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## THE COMPLICATED PERSONALITY RESULTED WITH DEATH IN NABOKOV'S *THE LUZHIN DEFENSE*\*

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### Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov is one of the most prominent writers in both Russian and American Literature. Influencing a great number of authors, Nabokov pens many a novel dealing with obsessed characters, some of whom regard the death as a final solution. *Luzhin Defense* can be considered in one of these kinds of novels mentioned above. The novel also possesses autobiographical and psychoanalytic characteristics, which attracts the readers' attention. Aleksandr Ivanovich Luzhin, the protagonist of the novel, spends all his whole life to chess and chess problems; besides, he has an introvert personality, which makes him snarl in communication with family, friends and even his wife. The critic depicts the protagonist as "a chess prodigy who can barely navigate his way through the daily physical world, much less cope with the people who live in it" (Ras, 2012). On the day her wife gives a party for the honorary of him, he suicides. Nabokov ends the novel with these sentences. "Aleksandr Ivanovich, Aleksandr Ivanovich,' roared several voices. But there was no Aleksandr Ivanovich" (Nabokov, 1990: 228). The complicated personality leads the protagonist see the complex problems in chess are much easier than daily life. As Khodasevich purports "For Luzhin, the complex problems of his abstract art are infinitely easier that the simple problems of life" (1930: 1). In addition to this, the lack of communication is another factor for his psychological breakdown. Her wife's endeavors to enter his world fail and Luzhin suicides. In this context, the novel teems with obsessive attitudes and incidences. To sum up, Nabokov well recounts the individual's inner world and his/her contradictions. Luzhin who cannot confront with the physical world prefers death to life. In this study, the protagonist's complex personality and his life resulted with death will be argued.

**Keywords:** Personality, Death, Luzhin, *Luzhin Defense*, Nabokov, Vladimir Nabokov.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Nabokov is one of the most prominent authors influencing world literature. Always concerned with numerous themes, Nabokov makes use of the subjects of death and suicide, especially in his earliest novels while living in Russia. His fourth novel, *The Luzhin Defense*, in which it "is really with this book that his 'life' begins," (Reeve 1992: 495) is regarded as his best Russian novel. It is concerned with a chess master, Alexander Ivanovich Luzhin, whose mental problems lead him to commit suicide. Nabokov depicts the protagonist as "a champion chess player who goes mad when chess combinations pervade the actual pattern of his existence" (Nabokov, 2011: 217). Dembo encapsulates the novel in a few words: "hypersensitive vision and the insanity or suicide in which it culminates" (1967: 122). Luzhin is

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depicted as a lonesome, introverted protagonist, who feels daily activities are more complicated than the most complex chess problems, eventually, becoming completely isolated from his wife and milieu. Observing his mental process, the reader can clearly see his unstable mental condition characterized by such ailments as obsessive compulsive neurosis, psychoanalytic conditions, and avoidant disorder. In the following section, these ailments and Luzhin's suicide will be examined.

## II. FAMILY FACTOR

Luzhin's family is the most important factor shaping his characterization and adulthood. His father expected more from Luzhin than the son could give, and his mother was beleaguered with attachment to Luzhin. His nursemaid is also a problematic figure, as depicted in the novel. When observing these characters from a psychoanalytical view, it can be seen that the main reason for the protagonist mental problems.

His father's influence is important understanding how Luzhin's morality is formed. An imbroglia emerges when the father's dreams are confounded by the timid and bashful Luzhin. Writing children books, Luzhin's father creates prototypical figures, such as "the image of a fair-haired lad, headstrong, 'brooding' who later becomes a violinist or a painter, without losing his moral beauty in the process" (Nabokov, 1990: 22). Furthermore, we can only pity a child with this kind of father, as regards both his physical and psychological development. The lack of his father's approval creates a lack of self-confidence. On the other hand, "the only person in whose presence he did not feel constrained" is his aunt, who commits adultery with Luzhin's father. To illustrate, "His father's death did not interrupt his work" (Nabokov, 1990: 87). One reason he does not like his father may well be this relationship. In psychoanalytic theory, it could be identified as an Oedipus complex. The protagonist's disconnection with the parents engenders an inclination of alienation and the creation of an inner psychological world.

