

# Reading “The Return of Chorb” by V. Nabokov as Neo-mythological Novel

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**Abstract:** A typology of the approach of writers of the 19th – 20th centuries to Wagner's musical dramas as an intertext has been given in the article. This may be a manifestation of the novel creators' erudition, a recollection of an anecdotal situation that arises on the basis of an opera's plot, an implicit foreshadowing of tragic events in a work, etc. Along with the point mention of Wagner operas in the works of world literature, there is also a different approach to the work of Richard Wagner. In this case, writers are attracted by the fact that when creating almost all of his librettos for operas, the composer creatively processed German myths and medieval German legends. On the basis of these librettos, neo-mythological works arise. Among them is V. Nabokov's short story “The Return of Chorb”, the “cipher-code” of which is the medieval myth of “a simpleton with a pure heart”, which is the basis for the libretto of Wagner's opera “Parsifal”, and on three levels: the system of images of the novella, its ontological and religious levels. The analysis showed that Nabokov took into account almost all genre features of the neo-mythological short story. At the same time, it should be noted that the writer approached this genre not formally, but having deeply mastered symbolist aesthetics, which was reflected in Nabokov's short story up to the creation of the author's creative legend about himself and his compatriots who were forced to leave their homeland.

**Keywords:** Richard Wagner, Vladimir Nabokov, Symbolism, Neo-mythological Prose, Intertext, Cipher-Code

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## 1. Introduction

Writers quite often mention the operas of Richard Wagner in their works, but the attitude to such an intertext is different. One can single out a number of types of approach to Wagnerian operas as an intertext.

In D. Brewer's “K-PAX”, music lover and psychiatrist Mark Fuller, working and relaxing, listens to opera and symphonic music, so his billiard game with himself is accompanied by music from “The Flying Dutchman”. At the same time, it can be assumed that the writer, in this way, also shows his erudition.

An anecdote in Nabokov's novel “Camera Obscura” is connected with Wagner's opera “Lohengrin”: an opera singer, late on stage to sit on a swan, was left to wait for the next one.

Quite often, writers play with the sound features (for example, loudness) of Wagnerian opera music in their novels. A striking example of this is Lady Henry's confession to Dorian Gray in O. Wilde's “The Picture of Dorian Gray”: “I

like Wagner's music better than any other music. It is so loud that one can talk the whole time, without people hearing what one says. That is a great advantage...” [14].

Mentioned in the novel by K. R. Safon's “Shadow of the Wind” Wagner's opera “Tannhäuser”, the main idea of which is “the struggle for the free manifestation of earthly human feelings” [6], implicitly warns the reader about further tragic events in the work.

At the same time, one can see another trend in the approach to Wagner's work, when librettos written by the composer himself become pretexts for subsequent works.

Let us dwell on the short story by V. Nabokov “The Return of Chorb”.

In the plot of the short story under consideration, researchers most often see a reflection of the myth of Orpheus [2, 11]. In addition, N. Buhks correlates the petty-bourgeois world, whose representatives, according to the researcher, in Nabokov's work are the Keller spouses, with Wagner's opera “Parsifal” [2].

Such a somewhat superficial approach to Wagner's

"Parsifal" can be avoided if one considers Nabokov's short story as a neo-mythological work, and there are all prerequisites for such an approach. So, A. Dolinin notes that Nabokov, "like many writers of his generation", "was brought up on the verses of Blok and senior symbolists – Bryusov, Sologub", and then came to the literature of the Silver Age as a novice writer "first in the late 1910s years, when he lived in the Crimea and met with Maximilian Voloshin..., [...] then in the 1920s in Berlin, when he began to communicate with writers and poets more experienced than himself" [4]. Moreover, the literary critic believes that "it is from there, from the aesthetics of Russian modernism of the early twentieth century, that the main principles that Nabokov was guided from the very beginning of his literary path to its very end come from" [4].

## 2. Neo-mythological Novel as One of the Leading Genres of Russian Symbolism and Its Features

It seems that when creating "The Return of Chorb", the writer successfully mastered the genre of neo-mythological short story, which is representative of Russian symbolism.

According to Z. Mints, the first "plot-figurative artistic reality" of a neo-mythological text "is, as a rule, modernity" [8]. And, indeed, in Nabokov's short story, the reader gets acquainted with the urban landscape of Berlin in the late 1920s, as well as with the life and customs of its inhabitants of that time.

If the "plan of expression" in the neo-mythological texts of Russian symbolism "is set by pictures of modern or historical life or the history of the lyrical" "I", then "the plan of content is formed by the correlation of the depicted with the myth". And then the researcher writes that "thus, the myth receives the function of a "language", a "cipher-code" that clarifies the secret meaning of what is happening". At the same time, "eternal" "works of world literature, folklore texts, etc." can act "on the function of myths and next to them" [8].

