



The fragmented world of Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada*

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Abstract

In 1969, Nabokov wrote his last major novel, *Ada or Ardor*, which, while displaying the usual Nabokovian components of incest, triadic relationships, and linguistic quibbles, marks a change from his traditional motif of father/daughter incest and instead revolves around sibling incest in the Veen family. Ardis, the featured ancestral home, becomes a mini Eden for the two protagonists, Ada and Van, and a hell for Lucette, the daughter and little sister figure in this triangle. She is the 'impeccable paranymp' (265) of the novel, whose manners and sense of duty mean that she puts her love of Ada and Van above herself. Nabokov again shows that an older sister/woman can have a detrimental effect on a young and naïve girl and while Van is not innocent, he too is led by Ada. Through Van, who is a psychologist, Nabokov can reveal his view that psychoanalysis takes over the story of the patient and turns it into an alternative narrative.

Keywords: love, injustice, frustration, male bastion, anxiety

Introduction

Nabokov reveals his recognition and understanding of the author's problematic attempts to portray the visually and vocally fragmented young girl. He projects his frustration with typists who misspell and his fear of editors who alter his novels, on to Van, who experiences these same issues. In these scenes while Van corrects the typist, Lucette is, at the same time, attempting to tell her story. Nabokov connects the interrupted story of Lucette, with his own problems of authorship, the perils of editors and critics, and his anxiety over misreading and mistranslations of his work. Lucette becomes silenced through Van's narrative, and is shown as only successfully communicating through hand signals and other forms of communication.

The novel chronicles the aristocratic family of the Veens. Van and Ada are siblings but have been raised as cousins. Lucette is Van and Ada's half sister. Their true relationship is not revealed until halfway through the novel. The novel starts in Ardis before telling the story of Ada and Van's parents. The two Veen brothers, Demon and Dan marry two sisters, Marina and Aqua. Demon, married to Aqua, has an affair with Marina over a number of years and conceives first Van, who is passed off to mentally ill Aqua as her own child, (her own was still-born) and then Ada, who is passed off as Dan's, who is married to Marina. Dan and Marina later have Lucette who suffers from her own love for Van and Ada, as Aqua suffers from her love for Demon and Marina.

The novel is a memoir, divided into five parts, and written by the aged Van. He documents the history of his and Ada's love affair, which starts in 1884 and ends just before their death. He recounts the story of his parents' affairs, his and Ada's own numerous affairs, his own career as a psychologist and Lucette's suicide. Hidden in this memoir, he reveals Lucette's

attempts to articulate her emotions, and the torments he realises that he and Ada inflicted on Lucette. Ada takes on the role of the older and manipulative female who controls Lucette's life. While Van shares part of the blame for Lucette's tragic life, he does take the same fatherly role that Humbert takes towards Lolita in terms of writing a narrative that would atone for his crimes against the daughter. The three make up a similar triad, found in James's novels and in *Lolita*. The torture Ada and Van inflict on Lucette in the summers of 1884 and 1888 lasts a lifetime. To keep Lucette from interrupting their amours, they devise numerous plans to keep her distracted. These include asking her to do imaginary favours for them, to tying her up to a tree. In 1901, Lucette travels by ship with Van to Amerirussia (America having been conquered by Russia in this parallel yet familiar universe of Terra), and commits suicide by jumping overboard.

Throughout the novel Lucette's voice appears fragmented through Van. The manuscript for Van's family chronicle has supposedly been left unaltered and published posthumously by his editor, Ronald Oranger. It has been typed up by Van's secretary Violet (also Oranger's wife), and is presented with parentheses containing comments and suggestions for alterations or corrections by Ada, now 93 years of age. Within the manuscript, the aged pair argue over details and facts. Ada is only allowed a voice in parentheses, and while it could be said that her speech is fragmented and that she does not have a true voice in the novel, we sense that she is actually interrupting Van's narrative. There are many times in the novel when Van acknowledges this has happened in their past. In their critiques of Ada, Brian Boyd and Bobbie Ann Mason squarely blame Lucette's tragic life on Van, but surely Ada is equally if not more culpable for her half sister's lonely life. Ada suggests the cruel games to divert Lucette from her and

Van's urges. Ada later introduces Lucette to an incestuous lesbian affair, knowing that Lucette loves Ada because she so closely resembles and is close to Van.

Van's narrative gives an account of Lucette that is filled with snap shots and fragments. Parts of her body are visually dissected (as in the case of Humbert's descriptions of Lolita, and Ferenczi's dream/fantasy of Elma), and she is only seen in flashes. She cannot speak without Van's constant musings or interruptions.

Nabokov's own anxieties about being misquoted are reflected in Van's problems with his secretaries. Nabokov's own 'private tragedy' is more forcefully played out in Van's portrayal of Lucette, who cannot compete with Ada and Van's extremely intelligent word play and good control of language. She is constantly fighting for recognition from Ada and Van in her childhood, and Van chronicles her life as he would one of his case studies, including Nabokov's obvious allusions and total contempt for Freud and his technique.

