

The Dual Projection of Repression and Fear of Death: The Study of The Vane Sisters from the Perspective of Freud's Psychoanalysis

Xiao Meng

School of English, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, 710100;

Abstract: Vladimir Nabokov was a highly influential Russian American writer of the 20th century, renowned for his exquisite language skills, complex narrative structures, psychological descriptions, and unique explorations of themes such as identity, death, and hallucinations. The Vane Sisters was one of his short stories which was composed in 1951, containing a large number of delicate images and ending with a unique hidden poem. This short story was discussed in the first person, telling the experience of his association with the Vane sisters, especially the close communication with Cynthia, and the mysterious implications brought by the death of the two girls. The narrator seems calm, self-controlled, rational and objective, but in fact, it is his psychological defense driven by the fear of death. He responds to the fear of death through repression and projection. This article attempts to explore from the perspective of Freud's psychoanalysis that how repression and fear of death profoundly influence the narrative behavior, the psychology of narrator and image construction. The narrator presents a subtle tug between reason and fear of death, consciousness and unconsciousness through narrative defense and subconscious projection, which not only explains the atmosphere of strange and uneasy, but also reveals the intervention of death theme on narrative structure. By combining psychoanalytic theory with close reading of texts, the interpretation ways of Nabokov's work can be expanded, enriching the understanding of the narrator's psychological structure and the image in the text.

Keywords: The Vane Sisters; Vladimir Nabokov; Freud; Psychoanalysis

DOI: 10.69979/3041-0843.26.01.065

1 Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's literary works are distinguished by their experimental narrative techniques, subtle linguistic wit, and profound exploration of human consciousness and the themes of life and death. What makes his short story *The Vane Sisters* such a captivating work is its deceptively first-person narration, its weird shifts in tone, and the iconic acrostic poem hidden in the last paragraph. The narrator of the story is a French literature teacher who maintains an emotionally detached and rationally skeptical stance throughout the narrative, appearing indifferent to the sisters' deaths and to Cynthia's belief in the supernatural. Nevertheless, this apparent rationality remains intense psychological conflict. Beneath the calm surface lurk unconscious repression, a sense of guilt that one refuses to acknowledge, and a pervasive fear of death. These repressed emotions have not vanished; rather, they return in indirect ways, influencing the narrator's perceptions, dreams, and reactions to the external world.

Existing researches on *The Vane Sisters* mainly focused on narrative techniques, the twist ending, stylistic artistry, and themes of death and illusion. Many critics have explored Nabokov's use of wordplay, hidden narrative structures, and meta-fictional devices. Other scholars have analyzed the story's representation of death and the supernatural. However, few studies have focused on the narrator's mental mechanism from a strict Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, especially the dual operation of repression and the fear of death and their projection in his language, behavior, and imagery.

Against this backdrop, this paper employs Freudian psychoanalytic theory to explore the narrator's psychological mechanism. The study concentrates on how repression functions as a defense mechanism against death anxiety, and how the fear of death is projected into various images and behaviors. By combining textual analysis with psychoanalytic concepts, this study seeks to explain why the narrative is full of contradictions and uncertainties, and to reveal how death invades and reshapes the narrator's conscious world. Combining psychoanalytic theory with close reading, this study aims to reveal the psychological logic hidden beneath the narrative's calm surface. In doing so, this paper seeks to deepen our understanding of the psychological depth of the work and expand the interpretive scope of Nabokov's short stories. The paper is structured as follows: the first part analyzes the narrator's use of repression as a defense mechanism; the second part explores the narrator's fear of death and the process of its projection; and the final section summarizes the significance of double projection within the narrative and thematic structure of the work.

2 The narrator's repression mechanism

Freudian psychoanalysis provides a practical analytical framework for understanding the narrator's psychological abnormalities. Repression, which as a core defense mechanism, refers to the process by which the ego pushes threatening or distressing thoughts, fears, and feelings of guilt into the unconscious in order to avoid anxiety. Defense mechanisms help maintain psychological equilibrium by concealing emotions that are difficult for the individual to bear. When repression fails, unconscious content resurfaces in disguised forms, such as dreams, slips of the tongue, or irrational behavior. At the same time, the mechanism of projection causes people to attribute their own unacceptable emotions to external objects or others. In *The Vane Sisters*, these theoretical concepts help reveal how the narrator uses rationality and detachment as a disguise to mask her fear of death and inner guilt.