In addition, his mother is a problematic figure who cannot signify her true feeling toward others. She also exhibits paranoid behavior occasionally, which deeply affects the character of Luzhin, for example, "his mother gasped as if deprived of her tongue and then began to laugh unnaturally and hysterically, with wails and cries" (Nabokov, 1990: 46). Moreover, after finding out about her husband's infidelity with her own sister, his mother abruptly refrains from taking an interest in her own child. The mother's statement substantiates this idea: "'He cheats,' she kept repeating, 'just as you cheat. I'm surrounded by cheats'" (Nabokov, 1990: 47). Thus, Luzhin can be understood as an unlucky boy whose parents are abnormal and mentally unstable.

Nabokov offers little information about Luzhin's nursemaid. She is depicted as an inconspicuous figure. The impotence of inner equilibrium makes her a little unbalanced. For instance, she has an abnormal fear for the Luzhins' belongings home. "she herself [will] take the bull by the horns, though this bull inspired mortal fear in her" (Nabokov, 1990: 14). Also, although the ambiance in the house is gloomy and silent, Luzhin prefers the times when nobody speaks to or tells him what to do. "This was, and now it was especially pleasant: a strange silence in the house and a kind of expectation of something" (Nabokov, 1990: 39) He lives in a problematic family that is one of the reasons shaping his characterization. At least one critic notes Luzhin "inhabits a closed, claustrophobic world with almost none of Ganin's sense of an expansive future" (Foster, 1993: 63). Hence, it can be concluded that by giving much attention to the protagonist's family, Nabokov emphasizes the sources of his mental ailments.

## III. COMPLICATED PERSONALITY

Although few critics have paid little attention to this novel, it is distinctive, depicting a complex character who may be best understood through the lens of modern psychology. For example, one critic identifies the novel as "the story of a chess (Wunderkind and monomaniac)" (Struve, 1954: 403). Being both genius and maniac, Luzhin exhibits indications of many psychological diseases. From the beginning of his childhood to his suicidal end he has so many

symptoms that even readers who do not know much about psychology or psychiatry are able to understand that there is something wrong in his mentality.

Madness has always fascinated writers and has a privileged relationship with literature, being sometimes more than a mere metaphor and rather corresponding to a thematic network underlying a text. It has even been compared to the reading and/or writing activity of literature. (Hamrit, 2006)

Luzhin's childhood is on prominent display for readers. Accompanying that is the notion that nobody can be counted on, or everyone is unreliable is the first symptom in his characterization. His schoolmaster states: "the boy seemed not to get on with his companions, .... the boy did not run about much during the recess period" (Nabokov, 1990: 24). The deficiency of communication leads him to feel alienated and possessed of a kind of personality, one in which he feels trapped in his inner world. One critic delineates him as the protagonist "who manages his career as a precocious chess genius but prohibits any normal human contacts as a drain on his energy" (Foster, 1993: 66). In this sense, it is reasonable to conclude this problem may be the main concern in the protagonist's life.

Nabokov also writes about dissimulation. Neither Luzhin's family nor the reader can understand what it is the protagonist thinks or how he feels. For example, Nabokov offers examples that the protagonist has never cried: "'Now he's going to cry.' But Luzhin never once cried" (Nabokov, 1990: 26) and again nor did he "break into tears and instead buried his face in the pillow, making bursting sounds with his lips into it" (Nabokov, 1990: 15). His childhood thus offers clues as to his mental state and hints at his pitiful end.

Another prominent issue is "the full horror of the change" (Nabokov, 1990: 18). Moving to another place or changing his habits is a more difficult and complicated circumstance than it might be for a typical child. The novel, "which began by stressing Luzhin's basic inability to welcome the future" (Foster, 1993: 66), from the start introduces a problematic figure who has no courage to cope even with unexceptional daily situations. As an example, when Luzhin learns they are moving from the country to the nearby city, Nabokov recounts the instant for the protagonist as "the whole world suddenly went dark, as if someone had thrown a switch," (Nabokov, 1990: 18) which reflects his fear of any alteration in his world.

