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Darkness of Absence and Darkness of Sleep:  
A Love Lesson in Nabokov's *The Vane Sisters*

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*The Vane Sisters*, the last short story published by Nabokov, was written in 1951, and came out in 1959.<sup>1</sup> When the *New Yorker* initially rejected *The Vane Sisters*, Nabokov had to write a letter to the editor, in which he explained the structure of the story and deciphered the sentence formed by the first letters of the words in the last paragraph: *Icicles by Cynthia meter from me Sybil*. The story was published and is known now as a famous example of an unreliable Narrator<sup>2</sup> who does not understand the message of the spirits. But do we, the readers, understand the message the ghosts are trying to communicate? Or are we as superficial as the Narrator and only skip at the surface, once we have read the first letters of the words of the final paragraph and are satisfied that we see a sentence? Why does Cynthia send icicles to the Narrator, and her sister Sybil — a meter? What are they trying to say through these objects?

The difficulties we encounter when trying to fully understand the story partly derive from Nabokov's own tendency to hide his meanings very deep inside his plots. In the above-mentioned letter to the editor, as cited by Gennady Barabtarlo, "Nabokov reveals...

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<sup>1</sup> Wagner-Martin 2000: 229.

<sup>2</sup> Wagner Martin sums it up: "As good readers, we are trained to seek permanence, clear headedness, stability (...) But the crux of Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters" is that the narrating consciousness, the professor of French who has been the teacher for the suicide Sybil Vane, Cynthia's younger sister, is untrustworthy. He is, in fact, something of a fool" (Wagner-Martin 2000: 232).

the inner workings of this strategy: 'Most of the stories I am contemplating (and some I have written in the past...) will be composed on these lines, according to this system wherein a second (main) story is woven into, or placed behind, the superficial semi-transparent one.' (SL 117)."<sup>3</sup> Not only the last paragraph but the whole story is a puzzle.<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning, the Narrator says that he might have never had learned of Cynthia's death had he not run into D. due to 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 letters of the last paragraph can we understand that the icicles and the meter were sent by the Vane sisters from beneath the grave. Below I will try to show that from the realm of shades the sisters wanted to draw the Narrator's attention to the similarity of his callous behavior towards Cynthia and D.'s cold behavior towards Sybil: behaviors which ultimately resulted in both sisters' death. But they didn't simply accuse him of murder in the strange sign languages of the shades. They wanted to show this intelligent but egotistical and superficial person that the only true vision is through the eyes of love.

## 2

The sisters names, Sybil and Cynthia, are significant. It has been pointed out that the name Sybil Vane comes from the Sibyl Vane of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.<sup>5</sup> Her name, therefore, introduces the theme of aestheticism's peculiar blind-

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<sup>3</sup> Barabtarlo 1995: 104–105.

<sup>4</sup> Alexandrov explains why Nabokov was forcing his reader to work hard in order to be able to tell truth from falsehood: "The implication of this tactic... is that he may have seen the hermeneutics of experience and the hermeneutics of reading as being equivalents" (Alexandrov 1991: 8).

<sup>5</sup> "...Wilde's visitation at the table-turning séance: Sibyl Vane kills herself because of Dorian Gray's singular stone-heartedness, and the dead author speaks in "garbled French" because he is addressing the supercilious Frenchman," (Barabtarlo 1995: 113).

ness to reality.<sup>6</sup> Nabokov being a lepidopterist, it is worth noting that there is a species of the so-called *cryptic mantis*, *Sibylla pretiosa*, an insect that is known for its ability for camouflage: it mimics not only the color of the surrounding leaves, but even its shape. *Samia Cynthia* is a wild silk moth, yellow as larva, brownish as moth with large wings, whose females 'call' males in the evening or at night. One can find certain parallels with the heroines of the novel: the ability of their ghosts to hide in the everyday life of the Narrator, the yellow colors associated with Cynthia in the story, the final scene taking place at night. But there is also, as it seems to me, another cultural reference in their names that might help us uncover the meaning of the story.

In the beginning, the unnamed Narrator meets a former colleague, D., on a wintry street after he has spent some time admiring the snow and the ice. As Wagner-Martin points out, the ice of the landscape is "resonant of the lower regions of Dante's inferno."<sup>7</sup> An evocation of death can be read into the comparison of the Narrator to an eyeball: "...I walked on 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,"<sup>8</sup> (compare it to the definition of death by a character in *The Gift*: "the liberation of the soul from the eye-sockets of the flesh and our transformation into one complete and free eye, which can simultaneously see in all directions, or to put it differently: a supersensory insight into the world accompanied by our inner participation."<sup>9</sup>). The death-motif (preparing the meeting of the Narrator and D., his double, as we shall see) is heard also through the Narrator walking "straight into a delicately dying sky,"<sup>10</sup> through the "ruddy tinge" upon "some damp snow."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Without your art, you are nothing," says Dorian Gray to Sibyl upon which she kills herself (Wilde 2003: 91). Similarly, the only thing the Narrator appreciates about Cynthia is her painting.

