter of Carl Gustav Jung, Joseph L. Henderson, Marie-Louise von Franz, Aniela Jaffé, and Jolande Jacobi, *Man and his symbols* (Zürich, Düsseldorf: Walter-Verlag 13th ed., 1968, first edition, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964). There is an unfortunate mistranslation on the last page where ‘Primzahl’ is rendered as ‘primary number’ but should be ‘prime number.’

deciphering Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols"? Will we be able to solve the riddle of this short story?

John N. Crossley: Mathematical logic utilizes formal languages that are context-free. That is to say, the meanings of the symbols are the same, independent of their surrounding words. Ordinary language writing and story telling, in particular, are highly context sensitive. The very word "it" clearly has different interpretations depending on its context. So, at the present time, we have no way of formalizing stories.

As an example of the difficulty, consider the following paragraph of the story:

"It was past midnight when from the living room she heard her husband moan; and presently he staggered in, wearing over his nightgown the old overcoat with astrakhan collar which he much preferred to the nice blue bathrobe he had."

Google Translate, after a few iterations rendered this as:

"It was after midnight when he heard groans from the living room with her husband, and now wrapped up, wearing her nightgown in the old Persian coat with collar, he preferred the blue dress was beautiful."

Such translation was achieved by formally translating words, and sometimes phrases, without an overall contextual viewpoint. Of course, mechanical translation will improve; indeed it has dramatically improved over the last fifty years but there is still a long way to go.

There is another difficulty. At each important point in the story there is a choice, sometimes for the writer, sometimes—as mentioned above when talking about holes—for the reader. Even if there are only two choices at each point, if there are ten points there will be 1024 possibilities. When we are presented with a finished story, then this represents just one of such possibilities. Trying to work out what went on in the writer's mind is therefore a huge task—we need to see which choice the writer made at each point. With a skilful writer such as Nabokov he does not even present us with a simple

choice, he leaves many choices up to us. This is one of the ways he draws us in. So I agree with David Richter that the writer “makes the reader his ironic victim.” Nabokov makes us care about what happens to the son and his parents.

Yuri Leving: *Is it possible that Nabokov’s story has no definite solution at all, or poses limits to interpretation in terms of mathematics?*

John N. Crossley: Why should Nabokov’s story have a “solution”? In mathematics in general there is usually a solution even if, in some cases, the (meta-)solution is that it is not possible to calculate a solution. In a story, however, if a question is posed without an answer then there is a real question as to whether the author implies a solution, or whether, as in the case of the present story, Nabokov wants the story to haunt the reader and make him, or her, live with the continuing problem and engage in a debate over several possible solutions.

Perhaps we want a “solution” because we want a neat ending, we long for the phrase “and they lived happily ever after.” Then we can go our way in peace and do something else. But Nabokov puts us in a situation the like of which we may encounter in real life, and in real life there are dilemmas about what course of action one should take. And then, if someone does commit suicide, there are the recriminations about what would have been the best course of action and whether we could have prevented the suicide. “Surely something *more* could have been done” is an ever-present thought.

There are virtually no limits to interpretation of Nabokov’s story; the holes in the story guarantee that, but Nabokov corrals the reader into thinking of a quite limited range of possibilities. The same is true of great paintings where the particular lie of an arm, or presence of an object, may invoke different feelings on the part of the viewer. Sustained, as opposed to passing interest, depends on the many-layered nature of the work of art or, in this case, the story.

Approaching the story through psychiatry

Yuri Leving: *If you were asked to diagnose a patient based on the symptoms as ascribed to the young hero of Nabokov's "Signs and Symbols," what would your likeliest expert clinical diagnosis be?*

Wayne Goodman: Schizophrenia is the most likely diagnosis of the young man in the story. He presents with a chronic history (at least 4 years) of delusional thinking. The delusions of schizophrenia are fixed, unshakeable, false beliefs that can be both complex and bizarre. Paranoid delusions, in which the person feels persecuted, are most common. The character of the delusions can oscillate between paranoia and grandiose. An example would be someone who fears his special powers evoke jealousy in others that threatens him. The content of the delusions of the young man seem both a blessing and a curse.

