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*Unreliable Narration in Vladimir Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters"*

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*To our dear parents for their love, patience, encouragement,  
and help.*

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this paper is on a further investigation into the growing area of research in the idea of unreliability in literary studies. The paper seeks to examine the issue of unreliability with reference to "The Vane Sisters" The first part of the paper provides an overview of the contrasted key theoretical investigations into the concept of unreliability, and in the second part, we have made an analysis of Vladimir Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters" by applying the ideas of unreliability.

There is a conclusion which sums up the findings of the study.

## Chapter One

### Unreliable Narration History

Unreliable narration is a storytelling technique which requires some work on the part of the reader, trying to work out how much of the story is true and how much is subjective, or an outright lie. The term unreliable narrator was famously coined by Wayne Booth in his seminal *Rhetoric of Fiction*. It has been of notable importance in narratological studies ever since its introduction in 1961. In *A Companion To Narrative Theory*) Connolly, 2005:13. (

Since Wayne Booth's introduction of the concept of unreliable narrator in 1961, it has been one of the most hotly debated issues in narratology. The idea has led several recent studies to promote a critical re-examination of the traditional understanding of the unreliable narrator. For Booth, a narrator is "reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not". He observes further that the "narrator is often radically different from the implied author who creates him" (Booth, 1961: 152, 158-159).

In other words, a narrator is considered to be unreliable if his remarks and expressions convey perceptions and values that deviate from those of the implied author. Accordingly, the notion of the unreliable narrator is seen as a "text-internal" issue between the "postulated narrator" and the implied author "(the author's 'second self')" (Ibid:159).

Olson notes that "Booth's emphasis on the pleasures of exclusion suggests

that the reader and implied author belong to an in-group that shares values, judgments, and meanings from which the unreliable narrator is ousted". Although, Booth's definition of unreliable narrator remains the chief inspiration for narratologists, it went through further refinement and classification by a number of narratological scholars who mainly pay a considerable attention to the interrelationship between author, narrator and reader without achieving unanimous agreement (Olson,2005: 93).

An unreliable narrator is usually identified as a narrative set in first-person where the nature of the narrator is sometimes immediately clear. For instance, a story may open with the narrator making a plainly false or delusional claim or admitting to being severely mentally ill, or the story itself may have a frame in which the narrator appears as a character, with clues to his or her unreliability (Booth,1983, 158-159).

Booth defines the reliable and unreliable narrator in the following way: "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (158-59). In other words, when a narrator expresses values and perceptions that strikingly diverge from those of the implied author he is deemed unreliable (Olson ,2005: 95).

The idea of the unreliable narrator and the reliable narrator is portrayed in both 20th century literature and contemporary literature. 20th century works such

as Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* is a prime example of the unreliable narrator. In Burgess' novel the narrator's credibility is determined by his misuse of language, drugs, and his subtle manipulation. All of which is made quite clear throughout the novel. The credibility of narrators in contemporary works is much more unclear, such as the narrator Blizzard Entertainment's *Diablo III*. The materiality of *Diablo III* is one of the main obstacles in determining the narrator's reliability (Ibid.).

Moreover, once a narrator is deemed unreliable, then this unreliability will be consistent throughout the work. When a narrator is unreliable there is a conflict between the narrator's presentation and the rest of the narrative which makes us suspect his sincerity. One read between the lines and come to the conclusion that the narrator is either withholding the true version of the story or is lacking the ability to tell it (Chatman,1978:149 .(

Further, specifies three sources of unreliability; the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his questionable morals. More specifically, factors which may contribute to narratorial unreliability is when the narrator is young and inexperienced or afflicted with low Intelligence quotient . These are both cases of limited understanding and knowledge. When narrators display a personal involvement the story, they portray characters or events in a subjective way (Rimmon-Keenan ,1989:100-101).