<sup>7</sup> Wagner-Martin 2000: 230.

<sup>8</sup> Nabokov 1968: 214.

<sup>9</sup> Nabokov 1991: 310, cited in Moudrov 2007: 15.

<sup>10</sup> Nabokov 1968: 214.

<sup>11</sup> Nabokov 1968: 214.

When they meet, D. tells the Narrator that his lawyer informed him that Sybil's sister Cynthia died last week: the cause of her death was somehow connected to her heart (possibly heart attack, heart disease, or heartbreak). This lawyer is not connected to anybody else in the story; but the lawyer is mentioned just before the Narrator is going to recall the examination Sybil took on the eve of her suicide. It turns out that the Narrator was Sybil's professor of French and therefore was able to read the suicide note she left in her exam paper: 'this exam is finished as is my life' (translated from French to English). The lawyer, the exam, the end of one's life — everything points out to a certain Judgment Day metaphor.

Her very name — Sybil — calls to memory the ancient visionaries, sibyls or *sibyllae*, frenzied women prophesizing at holy sites. Moreover, the famous mediaeval Latin hymn on the topic of the Judgment Day mentions both a Sibylla and the biblical David (D.?) figuring as a prophet:

Dies irae, dies illa  
Solvat saeculum in favilla  
Teste David cum Sibylla

Day of wrath, that day  
Will dissolve the world in ashes,  
As David and Sibyl have foretold.

The connection of Sybil to the Day of Judgment and to other-worldly communication will come up again significantly at the end of the story. At the beginning of the story, however, she is dead very soon after we first meet her.

Sybil's suicide note is written in a foreign language and contains a few puns, which makes it similar to riddle-like utterances of ancient prophets. When the Narrator shows the note to Cynthia after her sister's death, we are for the first time in the story struck with his strange indifference or insensitivity: he points out grammatical mistakes and peculiarities of her French when talking to Cynthia, as if they were important for the grieving woman.

In the description of the dead sister, Sybil, we 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 observing that carefully waved dark hair, that small, small-flowered hat with a little hyaline veil as worn that season and under it her small face broken into a cubist pattern by scars due to a skin disease, pathetically masked by a sun-lamp tan that hardened her features, whose charm was further impaired by her having painted everything that could be painted, so 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.<sup>12</sup>

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

And then, holding that limp notebook as if it were a kind of passport to a casual Elysium (where pencil points do not snap and a dreamy young beauty with an impeccable complexion winds a lock of her hair on a dreamy forefinger, as she meditates over some celestial test), Cynthia led me upstairs...<sup>13</sup>

Here the contrast between the darkness (Sybil's tan) 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.'<sup>14</sup> However, the Narrator's words reveal that he does have 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; he concludes his visit of Sibyl's bedroom mentioning 'a tender, inessential body, that D. must have known down to its

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<sup>12</sup> Nabokov 1968: 216.

<sup>13</sup> Nabokov 1968: 217.

<sup>14</sup> Nabokov 1968: 214.

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.' We will see below that all throughout the story the printed word and the visual image are somewhat at odds with each other.

### 3

The other sister's name, Cynthia, is reminiscent of the Roman poet Propertius's mistress. In his fourth book of poems, the ghost of Cynthia, who by that time is dead, haunts and reproaches the poet for having forgotten her. This Cynthia is called 'golden,' like the yellowish tones associated with Cynthia in Nabokov's story. Propertius's eerie poem 4.7 starts with the pronunciation:

The Shades are no fable: death is not the end of all, and  
the pale ghost escapes the vanquished pyre. For Cynthia  
seemed to bend o'er my couch's head, Cynthia so lately  
buried beside the roaring road, as fresh from love's  
entombment I slept a broken sleep and mourned that the  
bed that was my kingdom was void and cold.<sup>16</sup>

Cynthia's ghost complains that Propertius has not performed the last rites for her, has not bowed at her grave, did not cry for her or mourn her, and he has not stayed faithful to her memory, despite her love for him. She admonishes him to listen carefully to what she is saying:

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<sup>15</sup> "Foundational is Nabokov's own statement in his 1951 letter to White, stating that the professor of French who narrates the story is "priggish," "a sometimes obtuse scholar and a rather callous observer of the superficial planes of life" (SL 117)" (Wagner-Martin 2000: 233).