The typical clinical course of schizophrenia is onset of psychotic symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations in early adulthood. Frank psychosis is usually preceded by the emergence in childhood of odd behavior or thinking. This pattern fits that of the young man in the story.

Besides Schizophrenia, the differential diagnosis includes Delusional Disorder and Bipolar Disorder. Grandiose delusions, like those of the young man, are common in the uncommon condition called Delusional Disorder. However, the bizarre nature of his delusions is at odds with this diagnosis. Patients with Bipolar Disorder can experience grandiose delusions during a manic episode. And they certainly can be suicidal. Whereas Bipolar Disorder is characterized by prominent alterations in mood, the young man's most striking feature is a thought disorder.

Yuri Leving: *This is purely hypothetical: Is the patient's mental condition, as described by the writer in this story, curable? What would be the possible methods of treatment for such a patient? What sorts of psychopharmacology and/or behavior modification might you recommend?*

Wayne Goodman: Some symptoms of schizophrenia show a good response to medication treatment. These include delusions and hallucinations. Depression, a common complication of schizophrenia, can also be effectively treated with medications. Unfortunately, no cure has been discovered for schizophrenia. With modern treatment, the young man should be well enough to leave the hospital and be treated as an outpatient.

Yuri Leving: *In his letter to K. White, the editor of the New Yorker, Nabokov emphasized: “‘Referential mania’ (mihi) is a special form of persecution mania. I am the first to describe it and give it a name” (July 6, 1947). Do you see any similarities between this and other existing scientific diagnoses (known or described by clinical specialists)?*

Wayne Goodman: This term, ‘Referential Mania,’ is not in use today. The most similar terms in use are “ideas of reference” and “delusions of reference.” The former commonly refers to a negative emotional bias in which innocuous or irrelevant comments are misperceived as criticisms. The latter refers to flagrantly false and persistent conspiracy theories. As mentioned earlier, delusional thinking can blend paranoid and grandiose dispositions to the outer world. Nabokov was the not first to describe persecutory delusions laced with ideas of grandeur. He was preceded by Emil Kraepelin, Eugen Bleuler and others.

Yuri Leving: *Despite Nabokov’s assurances, K. White continued pressing and asked Nabokov: “Do you mean [the story] to be straight fiction, or do you mean it to be a parody or satire on the gloomy new school of psychiatric fiction? I believe that it is the latter – and if I am wrong you’ll be very annoyed with me” (July 10, 1947). Are you aware of the impact of a “new school of psychiatric fiction” on either medical science or literature in the 1960-70s and whether there is any correlation between it and a real state of contemporary psychiatry? Can you see any implied satire aimed at psychiatry or medical professionals in Nabokov’s short story?*

Wayne Goodman: I am not familiar with the literary school of psychiatric fiction, but like other fans of Alfred Hitchcock, I can think of films from the mid-twentieth century that were influenced by psychoanalytic thinking. “Spellbound” is a prime example with its own share of signs and symbols. This 1945 mystery features an imposter heading a mental asylum and a dream sequence designed by Salvador Dali that provides clues to a murder.

Nabokov expresses disdain for the institution of psychiatry in his description of a calloused nurse who “brightly” reports the young man’s latest suicide attempt. The ineptitude of the hospital is illustrated by relating that a fellow deluded patient and not a staff member prevented the young man from falling to his death.



*Movie stills from Alfred Hitchcock’s ‘Spellbound’ (1945) combining
Freudian symbolism and Salvador Dali surrealism*

Yuri Leving: *All the interpretations of “Signs and Symbols,” as suggested by scholar David Field, move from the question of whether or not the boy commits suicide to a consideration of the very foundation of knowledge: Can anyone know anything definitely? Are there any principles for determining reality? Are we not in fact all insane as we try to make some relative order of the world?*

Wayne Goodman: What’s Normal?: Whether defined statistically (as deviation from a normal distribution) or according to the psychiatrist’s schema for making a diagnosis, the young man in the story is living in a world of his mind’s own creation that has little bearing to reality.