2.1 Repression: A Psychological Defense against Death and Guilt

According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, repression is one of the most fundamental psychological defense mechanisms. It refers to the process by which the ego pushes unbearable anxiety, guilt, fear, or unacceptable desires into the unconscious, thereby enabling the individual to avoid psychological distress. In *The Vane Sisters*, the narrator's seemingly calm, rational, and detached demeanor is not a natural disposition but rather a conscious strategy of repression. He refuses to acknowledge his inner fear of death and his sense of guilt toward the Vane sisters, concealing these emotions behind a mask of rational detachment. Repression impels the narrator to deny the death, guilt feelings and paranormal intervention in a rational tone, but these suppressed contents have not disappeared, instead, they returned in other forms. Therefore, the suspense and plot twist were constructed and the vulnerability and self-deception of the narrator were exposed.

2.2 Rational Indifference as a Defensive Performance of Repression

First of all, in the whole narrative process, the narrator always tells the details of his relationship with the Vane sisters with a confident and rational attitude. This seemingly reflects his intellectual identity as a French literature teacher, but in fact it is a defensive performance of his suppression. "The notion that human beings are motivated, even driven, by desires, fears, needs, and conflicts of which they are unaware—that is, unconscious." (Tyson, p12) "Defenses are the processes by which the contents of our unconscious are kept in the unconscious. In other words, they are the processes by which we keep the repressed repressed in order to avoid knowing what we feel we can't handle knowing." (Tyson, p15) Repression, as a defense mechanism, allows individuals to exclude emotions that they find difficult to accept, in order to maintain internal order. In the story, the narrator experienced the death of two sisters, but showed a very indifferent attitude towards it. The description of the two sisters is full of irony, derogatory and indifference. When he describes the appearance of the two sisters, he portrays them as grim and scary images, and also clearly shows his dislike for Cynthia. This attitude is exactly a manifestation of his repression, as he is unable to face his emotional burden, which may be a sense of responsibility or fear of death, so he places these emotions outside of consciousness. Secondly, the narrator always claims to be rational and adopts a skeptical attitude to deny Cynthia's view of the soul and superstition. It seems that he appears logically clear on the surface, not superstitious about ghosts and gods, but in fact, this is also a form of his psychological defense, which is to use rational language to avoid the recurrence of his repressed content. This deliberately displayed rationality is not a true reflection of objective thought, but rather a carefully constructed barrier designed to shield the repressed fears and guilt within. The narrator refuses to accept any possibility of an afterlife or spiritual intervention, attempting to use this to reinforce his psychological defenses and prevent repressed emotions from resurfacing. He wields reason as a weapon, rejecting all emotional ties and moral obligations, thereby maintaining a sense of control and avoiding acknowledgment of his inner turmoil.

2.3 The Return of the Repressed in Dreams and Daily Signs

However, the narrator was not successful, and these repressed contents did not disappear, but returned in other forms. "When we sleep, it is believed that our defenses do not operate in the same manner they do when we are awake. During sleep, the unconscious is free to express itself, and it does so in our dreams." (Tyson, p18) When the defense mechanism weakens, such as during sleep, repressed content is more likely to emerge. Cynthia is ubiquitous in the narrator's dreams, indicating that the content he suppressed in a sober state returns in a primitive and intense way in the dream. It symbolizes the narrator's inability to escape the ghostly presence of the dead in the dream. At the end of the novel, when the narrator faces the sound of the trash can in the quiet room and the clicking sound of the bedside table, he immediately associates it with Cynthia's prank. Unable to admit his inner fear of the deceased, he attributes it to external ghost intervention in search of inner comfort. This is not only a manifestation of his failure to suppress, but also a typical projection. "Projection means that ascribing our fear, problem, or guilty desire to someone else and then condemning him or her for it, in order to deny that we have it ourselves." (Tyson, p15) At the same time, the narrator's behavior of considering the occasional sound as a prank by a deceased person contradicts his previous rational denial of paranormal theory, which also exposes the narrator's self-deception.