The question arises, what myth or "eternal" work of world literature, as a "cipher-code", does the writer refer to in his short story besides the myth of Orpheus? Obviously, this is the myth of Parsifal, creatively reworked by Wagner (the maestro thought about the plot of the "simple with a pure heart" three times in his life) and recorded in the opera libretto written by the composer himself: it is the poster of the opera "Parsifal" that Chorb notices on the advertising pedestal, leaving on the square in Berlin.

## 3. Opera "Parsifal" by R. Wagner as a "Cipher-Code" of Nabokov's Novel

Wagner's "Parsifal" just becomes the "cipher-code" of Nabokov's short story on three levels – this is the system of images of the short story, as well as its ontological and religious levels.

From our point of view, the image of Chorb in some of its features is close to the image of Wagner's Parsifal. So, the hero, like Parsifal, has neither generosity nor wealth. From the dialogue between Gurnemanz and Parsifal, one can learn that the young man "lived in the forest and in the desert steppe" with his mother. Chorb, from the point of view of the Keller couple, is "a poor emigrant and writer". In addition, at the beginning of the plot time in Nabokov's short story, he is just as selfish as Parsifal at the beginning of the opera [1].

It is more difficult to match the female images of Nabokov's short story with the image of Kundry from Wagner's opera.

According to Henri Lishtanberger, in the first act Kundry is a "sorceress", a woman-mystery, in the second act "a luxurious, passionate woman who uses all the power of her seductiveness to lure Parsifal into death", and in the third – "a penitent sinner", which finds peace and forgiveness, thanks to "the liberation of her from the curse that weighed on her" [7] by the new Grail King, the chosen one of God.

The magical pale green color of Chorb's nameless lover's eyes makes one "remember" that Kundry is a sorceress. The prostitute that Chorb brings to the hotel is also, in fact, "the color of temptation" and "the fiend of evil" [7], just like Kundry from the second act. And the death of Chorb's wife "from the impact of an electric jet, which, poured into glasses, gives the purest and brightest light" [9], remotely resembles the death of Kundry from the last act of the opera: "A ray of light: the brightest radiance of the Grail. A white dove flies from the height of the dome and soars over the head of Parsifal. – Kundry, raising her gaze to Parsifal, slowly falls before him, lifeless" [10].

Such a reading of Nabokov's images, it seems to us, is possible, since "the symbolist "text-myth" is, in particular, "literature about literature", a poetically conscious play with various traditions, a whimsical variation of the images and situations they set, which ultimately creates the image of this tradition itself" [8].

According to Z. Mints, "Russian symbolism in its worldview and artistic practice was closely connected with the traditions of pantheism, leading [...] to [...] romanticism, [...] and European symbolism. From pantheism came the apotheosis of nature" [8].

Indeed, for Wagner, like romance, nature had a special meaning. So, in the article "Art and Revolution" the composer wrote: "Nature, and only nature, is able to indicate the great purpose of the world. If civilization, proceeding from the Christian prejudice that human nature is contemptible, has renounced man, then it has thereby created an enemy for itself, which must someday destroy it, since man does not find a place for himself in it: this enemy is precisely the eternal, the only living thing" [3].

The opposition between the natural and the human can also be seen in the opera "Parsifal". Thus, Gurnemanz treats with tenderness the swan shot by Parsifal, and the plants that human feet do not trample on Holy Friday. However, the king's squire rudely sends Parsifal out of the castle of the Grail when the young man did not feel sympathy for the

suffering of Amfortas: “(very angrily). [...] Get out! Leave quickly!” [10].

The events of the third act of the opera take place on Good Friday. In a remark to this act, Wagner noted: “A free, lovely spring landscape” [10].

It is noteworthy that both Parsifal and Gurnemanz emphasize the beauty of blossoming spring nature in this action:

*And the meadow and the forest breathe with happiness, –  
everything that blooms for a short time:  
the whole redeemed world  
on the day of Forgiveness, the anthem sings! [10].*

And Chorb, going to the house of the parents of his deceased wife, draws attention on this May night to the beauty of the nature surrounding him: the street was cluttered with “the night splendor of chestnuts. A lantern was burning ahead, a branch was leaning over the glass, and several leaves, at the end soaked in light, were completely transparent” [9].

The fact that beloved Chorb is closely connected with the natural world is evidenced by the hands of the hero's wife, who “either plucked a leaf from a bush, or casually stroked a rocky wall”. Returning to Berlin, Chorb recalls not the character traits of his wife and not the features of her soul. His memories are associated with the details of the nature around them, which he, along with his beloved, observed during their honeymoon trip: “Just as on the southern beach, he tried to find that single, round, black, with a regular white belt, a pebble that she showed him on the eve of her last walk – in the same way, he searched along the way for everything that she noted with an exclamation: special sketch of a rock, a house covered with silver-gray scales, a black spruce and a bridge over a white stream” [9].