An important psychological problem indicated in the novel is seen in the symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder. The inventory of goods and attitudes typical of the condition is characteristically revealed about the protagonist. For example, Nabokov juxtaposes incidences of counting: "In this way he sat through approximately two hundred and fifty long intermissions," (Nabokov, 1990: 25) or "A goose advanced on a pup and so on thirty-eight times around the entire room" (Nabokov, 1990: 28). Such counting behavior may be related to how he regards events in life:

Thus Luzhin, the artistic chess genius of *The Defense*, makes his leap from a simulacrum of this world to one of infinite, eternal chess, upon realizing that the apparent events of his life have in fact been chess moves in a game played against an incomparably grander master than he. (Stonehill, 1998: 86)

This inclination toward playing chess becomes the protagonist's obsession. His concealment from life behind chess against struggling for life is his escape. The chess board symbolizes the world he lives in. However, Ivask alleges that his vision is "very limited - by a chessboard" (1961: 137). His narrow-mindedness becomes the source of his mental problems, leading to his suicide. The protagonist, whose entire life turns into a chess game, turns out to be an impuissant character, incapable of executing daily activities. Dembo observes: "It is against the play of this invisible opponent (fate) that Luzhin attempts to work out a 'defense'" (1967: 115). Luzhin, in endeavoring to exert his superiority, loses his mind.

Furthermore, Luzhin believes the circle of chess he inhabits is so huge, it incorporates the real world. "The world around him as a gigantic chessgame threatening to destroy him"

(Couturier 1986: 35) becomes his absolute enemy. "Luzhin has so saturated his mind with chess that he sees his whole life in its terms" (Gibbs, 1996: 215). The protagonist takes the obsession of chess even further, imagining the real world as a chess board, with daily activities conceived of as a great rivalry. "The great advantage of the ideal chess world over the 'real' world from which Luzhin flees in *The Defense* is that the chess world is one of carefully defined rules and orderly systems of play" (Stonehill, 1998: 108)

Not only does Luzhin show indications of obsessive compulsive disorder, such as being in the servitude of chess and in counting, but also his numerous paranoid behaviors are emphasized. Standard criticism underscore this circumstance as the idea of "a melancholy amusement" (Nabokov, 1990: 20) and it is only one of such examples given in the novel; in fact almost all behaviors described are abnormal. Burns notes, earlier novels written by Nabokov display similar characteristics: "As in *The Defense*, Nabokov's characters collapse into paranoia just at the moment when the reader realizes the metafictional twist in the story" (Burns, 2006). In this sense, Luzhin is identified as a paranormal figure.

Being himself subjected to auditory and visual hallucinations, Nabokov staged many characters tempted by madness. Thus, the protagonist Luzhin who is a chess player in *The Luzhin Defense* is the prey of a monomaniac passion which ends in a suicide. (Hamrit, 2006)

### CONCLUSION

Nabokov brilliantly depicts a mentally stable protagonist incapable of surviving daily life. Having demonstrated many indications of mental illnesses, Luzhin appears stuck in a chessboard that he regards as the real world. The only thing that overcomes him is a chess game against an Italian Turati, who makes an unexpected move. As Sale points out, Nabokov "created a character great enough that he could only be ruined in a switch from the life of chess to the chess of life" (1964: 612). Still, this point of view, it is limited and provides only part of the answer. Luzhin's own mental state naturally propels him onward to death. Chmeley's summation of the novel concludes that death is the protagonist's only remaining option;

Luzhin, the hero of the novel, becomes a victim of his genius in the very blossom of his maturity. He overstrained his nerves in his fight for the chess world championship because of an isolation from normal human life since his very childhood. Long years spent at the chessboard and mental chess exercises filled his head with a vision which blurs his family life with fog and distorts his mind. Having neither spiritual background nor training to fight it in a logical way, he decides to do something extraordinary. (1965: 218)

Nabokov has stated the characters he creates, represent his inner world, and they are fighting against the real world. Struve writes: "Nabokov himself said in his autobiography that all conflicts in literature are clashes not between characters but between the author and the world" (Struve, 1967: 156). In this context, we can claim that we are reading Nabokov instead of the protagonist Luzhin. Possibly, we also can better understand the author.

Luzhin succumbs to the madness, a victim of both his own brilliance and his love of playing chess. His psychological suffering led him to suicide. Nabokov has written an excellent descriptive novel depicting the travails of a chess genius. It is a tale that may well be his best novel composed in the Russian language.

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