Approaching the story through literary studies

Yuri Leving: *In Michel Foucault’s understanding of madness and institutional spaces, there is a deep suspicion about the “treatment” of the insane. What was the situation with asylums in Russia prior to Nabokov’s departure? Although Nabokov’s “Signs and Symbols” was published two decades earlier, do you note any similarities between Foucault’s and Nabokov’s treatment of institutional spaces?*

Frederick White: Psychiatry emerged as a distinct specialization in Russia only during the nineteenth century. In 1857 the first department of psychiatry was established at the Medical Surgical Academy in St. Petersburg. Students received both clinical and theoretical training and many studied or had contacts with leading European psychiatrists and neurologists. In 1900, Pavel Iakobii published a book entitled *The Principles of Administrative Psychiatry*. Iakobii, who had spent many years as a physician in Europe and practiced psychiatry in Moscow, presented a radical argument that class fears were to

blame for the mistreatment of the insane in Russia. The ruling social classes built asylums to remove from society perceived enemies and competitors as well as anyone who displayed uncontrolled passions or incomprehensible behavior. Therefore asylums and hospitals were not designed to treat the ill, but to detain them, thereby turning psychiatrists into wardens in charge of a captive population.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault concentrates on the 1657 establishment of the Hôpital Général in Paris, which he understands to be a semi-judicial and administrative structure, rather than a medical institution to help the sick and poor. Almost twenty years later, an edict was passed by the king to enlarge the *hôpital général* to each city in the kingdom, thereby expanding the reach of bourgeois and monarchical control. Foucault argues that this network began a period of confinement in which those who had once been driven from city limits (beggars, indigents and the insane) were now contained and housed apart from the general population. In these hospitals, labor was instituted as exercise and combined with moral rehabilitation to justify the site constraints and administrative enforcement. In this equation, there are both economic (putting the idle to work) and moral (maintaining the city for the virtuous) factors at play in herding undesirables into institutional spaces. The insane were grouped together with other unfortunates and little was done to treat, much less cure, their ills.

In “Signs and Symbols,” a young man is incarcerated in a mental institution in Boston or New York because he is “incurably deranged.” He is a danger to himself as he has tried to commit suicide at least twice. When his parents arrive, they are not allowed to see their son, but are confronted instead by the administrative face of the institution in the form of a nurse who “they did not care for.” There is some doubt about the type of care their son is getting since the first time he tried to commit suicide, it was unsuccessful only due to an “envious fellow-patient.” The doctors marvel at the son’s “inventiveness” and write academic papers about his condition, but there is no mention of treatment. The mother, herself, doubts the curative possibilities of the institution as “neglected children” are left “humming to themselves in unswept corners.” The boy’s father believes that they should bring their son home or they will be responsible for his death.

Although much must be extrapolated from Nabokov’s short story, it is clear that like with Iakobii and much later with Foucault, the institution’s main aim is to segregate

the ill from the well. The parents' desire to bring their son home will most certainly be met with refusals from the institution, doctors and even family members ("It does not matter what the Prince says"; A?). As Foucault would later argue, the establishment of mental asylums is for the sane, not the insane. Treatment is not the issue, rather the incarceration of the ill. In Nabokov's story, we find a similar dilemma in which the parents must either go against the norms of society (allow the insane to live within society) or take moral responsibility for the certain death of their son (through institutional neglect he will eventually be successful in killing himself).