<sup>16</sup> Propertius 1958: 307.

Nor spurn thou visions that come through holy portals;  
when dreams are holy they have the weight of truth. By  
night we range in wandering flight; night frees the prisoned  
shades...At dawn [the Underworld]'s ordinance bids us  
return to the pools of Lethe: we are ferried over...<sup>17</sup>

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.

At this point, the Narrator does not yet understand is that he himself has a double: D. Upon meeting D. in the college town in 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.'<sup>18</sup> At the end of the story it is the Narrator himself who is assaulted by 'writhing memories'.

In New York, Cynthia takes a flat that is referred to as being 'cold water' (evoking the icy landscape of the beginning of the story) and 'down in the scale of the... streets'<sup>19</sup> (recalling the lower realms, the Underworld). She starts sending bizarre objects to D. as if from beyond the grave to remind (and accuse) him of Sibyl's death, including cuttings of her hair (which is the same color as Sybil's), and a stuffed skunk. Only once we reread the story, can we see that this episode foreshadows the ending, where both sisters will be sending objects — this time by supernatural means — to the Narrator himself, drawing a connecting line between him and D.

Cynthia becomes even closer to the world of the dead through her obsession with spiritualism (interestingly, the Narrator refers to

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<sup>17</sup> Propertius 1958: 313.

<sup>18</sup> Nabokov 1968: 215.

<sup>19</sup> Nabokov 1968: 218.

this 'hereafter' as a 'silent solarium,' echoing Sybil's tan earlier in the story and introducing once again the motive of light and shade). The Narrator's 'French mind' is exasperated by this 'mumbo-jumbo': he is clearly a rationalist, a late product of the Enlightenment (which was probably the reason Nabokov made his Narrator a French professor). The Narrator's arrogant attitude towards the realm of the 'otherworldly' is a clear sign that the Narrator's voice should not be confused with the author's voice: for Nabokov himself, as Wyllie notes, this realm of 'other worlds' was extremely important from the very beginning of his creative career.<sup>20</sup>

The Narrator lets himself to be dragged by Cynthia to a mediumistic séance, which he describes with his usual mocking irony. He doesn't seem to understand that Oscar Wilde (the author of "The Picture of Dorian Gray," where Sibyl Vane dies from Dorian's cold-heartedness) might be addressing him in particular — with his 'garbled French.' Nor does he understand that Leo Tolstoy is speaking of chess and might have a message for him as well: that love, like war, is not a game.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4

The break between the Narrator and Cynthia comes shortly after she invited him to one of her parties. The bedroom, which is misused for storing guests' coats, is eerily reminiscent of the Narrator's visit to another bedroom in the beginning of the story,

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<sup>20</sup> "In [the] early stories, Nabokov's notion of *potustoronnost* ("other worlds" or perhaps more definitely "other sides") is established as a fundamental aspect of his characters' existence, and it is his characters' varying relationships to these "other sides," in what Poe describes as a posthumous dialogue among shades," that develops into a central theme of his work." (Wyllie 2000: 11).

<sup>21</sup> Tolstoy, like Nabokov, was an avid chess-player. In the *War and Peace*, Napoleon compares the war to a chess game, — and the Russian characters, on the opposite, repeatedly emphasize that a war is not a game of chess, because people really die in it (see the anonymous article Igra Voiny 2006: *passim*). In Nabokov's story, Tolstoy may be drawing a parallel between the French Narrator and Napoleon in their cerebral cold-heartedness). The mysterious 'man, horse, cock' could also be a reference to the otherworldly horse-rider in Burger's poem *Lenora* translated by V. Zhukovsky (the dead man disappears when the rooster crows). On Nabokov's view on chess and artistic creation, see Alexandrov 1991: 219.



Sybil's, after her body was removed. The party itself 'negatively' echoes Plato's<sup>22</sup> *Symposium*, where philosophers and poets converse on the topic of love during their drunken revelry: the Narrator tells us that 'there was no inspired talk, no wreathed, elbow-propped heads, and of course no flute girls.'<sup>23</sup> Another allusion to Plato's *Symposium* is the androgynous character of the guests: 'The rich friendliness of the matrons was marked by tomboyish overtones, while the fixed inward look of amiably tight men was like a sacrilegious parody of pregnancy,'<sup>24</sup> — a passage clearly parodying a speech from the *Symposium*: the myth of androgynous humans<sup>25</sup> (whose being cut in half engendered the search for love).