Brian Boyd (2001), analyses Lucette's character with her death in mind. He says:

I do not want to suggest for a moment that Nabokov wrote Ada primarily to expound an ethical system, but the evidence shows that he expounded extraordinary artistic energy in documenting via Lucette the demonic side of Van and Ada in a way that the ordinary reader cannot even suspect. (113)

Despite the many digressions into mythical and fictional history: the ramblings of Van's hypothesis on time, and the main plot of the epic love affair between Van and Ada, Lucette is at the crux of the plot. As Boyd suggests, the tragedy within the story and the reason why the reader dislikes Van and Ada is because of their abusive treatment towards Lucette. However, we must also remember that Van wrote this manuscript, with many comments and additions from Ada and his editor, Ronald Oranger. This tragedy is told from Van's point of view, and therefore while he attempts to write Lucette's story, it is ultimately his interpretation of this narrative. Lucette's character is mythologized and romanticised through Van. In an extremely difficult novel that purposely misleads the reader with its linguistic games and use of trilingual characters, it is hard to find any sign of Lucette's own voice or Van's guilty and despairing feelings about his own role in her life. These are all obscured by his love for and obsession with Ada. Nevertheless, we can pick out his attempts to present Lucette's story in the images Van associates with her, and in their few conversations together.

Van describes our first image of Lucette as a child:

He came upon a person whom he recognized with disgust as being his former governess (the place swarmed with ghosts!). She was sitting on a green bench under the Persian lilacs, a parasol in one hand and in the other a book from which she was reading aloud to a small girl who was picking her nose and examining with dreamy satisfaction her finger before wiping it on the edge of the

bench. Van decided she must be 'Ardelia,' the eldest of the two little cousins he was supposed to get acquainted with. Actually, it was Lucette, the younger one, a neutral child of eight, with a fringe of shiny reddish-blond hair and a freckled button for a nose: she had had pneumonia in spring and was still veiled by an odd air of remoteness that children, especially impish children, retain for some time after brushing through death. (35)

Lucette is always associated with the colour green, as here she sits on the bench amid the flora of Ardis. Her action of picking her nose is carefree and normal without either Ada's or her own later pretensions of sophistication. Van mistakes Lucette for Ada; the first of many comparisons between Lucette and Ada. He sees certain of Ada's characteristics in Lucette throughout the novel, but here, Lucette is the first 'Ada'. Her detachment and remoteness through illness already portend a series of later illnesses that are veiled in Nabokov's grandiose style. While the 'ghosts' refer to the governess, Lucette is already a ghost in the shade of Ada, whom Van has not yet met.

From their early childhood, Ada refers to Lucette in sexual terms. When the family is gathered for dinner, she announces: "Incidentally she will come down after tucking in Lucette, our darling copperhead who by now should be in her green nightgown -" "Angel moy," pleaded Marina, "I'm sure Van cannot be interested in Lucette's nightdress!" (56). Here, Marina interrupts Ada's narration of Lucette's night attire and forbids the subject to go further, while making explicit the interest in her nightdress. Ada continues talking and brings up the image of Lucette in her bed counting sheep. This innocent image is made even more repellent when we learn of Ada's later sexual abuse of Lucette.

Van has the ability of walking on his hands, which he later uses when working in a circus. The party trick is harmless when he is doing it. By helping Lucette with this trick he 'ploughs' her around the garden.

'Come,' he added, 'we have not yet ploughed today.' A day or two before, Lucette had demanded that she be taught to hand-walk. Van gripped her by her ankles while she slowly progressed on her little red palms, sometimes falling with a grunt on her face or pausing to nibble a daisy. Dack barked in strident protest... 'Not so energichno, children!' cried Marina in Van - and - Lucette's direction. 'Elle deviant poupore, she is getting crimson,' commented the governess. 'I sustain that these indecent gymnastics are no good for her.' Van, his eyes smiling, his angel-strong hands holding the child's cold - carrot - soup legs just above the insteps, was 'ploughing around' with Lucette acting the sallow. (76)

Both the mother and governess again recognise the sexualised content in their 'games'. However, it is older Van who uses this language when describing this scene and possibly sees the harm that he has done. During this episode, Ada does not say a word, and yet despite the highly transgressive nature of this game, Van and Lucette seem to remain innocent of any

untoward action. Whenever Van is near Lucette alone, he keeps the relationship safe and reminds himself not to encourage Lucette. Only Ada's games with Lucette prove destructive. Van even recalls 'with mixed feelings how much more developed her [Lucette's] sister had been at not quite twelve years of age' (156). Van is appraising Lucette's naked body while she runs around the pool, and his mixed feelings here seem to imply that he sees Lucette's innocence as something to be preserved. She is growing more slowly than Ada, who therefore has to make her grow up with the initiation into sexual knowledge.