Yuri Leving: *Is there any particular tradition of madness in Russian or European literature and culture that Nabokov alludes to here?*

Frederick White: Russia's cultural and scientific understanding of madness was originally influenced by German writers such as Joseph Eichendorff, Ludwig Tieck, Novalis and E.T.A. Hoffmann; philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche; and psychiatrists such as Emil Kraepelin and Sigmund Freud. By 1875, a vast majority of professors in Russia had received their first degrees in Germany. A fundamental shift in medicine occurred around this time, altering the way in which madness (and all other illnesses) would be conceptualized and discussed. German medicine suggested that illnesses have a pathology – medicine was no longer about symptoms as much as about causal agents and organic forms. In psychiatry, this shift resulted in an evolution of thought on madness – there would now be one conceptual norm with deviations or variations from that norm.

This evolution of thought is reflected in Russian artistic depictions of madness. We might start in the Romantic period with Aleksandr Pushkin and Vladimir Odoevskii in which we find fantastical stories about characters being driven mad by fear or supernatural forces. Nabokov seems to draw especially from Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman" and "The Queen of Spades." With Nikolai Gogol we find the last remnants of a Romantic Realism, in which fantastical madness is now brought on by real-world pressures – poverty, drug abuse, depression. These socio-economic factors are then fully exploited by Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose characters habitually struggle to maintain their

sanity despite the outward pressures driving them towards madness. The underground man, Goliadkin and Raskolnikov are examples of characters who attempt to maintain sanity through excessive reason. Nabokov's *Despair*, as an example, seems to rethink Dostoevsky's "The Double."

With the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia (as with Europe) begins to interpret mental illness in a new and different way. In an attempt to carve out a place for psychiatry within medicine, madness would now be dealt with as a disease. In response, artists at first rejected scientific medicine in favor of the irrational, championing madness over reason, yet they too eventually began to reflect in their works the contemporary medical discourse of the time. Gone was the German Romantic notion of *irrational inspiration*, replaced by a growing suspicion that civilization was under threat of moral and mental devolution. As a result, the aim of psychiatry was to depict a disease that had no uniform symptomatology. Identification and then isolation of the insane individual as a possible dangerous menace to society replaced the Romantic notion of the mad genius. This medical discourse of identification and incarceration can be found in works by Vsevolod Garshin ("The Red Poppy"), Anton Chekhov ("The Black Monk"; "Ward No. 6") and Leonid Andreev ("The Thought"; "My Notes").

Later, Freud had an *indirect* impact on the Soviet Union (many of his ideas were reconfigured without direct attribution), but was recognized and quite influential in European intellectual and popular thought. His theories on psychoanalysis and the treatment of the mentally ill became ubiquitous in intellectual discourse of the 20th century. Although Nabokov referred to Freud dismissively as the "Viennese witchdoctor," the author's references to and parodies of Freudian psychology suggest that he had more than a passing knowledge of this medical discourse.

Yuri Leving: *Stephen Parker curiously suggests that the disease of "referential mania" might also be some type of literary sickness that readers can suffer from if they get too involved in a text and begin to over focus on it at the expense of the real world around them. Is it possible that Nabokov exposes or even derides here not only the medical discourse but also literature itself (and in direct reference: literary criticism as well)?*

Frederick White: Parker's suggestion is a little disconcerting as it smacks of Max Nordau's theories on degeneration at the beginning of the twentieth century. The physician Bénédict Augustin Morel developed the idea of mental degeneration during the second half of the nineteenth century. Morel successfully argued certain elements of society were devolving, becoming genetically weaker with each generation, which would result in imbecility and sterility. Nordau expanded the concept beyond psychiatry, recognizing degeneration in the decadence and willful rejection of moral boundaries in fin de siècle Europe. In essence, Nordau transferred Morel's scientific theory of mental degeneration from the insane asylum to the literary avant-garde. His book, *Degeneration* (1892; Russian translation 1893), was concerned with the pathology of artistic production, whereby the very act of creation results in the release of vapors that are both the source of creative fantasy and the result of physical illness. Henrik Ibsen, Oscar Wilde, Paul-Marie Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire, Richard Wagner, and many others fell into his purview. Nordau's goal was to stigmatize these cultural figures as perverted and sick. The key assertion was that not only the art, but also the artist, was degenerate, depicted as a dangerous spokesman for the world of the debauched fin de siècle, nourishing a neurotic audience with artistic delusions. Nordau and his pseudo-scientific methods were used extensively by Russian critics to stigmatize their own literary competitors until as late as the 1930s. As such, I am resistant to the notion that "Signs and Symbols" can spread "referential mania" to its readers, thereby perpetuating Nordau's dubious assertions.