But after this *Symposium*-like event, a metaphoric invitation to love, the Narrator sends Cynthia a 'perfectly harmless' (in his words), but actually offensive note poking fun at her party and explaining why he did not drink any alcohol (which could also be read symbolically as his refusal to get intoxicated by the Dionysian emotion of love). When the Narrator meets Cynthia on the steps of the library, she is angry at him. He sees her under the drops of rain — invoking the shadows of icicles and shadows of drops in the beginning of the story that first brought him in contact (unbeknownst to him yet) with shades and their grief. Under her

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<sup>22</sup> Although Nabokov openly professed his antipathy for Plato, Platonic influence on his writings is considerable, as Moudrov (2007 *passim*) shows. What Moudrov says about *Invitation to a Beheading*, is also true, it seems to me, for *The Vane Sisters*: "The atmosphere of the novel... immediately evokes Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave, a vision of everyday reality as a shadowy realm whose inhabitants are barely aware of the artificiality of their existence. Only few of them dream of the other, perfectly original world, let alone actually reach it" (Moudrov 2007:3).

<sup>23</sup> Nabokov 1968: 224. Cf. Plato *Symp.* 212 d-e: "The flute girl and some others half-carried him in. There he stood in the doorway with a bushy wreath of violets and ivy on his head, and lots of ribbons" (Plato 1980: 40).

<sup>24</sup> Nabokov 1968: 224.

<sup>25</sup> "Originally, every man was whole, and shaped like a sphere. His chest and back formed a circle, he had four arms, four legs, and one head with two identical faces facing in opposite ways" *Symp.* 189e–190a (Plato 1980: 18). "After man's nature had been split, each half longed for its other..." *Symp.* 191a (Plato 1980: 19).

arm Cynthia has a book on Spiritualism and Christianity, to which the Narrator is not paying any special attention in this moment. Angry Cynthia, blazing at him, as the blasé Narrator puts it, ‘with vulgar vehemence,’ accuses him of only seeing ‘the gestures and disguises of people,’ i. e. of being superficial and lacking any depth. And, although he knows that Cynthia can lash out at people who are dear to her, the Narrator, without bothering much about it, decides to stop seeing her.

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Indeed, the superficiality and ‘aestheticism’ of the Narrator is by now obvious to any reader. Take, for example, the precious language he uses when describing a winter street:

Through peacocked lashes I saw the dazzling diamond reflection of the low sun on the round back of a parked automobile. To all kinds of things a vivid pictorial sense had been restored by the sponge of the thaw. Water in overlapping festoons flowed down one sloping street and turned gracefully into another. With ever so slight a note of meretricious appeal, narrow passages between buildings revealed treasures of brick and purple. I remarked for the first time the humble fluting — last echoes of grooves on the shafts of columns — ornamenting a garbage can (...) <sup>26</sup>

He goes on and on, trying the reader’s patience with overtones of pretentiousness (*poshlost’*), in a stark contrast with the prosaic tone used throughout the story.<sup>27</sup> Compare, for example, to his disdainful language used to describe Cynthia:

The interval between her thick black eyebrows was always shiny, and shiny too were the fleshy volutes of her nostrils. The coarse texture of her epiderm looked almost

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<sup>26</sup> Nabokov 1968: 214.

<sup>27</sup> “Compared to the stylistic blandness of the rest of the story, the opening takes on a strange incongruity, to a point where it becomes a parody of poetic sensibility. (...) His vision borders on delirious hallucination...” (Wyllie 2000: 14).

masculine, and, in the stark lamplight of her studio, you could see the pores of her thirty-two year old face fairly gaping at you like something in the aquarium.<sup>28</sup>

The Narrator can appreciate beauty — he is actually very sensitive to beauty, even the beauty of a garbage can in the winter light. But he is only able to notice the most superficial layer of beauty, easily seen by an indifferent eye. There is a dissonance between the mocking language he uses to describe Cynthia's looks and the praise he has for her painting. Her talent for painting does not color at all his view of her as a woman. He separates the talent and the person, as if unable to see her soul, the container of her talent, showing through the 'large pores.'

The description of his favorite painting is especially important for the understanding of the protagonist and the story:

...“Seen Through a Windshield” — a windshield partly covered with rime, with a brilliant trickle (from an imaginary car roof) across its transparent part and, through it all, the sapphire flame of the sky and a green and white fir tree.<sup>29</sup>

The surname of the sisters — Vane — refers to the metal blade used to tell the direction of the wind, thus establishing a linguistic link to the word 'windshield.' The rime and the trickle recall again to the drops and icicles in the beginning of the story. Since the landscape on the paintings is seen from a car — through the windshield — it is reminiscent of the motel in the forest, where, in broad daylight, D. and Sybil stopped to make love. Thus it may be not an innocent landscape but a recollection of the spot where started the chain of events ultimately leading to her sister's suicide.