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Lastly, if the implied author does not share the narrator's moral values then his morals are considered questionable. If they do share moral values then the



narrator is unequivocally deemed reliable, no matter how morally reprehensible his views may seem. Unreliable narration falls under the umbrella term of irony. Irony provides the means for creating the distance between the implied author and the unreliable narrator. The author is able to include as well as exclude readers in a subtle way (Keen,2003:41. (

In order to detect unreliability, the reader has to adopt an interpretive strategy which involves reading against the grain and assuming the understanding of the unspoken values that are communicated by the implied author. This strategy includes the detection of textual signals (Olson ,2005:96).

Wayne C. Booth (1961) defines the “unreliable narrator” in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* as follows:

I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not. (158 -9)

According to M. H. Abrams’(1993) *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

The fallible or unreliable narrator is one whose perception, interpretation, and evaluation of the matters he or she narrates do not coincide with the implicit opinions and norms manifested by the author, which the author expects the alert reader to share. (168)

Additionally David Lodge(1992) says in *The Art of Fiction*:

Unreliable Narrators are invariably invented characters who are part of the stories they tell...Even a character-narrator cannot be a hundred per cent unreliable. If everything he or she says is palpably

false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that a novel is a work of fiction. There must be some possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood within the imagined world of the novel, as there is in the real world, for the story to engage our interest. The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter(154).

To sum up these three definitions, the unreliable narrator is the one whose ideas, opinions, or sense of values do not agree implicitly or explicitly with those of the author, the implied author, or the work as a whole. Unreliable narration occurs when there is a rift between the values of the narrator and the implied author. This rift is put into context by irony, by which the implied author is communicating unspoken points over the head of the narrator to readers (thereby excluding the narrator). There are three sources of unreliability, limited knowledge, personal involvement, and questionable morals. Furthermore, detecting textual signals is a method for the reader to identify an unreliable narrator (Rimmon-Keenan,1989: 102).

## **Chapter Two**

### **Unreliable Narration in "The Vane Sisters"**

"The Vane Sisters" is a short story by Vladimir Nabokov, written in March 1951. It is famous for providing one of the most extreme examples of an unreliable narrator. It was first published in the Winter 1958 issue of *The Hudson Review* and then reprinted in *Encounter* during 1959 (Quinn,2005:83).

A teacher struggles with the ghosts of a former student and her sister. The narrator of "The Vane Sisters" is a French teacher at an all-girls college, and he comes across a suicide note from one of his students disguised as part of her French essay. He rushes to stop her as soon as he finds it, but he shows up too late. His student killed herself because she couldn't stand the thought of life without her married lover, and said lover showed no signs of leaving his wife for the student (Ibid.).

The narrator is left to console the sister of his late student, a woman named Cynthia. The narrator and Cynthia both knew of his student's affair, and Cynthia believes that her sister is punishing her from the grave for meddling (quite literally) in her affairs. Cynthia takes it upon herself to start toying with her sister's lover; sending him locks of her sister's hair and pictures of the gravesite (Oliver,2015:9).

This freaks the narrator out a little, and Cynthia's tactics, plus her apparent connection with the dead, cause the narrator and Cynthia to part ways. Or so he thinks. He later learns of Cynthia's death, and although he himself can never sense it, it is apparent to the reader that both of the Vane sisters have been toying with the narrator from beyond the grave; they leave a message for the reader in the last paragraph of the story. For this reason, many tout "The Vane Sisters" as a prime example of an unreliable narrator (Ibid:10).

Stylistic techniques are never sharply separated from the themes in Vladimir Nabokov's work. "The Vane Sisters" is an excellent example of his interest in the playfulness of fiction for its own sake and his joy in the potential for deceitfulness in art. His main thematic and stylistic device here is the use of an unreliable narrator. The events of the story of the Vane sisters and D. probably occurred much as the professor says they do, but his interpretations of characters and events are not always fully accurate. In this regard, he resembles Charles Kinbote, in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), who ostensibly is explaining a poem by John Shade but is actually writing about himself (Ibid.).