I think that Nabokov himself would find Parker's suggestion appetizing for derision. After all, he enjoyed poking a stick at Freud and his followers during his lifetime. For example, in his 1963 introduction to *The Defense*, Nabokov states:

[...] I have made it a rule to address a few words of encouragement to the Viennese delegation. The present foreword shall not be an exception. Analysts and analyzed will enjoy, I hope, certain details of the treatment Luzhin is subjected to after his breakdown (such as the curative insinuation that a chess player sees Mom in his Queen and Pop in his opponent's King), and the little Freudian who mistakes a Pixlok set for the key to a novel will not doubt continue

to identify my characters with his comic-book notion of my parents, sweethearts and serial selves. For the benefit of such sleuths I may as well confess that I gave Luzhin my French governess, my pocket chess set, my sweet temper, and the stone of the peach I plucked in my own walled garden.

Here, Nabokov is able to chastise both psychoanalysts and the would-be Freudian literary critic. Similarly, I think that Nabokov would relish the notion that a bunch of educated individuals would read too much into his diagnosis of “referential mania.” The bait seems to have been provided for us to drive ourselves into some sort of mania while looking for all of the possible references that Nabokov has or has not planted in his works for us to find (or not).

Yuri Leving: *Given that “Signs and Symbols” has a rather brief explanation of the character’s mental illness, can you draw any inferences from Nabokov’s other works about his depiction of madness?*

Frederick White: Earlier in Nabokov’s literary career, he concentrated on the issue of mental illness in both *Despair* and *The Defense*. In both of these works, Nabokov draws from a rich tradition, as noted above, of literary texts that depict madness. A brief discussion of these texts opens to us a few seemingly random details in “Signs and Symbols” that, not surprisingly, augment Nabokov’s treatment of the son’s illness.

The Defense was first published in 1930 and tells the story of a Russian émigré chess champion, Luzhin, who eventually goes mad and commits suicide. Although Luzhin suffers several breakdowns prior to his suicide, no medical diagnosis is offered, other than the suggestion that he has exhausted himself from too much mental activity (some version of neurasthenic mania). Even so, it is quite clear that Nabokov wished to create a character who from early childhood finds refuge from an overactive mind in the logical and rational moves of the chess game. Unfortunately, Luzhin’s obsessive compulsion to find patterns in daily life, which made him so successful at chess, also causes his ultimate demise. Although we have less detail about the son in “Signs and Symbols,” Nabokov’s reference to “referential mania” suggests a similar malady in both

the son and in Grand Master Luzhin. Some credence is given to this comparison by Nabokov's own allusions to *The Defense* in this short story. For example, there is mention that the son's "cousin [is] a famous chess player." Also, both Luzhin and the son displayed "eccentricities of a prodigiously gifted child." Given the inter-connectedness of Nabokov's literary world, I do not think that it is too preposterous to look to the symptomatology of Luzhin to better understand what Nabokov means by "referential mania."

Despair was first published in Russian in 1934. In this work, Nabokov tells the tale of Hermann, who believes that he has met his double and, as a result, decides to kill the double in order to collect on his own life-insurance policy. The problem is that Hermann is deranged and the double, as it turns out, is not actually a double, only perceived to be such by Hermann. After the murder, it is revealed in the newspapers that the victim looks nothing like the murderer, although the dead man is dressed in Hermann's clothes. This story shares similarities with Dostoevsky's "The Double" in which the character Goliadkin perceives of his own double in the work place, a man who is significantly more successful than Goliadkin, himself. Nabokov also makes references to *Crime and Punishment* and Raskolnikov, who commits murder for personal gain and then is haunted to near madness for this decision.