It is obvious that in Nabokov's short story, the characters who are closely connected with the natural world, able to see its beauty (Chorb and his beloved), are opposed to the petty-bourgeois world of the Keller spouses, associated with status things (a stately mansion, their car, a gigantic featherbed, a bright sheet, etc.).

The researchers noted that “Parsifal” is not only closely connected with the Christian mystery (we recall that the full title of the opera is “A Solemn Stage Mystery in Three Acts”), but also with the Buddhist worldview: “...Along with the semantics of bell ringing, chorale, Eucharist, the Buddhist idea of compassion for all living beings is guessed..., overcoming sensuality is associated with Christian chastity and Buddhist nirvana” [1].

Moreover, “the ability for empathy (empathy) is born in the spiritual life of Parsifal unexpectedly – as a mysterious insight”. “And here again a point of contact between Christianity and Buddhism is found thanks to the archetype of the Path, because knowledge is always associated with spiritual growth, the processes of maturation and deep self-knowledge. Parsifal has his own path – from ignorance to knowledge, from simplicity to holiness” [1].

#### 4. The Ideas of Christianity and Buddhism in R. Wagner's Opera “Parsifal” and Their Reflection in the Novel by V. Nabokov

It is noteworthy that Nabokov built his short story “The Return of Chorb”, organically combining the ideas of Christianity and Buddhism. And the way of the revival of Nabokov's hero can be read in the paradigm of Buddhism.

Recall that in Buddhism there is a certain circle of basic ideas, also called “the foundations of the teachings of Buddhism”. These basic ideas primarily include the Four Noble Truths. “The First Noble Truth states that the main characteristic of human existence is [...] suffering and frustration. Frustration is rooted in our unwillingness to acknowledge the obvious fact that everything around us is not eternal, everything is transient” [5].

Moreover, Buddhism refers to suffering not only death and illness, but also birth. Chorb's unbearable suffering in Nabokov's story brings the death of his wife: “...Ever since, on a spring day on a white highway ten miles from Nice, she, laughing, touched a live wire with a storm of a fallen pole, the whole world for Chorb immediately died down, moved away”. And from that moment on, “he wanted to possess his grief alone, without littering it with anything extraneous and without sharing it with anyone” [9].

“The Second Noble Truth is the truth about the cause of suffering. This reason is attraction, desire, attachment to life in the broadest sense...” [13]. Chorb, thrown by the will of fate to Germany, became attached to the daughter of the Keller couple with his soul. On the one hand, Nabokov paints a portrait of his beloved Chorb as sparingly as possible (“light, laughing hands that did not know peace”, “a small face, entirely covered in dark freckles, and eyes wide, pale green, the color of glass fragments smoothed by waves”) and her easy character (on the eve of the wedding, she danced “with a spatula in her raised hand”, “jumped and laughed”; “she was amused by how they disappeared from home”, immediately “upon arrival home from church”; in a “bad hotel” “everything seemed funny to her”; “laughing”, she passed away). And on the other hand, the hero's touchingly tender attitude towards his bride/wife: “Chorb, slightly hunched over, walked after her, and it seemed to him that happiness itself smells the way sluggish leaves smell”. And again: “My wife breathed so childishly smoothly. That night he only kissed her on the darling, nothing more” [9].

The Third and Fourth Noble Truths are closely related to each other, as one follows from the other. “The Third Noble Truth is the truth about the cessation of suffering, that is, about nirvana. [...] The Buddha claims that despite the fact that suffering permeates all levels of samsaric existence, nevertheless, there is a state in which there is no more suffering, and that this state is achievable” [13].

According to Buddhists, suffering ceases when “all the passions and drives that feed suffering dry up. That is, it is precisely passions, attachments, obscurations that fade

away... With the disappearance of the cause of suffering, the suffering itself disappears" [13].

"The Fourth Noble Truth is the truth about the path leading to the cessation of suffering" [13]. This Truth "reveals a method that leads to happiness, well-being, a reduction in life's problems, and ultimately to the attainment of nirvana – the complete elimination of suffering" [15].

Chorb is confused immediately after the death of his wife. He "only smiled languidly" in Nice, "where she was supposed to be buried", "...sat all day on the pebbles of the beach, pouring colored pebbles from palm to palm...". And then suddenly, "without waiting for the funeral, he went back to Germany through all those places where during the honeymoon they visited together", that is, it is obvious that Chorb, sitting on the seashore, discovers a path for himself, which, as he seems to help him get rid of suffering: "...If he collects all the little things that they noticed together, if he recreates this close past, her image will become immortal and will replace her forever" [9].