One of Ada's ideas is to tie Lucette to a tree. Just before she does this, Van and Lucette are occupied with their own thoughts and actions, and Ada is watching them both:

Ada sat reading on a similar bank, wistfully glancing from time to time at an inviting clump of evergreens (that had frequently sheltered our lovers) and at brown-torsoed, barefooted Van, in turned-up dungarees, who was searching for his wristwatch that he thought he had dropped among the forget-me-nots (but which Ada, he forgot, was wearing). Lucette had abandoned her skipping rope to squat on the brink of the brook and float a fetus-sized rubber doll. Every now and then she squeezed out of it a fascinating squirt of water through a little hole that Ada had had the bad taste to perforate for her in the slippery orange-red toy. With the sudden impatience of inanimate things, the doll managed to get swept away by the current. Van shed his pants under the willow and retrieved the fugitive. (115)

This scene anticipates future events. Van's obsession with explaining time and trying to hold on to the past and denying that the future exists is revealed here through the literal loss of his timepiece, which Ada governs by wearing. The forget-me-nots are the reminder of this little incident in Van's mind as he writes his manuscript. Ada's 'bad taste' here harms the doll and introduces Lucette to biology and sexual knowledge before she is ready. While Lucette thinks the doll is merely urinating, Ada's intention remains ambiguous. The last few words of the novel are of fragmented images, one being: 'a pretty plaything stranded among the forget-me-nots of a brook' (461). Boyd suggest there is:

A pleasant irony in the wristwatch being a "plaything," in this novel so seriously concerned with the nature of time – but the watch was not after all stranded among the forget-me-nots. What does get stranded there is the doll which Lucette again lets drown – as Van recalls when he described her death. (123)

When Van describes Lucette's death he says: 'the red rubber of a favourite doll remained safely decomposed among the myosotes of an unanalyzable brook' (389).² The doll was not saved by Van, and he connects the drowning of the doll, with Lucette's death. Nabokov states that this scene with the brook is 'unanalyzable'. Therefore, Nabokov says we should not analyse this earlier scene and so should not see the connection

between this unintentional drowning of the doll by Lucette and the later parallels with her suicide. Whether he is being disingenuous or not, he has made his point. From one scene to the other, Nabokov has placed an image of something that will of course be analysed by the critic.

Nabokov's strong aversion to the Freudian technique is in the case study that Lucette embodies. Nabokov points out that Van writes Lucette's life as a case study and so her story will become victim to the fragmentary approach of a typical Freudian case study. The personal bias of an analyst, ulterior motives, and memory issues of the analyst who writes up the patient's narrative after the session means the narrative is fragmented. We as readers are also guilty of analysing Lucette and her story, and so we are forewarned and made to recognise that nothing can be simplified into a unitary reading. One of Van's ideas to keep Lucette occupied is to make her learn and recite a poem by heart. He wishes her to go to her room for a full hour and prove to her 'nasty arrogant sister that stupid little Lucette can do anything' (117). He gives her a small poetry book of his own, which she treasures, and goes off to learn the assigned poem. In later life, he writes:

'I kept it for years – it must be in my Ardis nursery – the anthology you once gave me; and the little poem you wanted me to learn by heart is still word-perfect in a safe place of my jumbled mind, with packers trampling on my things, and upsetting crates, and voices calling, time to go, time to go. Find it in Brown and praise me again for my eight-year-old intelligence as you and happy Ada did that distant day, that day somewhere tinkling on its shelf like an empty little bottle. (118)

Lucette dies on 4th June 1901. This is not only her last note to Van, but also her last correspondence to anyone and the meaning is wholly ambiguous. On 2nd June, Lucette would have been packing to accompany Van on the Tobakoff cruise ship, without his knowledge. When Van finds her name on the passenger list, he writes as if he is shocked by her presence: 'What constricted his heart? Why did he pass his tongue over his thick lips?' (373) Lucette has purposely followed Van on to the ship in one last hope that they will be together. When she realises this will never be the case, she commits suicide, but her note bores holes in Van's memory. He mentions with hindsight that this is a 'just in case' note, and if something was to happen to Lucette he would still be able to find the poetry book. While the 'packers' physically pack her things for the voyage, an ulterior meaning is placed in this note which Van can only see seventeen years later. 'Time to go, time to go', is a reference to her suicide. Towards the end of the novel, Van writes that on June 4th, she 'looked in vain for a bit of plain notepaper without caravelle or crest; ripped out the flyleaf of Herb's Journal, and tried to think of something amusing, harmless, and scintillating to say in a suicide note' (388). These are Van's later interpretations of Lucette's last moments, and the adjectives he uses are humorous but inappropriate for such a scene. Van distances the grief and guilt he feels by using a comic tone. Her difficulty with expression in her suicide note is projected on to her seventeen

years later by Van who now realises how she had been ignored.

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