The title, “Seen Through a Windshield,” invokes the expression 'through the glass darkly.' The passage occurs in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians (13). This passage talks both about love and about afterlife, the two main topics of Nabokov's story:

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<sup>28</sup> Nabokov 1968: 218.

<sup>29</sup> Nabokov 1968: 219.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ... (Love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ... For now we see through a glass, darkly,<sup>30</sup> but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

The painting, therefore, may be suggesting to the Narrator (as well as to D.) that, trapped in his superficial vision (like seeing from behind glass, blurred by rime and trickle), he fails to see the true reality and the true beauty of those who surround him.

## 6

Only in the final chapter of the story does the Narrator seem to become aware of his loneliness when approaching his home: 'Upon reaching the porch I looked with the apprehension of solitude at the two kinds of darkness in the two rows of windows: the darkness of absence and the darkness of sleep.'<sup>31</sup>

The night he learns of Cynthia's death ('something to do with her heart'), he is feeling nervous and uneasy. He starts reading Shakespeare's sonnets, trying to find prophetic acrostics in the first letters of the lines, a futile endeavor. What he fails to pay attention to (or maybe does pay attention, but is in denial) is that these poems are about love.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Alternative translation: Through a mirror, dimly. In Russian: Как бы сквозь тусклое стекло, *гадательно*, introducing an additional motive of prophesy and sooth-saying.

<sup>31</sup> Nabokov 1968: 226.

<sup>32</sup> Barabtarlo states: "Nabokov seems to move us to reread the poems... the way they were written, left to right. Had the professor endeavored to do so... he might have become, paradoxically, more alert to the message running crosswise his dream." (Barabtarlo 1995: 114).

He almost feels the presence of the dead Cynthia ('it would have been just like Cynthia' — for earlier in the story it was Cynthia who said she felt other people's auras). He now puts up his defenses by recalling and ridiculing every spiritualistic fraud known to modern men.

Sleep overcomes him only at dawn. Although Nabokov was famously adverse to Freud's theories, dreams do play a revelatory role in his own work, pointing either to some hidden world, or a character's own feature that the character is not consciously aware of.<sup>33</sup> The Narrator is asleep not in the dark, but in the light: his dream is penetrated by the sun shining through the window shades. In the dream he feels the vague, yellow-clouded presence of Cynthia. We, the readers, put together the first letters of the words of the last paragraph and decipher a sentence. *Icicles by Cynthia meter from me Sybil*.

Two thoughts (quoted by Victor Strandberg from Nabokov's writings and interviews) seem to be illuminating the deeper sense of this message. In the opening sentence from *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov talks about the 'commonsensical' worldview, shared by most: "common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness."<sup>34</sup> The other one is from Nabokov's interview to *The Saturday Review of Literature*, an answer to the question "What surprises you in life?": "...the marvel of consciousness — that sudden window swinging open on a sunlit landscape amidst the night of non-being; the mind's hopeless inability to cope with its own essence and sense."<sup>35</sup> The imagery of these two sentences is similar to the image the reader has of the Narrator sleeping: first the darkness of the night, then — the light penetrating his dream. Upon awakening, he remembers little and understands nothing — a metaphorical darkness again.

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<sup>33</sup> As Wyllie points out: "In Nabokov's short fiction characters experience sleeping and waking dreams. Both have the potential for revelation, either exposing a latent aspect of a character's personality which has gone unacknowledged, or signaling the presence of a spiritual world that has somehow gained control, if only briefly, of a character's unconscious." (Wyllie 2000: 11).

<sup>34</sup> Strandberg 2000: 191.

<sup>35</sup> Strandberg 2000: 194.

We, readers, are better able to decipher what the dream was telling him. However, it remains open whether the message of the dream was indeed sent by the ghosts of the girls, or the Narrator's mind itself revealed to him, in his dream-state, the truth that was too painful to acknowledge while awake.<sup>36</sup> The sense of mystery that we can never completely grasp is inherent in Nabokov's oeuvre.

Sisters' ghosts wanted the Narrator to meet D. and to learn about Cynthia's death. In this meeting he was given the opportunity to understand how similar he was to the indifferent D. Cynthia, the painter, sent the delicate melting icicles so much admired by the Narrator, indicating that the cold glance only skims the surface. The meter, however, was sent by Sybil, Sybil of the Judgment Day, to remind the Narrator that the days of our lives are counted and that we all have to pay.

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<sup>36</sup> On Nabokov's metaphysics see Alexandrov 1991: *passim*.