It can be assumed that behind the "immortal image" of the deceased beloved Chorb, one can also see the image-symbol of Eternal femininity, focused on the image-symbol of the Beautiful Lady, going back to Alexander Blok's poems about the Beautiful Lady, and the image-symbol of Soloviev's Sophia, as the Soul of the World. In addition, it is necessary to recall the symbolist concept of "Beauty as the deepest essence of the world". Moreover, from the point of view of the symbolists, "the highest manifestation of beauty (or, at least, one of the highest) is, as a rule, art" [8]. With this concept, of course, Sologub's concept of a "created legend" is also connected: "I take a piece of life, rough and poor, and create a sweet legend out of it, for I am a poet. Slow in the darkness, dull, everyday, or rage with a furious fire – over you, life, I, a poet, will erect a legend about the charming and beautiful that I create" [12]. And the symbolist notions that "art creates a new reality, which, after the image is created, has an objective reality" [8]. Important for the symbolist worldview is the concept of life-building, which was addressed by almost all the symbolists of the Silver Age.

All of these concepts seem to be implicit in the hero's unexpected decision to make his way back to Berlin.

Let's stop at one more moment. Henri Lishtanberger, analyzing the image of Parsifal, notes that the hero "almost does not act in the drama itself; his actions, in the true sense of the word, we do not see on the stage, and we learn about them just in a few words". This is due to the fact that "the glorious deeds of Parsifal are not his deeds, but those consistent intuitions through which he gradually rises to higher wisdom", that is, according to the researcher, Wagner is not interested in depicting the hero's deeds on stage, but in the fact that "through pity" he became "conscious" [7].

At the beginning of his journey in the short story, Chorb frivolously runs away from the world of the Keller spouses, like Parsifal, not understanding what compassion is: "...Only the next morning, half an hour before the departure of the express, they came to the house for things. Varvara Klimovna sobbed all night; her husband [...] cursed the choice of his

daughter, the expense of wine, the police, who could not do anything..." [9].

After the death of his wife, Chorb does not perform feats, his task is to travel "back to Germany through all those places where they visited together during their honeymoon trip". At the same time, it is obvious that, slowly returning to Berlin ("it's not for nothing that there were no letters for about a month") and looking for "everything that was noted along the way" by his wife with an exclamation, the hero goes through "consistent intuitions", that is, he becomes spiritually mature and therefore more human.

Like Parsifal, Chorb is not freed from life's cares and aspirations, but begins to feel compassion for his wife's parents and, in fact, thus renounces his desire to solely possess his grief. Therefore, the lackey and the prostitute do not hear anything behind the doors: "The door closed. The woman and the footman remained standing in the corridor, looked frightened at each other, and, bending down, listened. But there was silence in the room. It seemed incredible that there were three people behind the door. Not a single sound came from there.

"They are silent," – the footman whispered and put his finger to his lips" [9].

True, if "Parsifal takes back the sacred Spear from Klingsor, makes amends for the sins of Amfortas and Kundry, restores their peace of mind and, thus, is the restorer of world order, the redeemer of the world" [7], then Chorb makes amends for his sins before the Keller couple, together with them, sharing the grief of the departed heroine, and thus also becomes a kind of restorer of world order.

## 5. Conclusion

So, the analysis showed that Nabokov's short story is a neo-mythological work. Our findings are also confirmed by the fact that Nabokov's work can be read from the point of view of Soloviev's triadic nature of world development: thesis – antithesis (Chaos) – synthesis. The joy of marriage and honeymoon (which remains outside the time frame of the novel and appears in the text as separate hints) is replaced by the hero's confusion after the death of his wife and the loss of the meaning of life, and then, through a series of "consistent intuitions", Chorb creates her new image and discovers feeling of compassion for others.

At the same time, the "Return of Chorb" can be viewed both from the point of view of Nabokov's created legend about himself and his migrant contemporaries, and about the possibilities sooner or later to find the meaning of life away from home.

At the same time, the comprehension of the analyzed Nabokov novel leads to the understanding that further research related to works of V. Nabokov, can be directed in two ways. First of all, the question arises whether only in the novel "The Return of Chorb" the writer penetrates deeply into the essence of basic Buddhist ideas and realizes his understanding of the Noble Truths in such an original form, as shown above. No less interesting is the question related

with symbolist neo-mythological prose: is Nabokov the only one among the young writers, who emigrated to Western Europe, learn from the experience of their close predecessors, in the 1920s he turns to this genre, and are there still experiments of the writer himself in this direction.

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