In *Despair*, Nabokov also makes passing references to Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman" and "The Queen of Spades." The hero of both Pushkin's and Nabokov's stories is Hermann. In "The Queen of Spades" Hermann commits murder to learn the secret card combination that will make him rich. Just as he seems to play this winning hand, one of the cards changes to the Queen of Spades and he sees the face of the woman whom he has killed for the card combination, while also losing his fortune to this misplay. Hermann then spends the rest of his life in an insane asylum going over this three-card combination. We see this reference once again in "Sign and Symbols": "the knave of hearts, the nine of spades, the ace of spades, the maid Elsa and her bestial beau." The bestial beau would be Pushkin's and Nabokov's Hermann.

Finally, Nabokov makes several momentary allusions to the medical science of the beginning of the twentieth century with references to phrenology, dangerous lunatics and those who have morally perished. Degeneration theory suggested that mental illness

was related to both the moral and mental decline of the individual, which would result in criminal behavior. Clearly, Hermann's mental illness is a factor in his criminal behavior. Nabokov also takes a funny swipe, for good measure, at psychoanalysis and their proponents: "those irresponsible scribblers, those purveyors of thrills, those villainous quacks." In this work then, Nabokov seems to have little faith in the medical profession and even creates a character who parodies many of their medical theories.

It is often dangerous in literary studies to make associations between literary works without substantiation by the author himself – whether a reference in a letter to a colleague or a note in a diary. In the case of Nabokov, however, the referential *game* is one established by the author himself and invites just the type of associations that are normally taboo with other authors. As such, I think that we can gain insights into the madness of the son in "Signs and Symbols" by following Nabokov's literary allusions, especially in this case as there is so little actual information about the real diagnostic details of the son's illness.

An Attempt at Synthesis

Yuri Leving: *This is a general question to everyone. Please contemplate the following question based on your personal reading of the short story: The third phone call is an open ending for "Signs and Symbols" which Nabokov might have utilized to create an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. Is the third call from the hospital, reporting that the son has finally succeeded in committing suicide? Is it the unknown girl dialing a wrong number again? Could it be the couple's son calling himself? How do you interpret the ending, given the events that have preceded it?*

John N. Crossley: The obvious response is to feel that when the phone rings for the third time it is the hospital calling to say that the son's most recent attempt at suicide has

succeeded, though there is clearly the possibility of a third call for “Charlie”. In the former case one may take comfort from the belief that this will bring closure for the parents, but anyone who has been close to a young person who has committed suicide knows that there are all sort of emotions that erupt. Further, there is always a void left. For the parents here, their life has been largely filled by their son. What life will they have if he is gone?

There is at least one further possibility, one other ending. The parents, or perhaps rather, the mother, could just let the ringing of the phone lapse. If answering it would bring the expected bad news, then there is nothing that they can do at this hour of night since they are dependent on public transport. In any case they were already proposing to go to the hospital in the morning. If it is not the hospital it could be the girl again, and again there is nothing more they can do. They do not seem to have many friends, so it is unlikely that one would be calling at this time. So there is nothing to be done now. There is no peace and yet, the rest is silence.⁹

Murray Biggs: Since I’ve already expressed a preference for the story’s open end, I refrain from answering this question. The theatre audience should be left to pose such questions for and to themselves, answering them (if at all) as they please. For me, the whole impact of Nabokov’s ending resides in this unknowable.