2.4 The Hidden Poem and the Total Failure of Repression

At the end of the story, the hidden poem once again proves the failure of repression. The narrator vehemently denies the supernatural and unconsciously acknowledges its existence. He vehemently denies the intervention of death in the living world, but indirectly acknowledges the invasion of the dead at the end. The existence of the hidden poem is a complete subversion of its rational narrative.

3 Projection and Imagery of the Fear of Death

3.1 Fear of Death as the Root of Rationality and Indifference

The fear of death also causes the narrator to be a rational and indifferent man. Avoiding intimate emotions with Cynthia is his way of protecting himself, and the repeated natural images in the text are carriers of the narrator's subconscious projection of death. Similar to the narrator's defense of repression mentioned above, the narrator's rational language and pursuit of precise and detailed recording reflect his fear of death. He attempts to conceal the chaos and anxiety in his subconscious with superficial order and norms. This pursuit of absolute order and rational expression is, at its core, a defensive reaction. Unable to confront the threat and uncertainty of death within himself, the narrator chooses to shield himself behind a stern and detached facade. All his efforts to maintain rationality and order are aimed at warding off the panic lurking in his subconscious and preventing himself from being consumed by the fear of death he has deliberately avoided.

3.2 Fear of Intimacy as Self-Protection against Death Anxiety

The narrative's avoidance of intimate emotions shows his mechanism of self-protection. He showed obvious withdrawal and alienation from his relationship with Cynthia, which is also due to the fact that intimate relationships can exacerbate the fear of death. He suffers from fear of intimacy—fear of emotional involvement with another human being—is often an effective defense against learning about our own

psychological wounds because it keeps us at an emotional distance in relationships most likely to bring those wounds to the surface. (Tyson, p16) The deeper the emotions towards the deceased, the heavier the impact of death. By maintaining indifference and distance, he subconsciously protects himself from the blow of death. Therefore, the narrator's detachment from Cynthia does not stem from personal aversion, but rather from a subconscious self-protective mechanism. He dares not form deep emotional bonds, because once he loses someone he cares about, his fear of death becomes all the more real and unbearable. His indifference serves as a protective barrier erected to ward off the pain and panic brought on by death.

3.3 Fear of Intimacy as Self-Protection against Death Anxiety

Furthermore, some natural images mentioned in the text are also expressions of his fear of death. The narrator repeatedly mentions the icicles hanging under the eaves, which give a cold and sharp feeling, symbolizing the coldness, danger, and ruthlessness of death. It also symbolizes the edge state of coldness, fragility, and disappearance, and the narrator's detailed description of the melting state of the icicles implies his sense of powerlessness towards the disappearance and uncontrollability of death. The narrator projects their fear of death onto these icicles that could fall at any moment, thus turning them into external threats of death that could come at any time. At the same time, he also mentioned that the dripping of water droplets has a rhythm, like coin magic, which is fascinating. The more fascinated he is, the more he shows his fear. This is because, in fact, "it's reasonable to conclude that the greater our fear is, the greater our fascination becomes." (Tyson, p24) In this way, the natural imagery in the text ceases to be a mere description of the scenery and instead becomes a vital vehicle for the narrator's inner psychological state. Through the mechanism of projection, his fear of death is superimposed onto specific images, rendering this abstract fear tangible and perceptible. This also demonstrates that the narrator's fear of death has permeated his everyday perceptions and is influencing his observation and understanding of the external world.

4 Narrative Features under the Dual Projection

4.1 Contradiction between Rationality and Unconscious Anxiety

Under the dual influence of repression and the fear of death, the narrator's narrative exhibits a striking contradiction. On the surface, he maintains a stance of rationality, objectivity, and emotional detachment, attempting to present a logically coherent and clearly structured story. However, his unconscious mind is constantly dominated by repressed guilt, anxiety, and the fear of death—emotions that periodically breach his psychological defenses and come to the surface. This contrast between conscious self-restraint and unconscious emotional outbursts constitutes the novel's most prominent narrative feature.