In the beginning, the Narrator says that he could have never had learned of Cynthia's death had he not run into a 'series of trivial investigations' prompted by his observation of icicles and the parking meter. Only after having deciphered the mysterious message hidden in the first later of the last paragraph can readers understand that the icicles and the meter were sent by the Vane sisters from beneath the grave (Murvnik,2008:45).

In the description of the dead sister, Sybil, readers are confronted with the possibility of two views of reality. One is Sibyl seen through the 'rational' eyes of the Narrator who notices her skin disease, the ugly tan and unfortunate makeup:

... kept watching that carefully waved dark hair, that small, small-fowered hat with a litle hyaline veil as worn that season and under it her small face broken into a cubist patern by scars due to a skin disease, pathetically masked by a sun- lamp so that hardened her features, whose charm was further impaired

by her having painted everything that could be painted, that the pale gums of her teeth between the cherry-red chapped lips and the diluted black ink of her eyes under darkened lids were the only visible openings into her beauty (Nabokov 1968: 216)

The other is the 'dreamy,' 'heavenly' or even Platonic view of Sibyl by her sister Cynthia:

And then, holding that limp notebook as if it was a kind of passport to a casual Elysium (where pencil points do not snap and a dreamy young beauty with an impeccable complexion winds to a lock of her hair on a dreamy forefinger, as she meditates over some celestial text), Cynthia led me upstairs ... (Ibid:217).

Here the contrast between the darkness and the light implied in the description of the Elysium recalls the beginning of the story when the Narrator talked about his appetite for 'other tidbits of light and shade. However, the Narrator's words reveal that he has glimpses of the other, beautiful reality despite being focused on the prosaic details: he talks about 'openings into her beauty' at the very end of his description of Sibyl; I have concluded his visit of Sibyl's bedroom mentioning 'to tend, inessential body, that D. must have known down to its last velvet detail. 'And yet, there is always something that leads him away from seeing this beauty more clearly. As Nabokov himself stated, the protagonist of this short story is both callous and superficial . It may be the Narrator's preoccupation with the order of written words that makes him so unfeeling: he is constantly arranging 'the ugly copybooks alphabetically' and plunging 'into their chaos of scripts (Wagner-Martin,2000:229).

Nabokov presents his protagonist ironically because the narrator thinks he is far more capable of understanding than he truly is. At one point, he considers himself “in a state of raw awareness that seemed to transform the whole of my being into one big eyeball rolling in the world’s socket.” He feels that he must ridicule others to elevate himself. Thus he emphasizes how Sybil’s face was scarred by a skin disease and was heavily made up and how Cynthia’s skin had a “coarse texture” masked ineptly by cosmetics applied even more slovenly than her sister’s. He glories in calling attention to Cynthia’s body odor and to the fading looks of her female friends (Ibid.).

At Cynthia’s parties, even though everyone is connected with the arts, “there was no inspired talk,” so he amuses himself by poking “a little Latin fun at some of her guests.” He will not accompany Cynthia to séances conducted by professional mediums because he “knew too much about that from other sources.” He does not need to experience something firsthand to be able to dismiss it (Marcus,2005:187)

At one point, the narrator alludes to a "novel or short story in which, unknown to the author, the first letters of the words in its last paragraph formed, as deciphered by Cynthia, a message from his dead mother." When the final paragraph of the story is subjected to this technique, the result is as follows: Icicles by Cynthia. Meter from me Sybil. The icicles and meter are references to the story's beginning where the narrator, who prides himself on his careful attention to detail, is transfixed by the minute effects of dripping icicles and shadows cast by a parking meter. Thus, this is the Nabokovian twist: at the end of the short story, the reader learns that the narrator is being unconsciously and mockingly influenced in both his writing and the events surrounding him by the dead sisters (Quinn,2005:21).

The very name of Sybil hints at the trick of the final paragraph, as the word acrostic was first applied to the prophecies of the Erythraean Sibyl, which were written on leaves and arranged so that the initial letters of the leaves always formed a word. Sybil Vane is also a character in Oscar Wilde's only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. She is an actress who commits suicide when Dorian rejects her, first causing the portrait to change and Dorian to notice the connection between him and the portrait (Ibid:23).