Frederick White: “Signs and Symbols” is very reminiscent of *Gothic horror* literature, in particular “The Monkey’s Paw” (1902) by W.W. Jacobs. I cannot be certain that Nabokov was paying homage to Jacob’s short story, but there are too many similarities to ignore. More importantly, an examination of Jacob’s story gets to the heart of your question. “The Monkey’s Paw” begins with a father and son playing chess (a favorite of Nabokov), which is interrupted with the arrival of the Sargent-Major. The father, Mr. White, eventually prods the Sargent-Major into telling the story of his mummified monkey’s paw. It seems that an old Fakir wanted to show that fate ruled people’s lives and that those who interfered were punished. The old Fakir put a spell on the paw so that three different men could each have three wishes from it. I might note the repetition of

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene II, Hamlet’s last four words.

threes, which is also essential to Nabokov's story. Upon questioning, it is learned that the Sargent-Major has received his three wishes and rather than selling the paw or passing it on to someone else, he decides to toss it on the fire. Mr. White pulls the paw out of the fire, but the visitor warns that he cannot be held accountable for the talisman, believing that it should be destroyed.

Later, Mr. White takes the paw and, after admitting that he already has all that he wants from life, wishes for two hundred pounds. The money does not suddenly appear, but Mr. White is sure something occurred as the paw twisted in his hand as he was making the wish. The next day, the couple's son leaves for work and the wish is almost forgotten until later in the day, when a representative from the mill arrives at the White's home to say that their son has been caught in the factory's machinery and killed. The company offers the couple two hundred pounds as compensation.

The couple is devastated by their loss, but one day, Mrs. White remembers the monkey's paw and she asks her husband to use the second wish to bring their son back from the dead. The father is reluctant because not only has his son been dead for ten days, but the young man was mangled by the machinery and could hardly return from this experience whole. The couple argues, but the wife is insistent. Mr. White concedes and wishes that their son were alive once again. As the evening approaches, there is a knock at the door. Mr. White is afraid to open the door, but his wife is certain that it is their son returned. Mrs. White runs downstairs to open the door, but cannot reach the bolt. The faint knocking continues and Mr. White fumbles for the monkey's paw and makes his final wish. The knocking ceases. When his wife finally opens the door, there is nothing there. The reader is left to wonder whether this was really their son, or if all of this was simply a series of coincidences: the death of their son, the two hundred pounds, and the faint knocking at their door.

Whether Nabokov had this particular tale in mind is unclear, but a similar narrative arc results in an analogous mystery. In "Signs and Symbols" we again have a husband and wife, who have lost their son – this time to madness. They too feel guilty – this time due to his institutionalization and, in their minds, his abandonment. They too contemplate changing the fate of their son by caring for him themselves (Can we suggest - bringing him back to life?) in their own home. Yet, before this can happen, the couple is

confronted with two misplaced telephone calls to an unknown Charlie. The story ends with a third call, late at night, that may again be for Charlie, or may be the hospital calling to say that their son has committed suicide. Is it their son? Is it a bad omen? We will never know. Just with Jacob's story, there is no correct answer. The reader cannot figure out who is calling or if the mangled corpse is actually knocking at the door. Horror and terror, the main components of the Gothic story, are effectively created because we do not know and never will. Therefore, I suggest that Nabokov has established several possibilities for the third call on purpose and has intentionally given no concrete clues to a *correct* answer because, the story would lose all of its suspense once deciphered, if that was possible.

Wayne Goodman: I interpreted the third phone call as a call from the hospital informing his parents' that their son has escaped. By that I mean either through suicide or leaving the grounds. The son was determined to "tear a hole in his world" and the hospital staff was incapable of stopping him. But I do not envision a happy reunion with his family. There is no room in their world for him.

Hal Ackerman: It is tempting, of course, to supply an answer to the story's final question. Given Nabokov's sense of humor, if there were an answer it might be a wrong number or a Canadian pharmacy spam calling to sell Viagra. The decision of how to end the film speaks to the differing expectations that audiences bring with them. Contemporary feature film audiences, sadly, do not relish ambiguity. (Certainly the executives who pre-decide these questions believe that to be true. I once had an executive tell me "We have a C-List audience. Write down to them.>"). Purveyors of literary fiction are far more open to challenge. Think of *The Lady or the Tiger*. There's no answer given. Movies (famously, *Casablanca*) have had several endings shot, ultimately settling on one. With today's interactive technology, audiences might be given the choice of several answers