4.2 Oscillation between Reality and Illusion

This dual projection causes the narrator's account to oscillate between reality and illusion. The sounds in the room, the phantoms in dreams, the icicles in reality, and the poetry hidden at the end of the text all blur the boundaries between the objective real world and the subjective psychological world. Readers cannot fully distinguish which elements constitute objective facts and which are the narrator's psychological projections. This uncertainty creates the novel's eerie and unsettling atmosphere.

4.3 Subversion of Rational Narrative Structure

Furthermore, repression and the fear of death are deeply embedded within the narrative structure. The narrator attempts to construct a coherent and rational narrative order, yet this order is constantly disrupted by the resurgence of repressed emotions and the projection of the fear of death. The poem concealed at the end of the text completely subverts his rational narrative, revealing that the power of death and the unconscious far surpasses rational control. From this perspective, the narrative itself becomes a process interwoven with concealment and revelation.

4.4 Implicit Expression through Details and Images

Under the influence of double projection, the narrator does not directly reveal his inner conflicts but conveys his repressed emotions and fear of death through everyday details, natural imagery, and chance occurrences. Images such as dreams, sounds, and icicles carry the anxiety lurking in his subconscious. This subtle and implicit mode of expression lends the narrative a greater sense of delicacy and depth.

5 Conclusion

The Vane Sisters reveals the psychological defense and mental dilemma of people when they face death. The narrator always denies all kinds of connections with death in a rational and self-assured manner, appearing calm but actually filled with psychological defense. Under the dual projection of repression and the fear of death, his narrative is rife with the tension between reason and unconscious anxiety, oscillating between reality and illusion, and is ultimately subverted by the poetry hidden within the conclusion. He suppresses his own fears, guilt, and desires out of consciousness, but unconsciously projects them into images such as dreams, sounds, and icicles, making the entire narrative wander between reality and illusion. The continuous return of this unconscious content not only reveals the penetrating power of death drive in the text, but also makes the narrative itself a psychological stage for concealing and exposing the truth. It is from the perspective of Freud's psychoanalysis that we are able to understand how seemingly meaningless details become clues to inner repression, and how those accidental events carry deep fears of death. In this sense, *The Vane Sisters* is not only a short story with exquisite structure, but also a explore of human unconsciousness. It reminds us that even in the calmest and most rational narrative, the shadow of death and the echo of repression have never truly disappeared.

References

- [1] Chen, Jing. "The Aesthetic Significance of Freud's Concept of the Unconscious." *Hubei Social Sciences*, vol. 5, 2015, pp. 116 - 118.
- [2] Dai, Xiaoyan. "On the Theme of Death in Nabokov's Works." *Jiangsu Social Sciences*, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 193 - 196.
- [3] David H, Richter. *The Critical Tradition*. New York: Bedford Books, 2006.
- [4] Ji, Qiwei. "The 'Scientific' Status of Freud's Theory of the Unconscious and Its Philosophical Value." *Academic Exchange*, vol. 5, 2017, pp. 64 - 69.
- [5] Ma, Yuanlong. "The Unconscious: From Freud to Lacan." *Foreign Literature*, vol. 5, 2022, pp. 79 - 92.
- [6] Meng, Qiuli, and Gao Shenchun. "The Theoretical Nature of Freud's Psychoanalytic Idea of the Unconscious." *Journal of Nanjing Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, vol. 3, 2007, pp. 103 - 106.
- [7] Nabokov, Vladimir. "The Vane Sisters." *The Hudson Review* 11.4 (1958): 491-503.
- [8] Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Stories of Nabokov*. Translated by Feng Zhen. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2018.
- [9] Raman, Selden. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Translated by Liu Xiangyu et al. Peking University Press, 2000.
- [10] Rybakova, Maria. "Darkness of Absence and Darkness of Sleep: A Love Lesson in Nabokov's 'The Vane Sisters'." *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 42 (2012): 60-74.
- [11] Sun, Huiwen. "Analysis of Freud's Concept of Drive and Its Turn." *Medicine & Philosophy*, vol. 13, 2024, pp. 55 - 60.
- [12] Toker, Leona. *Nabokov: the mystery of literary structures*. Cornell University Press, 2016.
- [13] Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today-A User-Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge, 2006.