The most noteworthy thing in Vladimir Nabokov short story "The Vain Sisters" is his unique narrator that is noted as being an "unreliable narrator". It gives the short story a nice twist especially the ending. The writing style of Nabokov is what gave this story fame since no body has attempted what this postmodern writer has done. The plot was minimal but Nabokov relied on his descriptive language to tell the story (Wasmuth,2009:8).

The narrator gave extreme detail on everything he saw which is something he prides himself on like when he description the icicle that caught his attention. His acute eye is what led him to discover his former colleague D. and running into him is what lead him to find out about the death of Cynthia. The ending is the real twist in that it is alluded that the narrator is not who he says he is. The apparent uniqueness of this narrative approach has created fame for this story, and Nabokov himself described this device as something that 'can only be tried once in a thousand years of fiction'. However, it may be that several other of Nabokov's works have similar riddles inside them yet to be discovered. The trick ending of "The Vane Sisters" originally went unnoticed when the "New Yorker" rejected the

story, and it was only revealed when Nabokov wrote a letter to the chief editor, Katharine A. White, explaining the foundation of the story (Ibid:9).

In Nabokov's story, however, Cynthia moves to New York after her sister's suicide. Here the Narrator begins seeing her, in his own words, 'fairly often.' There is nothing erotic in their meetings for him. Indeed, as he tells us, she has three lovers in New York: one is a photographer, the others are two brothers who own a printing establishment. We must notice again the juxtaposition of the visual (photography) and the print (a printing establishment), as well as the usual for Nabokov theme of doubles (Ibid:10).

At this point, the Narrator does not understand that is he himself has a double: D. Upon meeting D. in the college town at the beginning of the story, the Narrator feels 'a rush of personal irritation against travelers who seem to feel nothing at all upon revisiting spots that ought to harass them at every step with wailing and writhing memories. At the end of the story it is the Narrator himself who is assaulted by 'writhing memories' (Ibid:15).

## **Conclusion**

"The Vane Sisters," concluding the story on and with a puzzle relates the text to games but also incites the reader to go back to the beginning and try to sort out the meaning, starting from the acrostic at the end. The story demonstrates the author's amazing descriptive abilities to capture an image or a moment as he both records and relates all the hidden surprises of a sunny day in a snowy, rural New York college town.



The story is carefully told by the French professor who prides himself in having a sharp eye and extremely accurate visual sense. In addition, to physical details that surround him, the narrator also finds great satisfaction in noticing the little secrets and scandals of all the people that cross his path in life. He is always serenely satisfied with himself and condescendingly critical of others. He happens to become involved with two sisters who both ironically die in the story. One of the sisters was his French student who committed suicide after a failed love affair. The other is her older sister who tried to get the narrator to stop the affair and later died from some unknown cause. The older sister had a strong belief in the spiritual world of afterlife and beyond. Her relationship with the author after her sister's suicide has had a strong influence on the narrator but he cannot fully understand to what extent since he is unable to see the hidden meanings in the signs and symbols that surround him.

“The Vane Sisters” is a great example of Nabokov's artistic purpose and objectives regarding fiction in general and the short story in particular. Nabokov shows meticulous attention to the details of the outer world, and a clear eye for the inner world of human desire, despair and compulsion. In this story, Nabokov also provides the reader with a promise of the existence of something that lies beyond the world of sight, sound and perception. This story is told on different levels at the same time. It is a pleasant experience for the reader to slowly discover that the main story has been woven into the superficial one that the reader encounters on the surface level. Nabokov allows the reader to speculate with him on the nature of a spiritual world that seems to pervade his story yet constantly remains elusive.

The Key to the story is quite interestingly found in the last paragraph which helps us to solve the mysterious spiritual message that the narrator has been searching for from the deceased sisters.

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