

**Vladimir Nabokov: problem of explication of the phenomenon of life**

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**Abstract.** One of the most important features of the article is that the research described herein is based on linguistic analysis, limited by a specific task that is reveal and interpretation of textual representatives of the notion of life in order to get a conceptual content of the text. Interpretation point of the linguistic research is a novel “Mary” by V. V. Nabokov. Bright examples prove multilayerity and ramified structure of meaning of forms of the studied notion realization that made the author think about unsolved mystery of existence of the writer’s works and dip himself in his literary discourse, in the problem of specific character of the Russian world view.

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**Introduction**

In linguistics a text being a complex semantic and syntax unit is recognized to be a unique sign of the language of a specific content. Just the same as a language has its own semiotic system and requires a relevant scientific attention, literary text has its original system of signs and of their combinations, into which the author strives to bring transcendental meanings that can not be delivered by other means. During the process of research of the complete (global) meaning of the text linguists to a great extent base on ideas of philosophy of language of Ch. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards described in their book “The Meaning of Meaning” [1]. Global meaning of literary text is determined on the ground of level analysis. Each level of the research should relate to study of a relevant field of complete (global) meaning. This field of meaning according to J. R. Fers is called *modus operandi* [2]. Nonetheless, E. Malinowsky pointed an important role of the context: “The statement obtains its meaning not from logical interrelation of ideas expressed by words contained therein, but from the relation towards situational context where it is localized” [3: 297]. It is commonly known that linguists distinguish two types of meaning – formal meaning and contextual (situational) meaning [4]. However, M. Halliday lays special emphasis on the fact that none of the texts can be completely characterized in relation to its situational context because it is impossible to describe this or that real situation in an absolutely complete way. Therefore, he implements instantiating notion of “linguistic contextualization” [5]. It can be partially explained by complexity of interrelation of two systems of the text that is mostly reflected not by discrepancy between current reality and literary reality (level of correspondence can be significantly different) but by the fact the linguistic-literary units (signs and their

meanings) are given to us in the process of their functioning, in semiosis, fixing conceptual linguistic interpretation of the reality.

**Main part**

Semiotic nature of the phenomenon of life that is a basic category of human consciousness on the whole and in the novel “Mary” in particular, lays in its duality. On the one hand, in our material it is a sequence of signs, some kind of the unique complex sign of the united integrated meaning, of the verbalization of the entire world view.

At the initial stage we will regard a noun *life* as a unit of lexical system of the language, firstly, from the point of view of its primary, vocabulary meanings, secondly, from the point of view of its peculiarities caused by its contact with other units. Combination of the figure of the plan of expression and of the figure of a plan of the content as a result forms a sign-oriented unit that is a word. As a result the structure of the notion of *life* that contains the following aspects: subject of life, predicate of life, purpose of life, is defined. Moreover, analysis of functioning of noumenon of life in contexts helps to reveal means of indirect nomination conveying individual knowledge of the author about life.

Let us determine the main representatives of categorical notion of *life*, that according to vocabulary interpretation closely relate to each other within their meaning. Indeed, the noun *life* is a name of a relevant notion and is interpreted as generally as possible, first of all specifying the form of human existence. Adjective *alive* is used in order to endue the whole world surrounding a man with a sign of life. As a matter of course both the subject and his spirituality are endued with this sign. The general meaning of the verb *to live* – to exist, is laid in the process of life. The meaning fixed in the vocabulary obtains additional shadows in the result of interaction of these words

with contextual partners within the framework of specific statements, therefore, during the process of formation of a semantic field of human existence level of abstractness of the said lexemes is decreased due to their general categorical and vernacular meaning, while thoroughness of these meanings, vice versa, is increased.

Let us analyze contexts of usage of the words of this group. The notion *to live* unites different groups of nouns with meaning of the subject. The most popular lexeme here is a lexeme *lodgers*. As for abstract notions (*womanhood, thought, shadow*) and inanimate objects (*house, eyes*) that relate to types of lexical nominations of the subject of life, they still wait for their description and understanding from the point of view we are concerned in. Further in conceptosphere of existence a system of nouns-localisators reflecting existence of subjects in the following sequence: country – city – house – apartment – room (number), is clearly distinguished. Provided that, this system is complicated by localisator *board*, that is theoretically explained by a plot of the novel (emigrated characters live in Berlin in a board), and by localisator connected with the world of personal I (*living as I was*). Their location in the present hierarchy cannot be precisely determined because they strive to take a place higher than they are authorized to take according to the logic of the revealed system. Therefore, there is no doubt that a house being characterized in the novel as *of glass, cheerless* is a key in literary system of this novel and also acquires a status that is somewhat higher than we determined for it, having put it into strictly determined continuant limits. Russian people relate towards the house in a special way, for them it is a some kind of sense of motherland, a hub of the universe. Or maybe not? In fact, a noun *house* should form absolutely different compound names, for example, father's house, native house. A *house "of glass"* or "*cheerless*" can not provide a sense of internal warmth, comfort, and as a rule, a sense of love of nearest and dearest, therefore, there is no sense of security. We came to extremely important point of understanding the whole mechanism of sense production of the novel. Facts certify that lexemes related to local specifiers (*to live in a country* [foreign, in a board – note of the author of the article], *in a house of glass* and *living as I was*), pretend to the position of hierarch in a general paradigm and verbalize meanings of "reduction of the sphere of existence of a man", "exile", "homelessness", "total self-alienation of a man".

The characters comprehend the content of their life through recognition in a "threshold" situation ("threshold" situation in this case is a situation of emigration of the characters and particularly at the

moment when it became obvious that they are cut off their motherland and that there is almost no chance to return in Russia). Reflected category of life is connected with perception of the world by the characters and largely is based on mental - existential and on moral - spiritual basis of Russian people. The characters ask themselves: *How have I managed to survive and what was there to live for? Why he had lived?* According to their semantic characteristics they are close to rhetorical questions, such type of questions that do not require a precise answer, they are a special kind of statement. V. Nabokov does not form purpose and meaning of life explicitly. Answers for given questions can be obtained only in the result of analysis of the context. Analysis of the context of the novel shows that it contains a number of substantial features, usage of which in specific descriptions reveals the facts hidden in nominalization. Let us try to represent the core of things more clearly. The first thing in this question we paid attention to is absence of signs of desire to live in forms of predicate *to live*, that could be reflected in forms like *I want to live, it will be (was) good to live, I have devoted my life* and etc. Their absence correlates with absence of positive strategies of life. At the same time quotations reflecting dramatic nature of each individual life, related to intense and useless flow of life are, vice versa, rather frequently observed ("*life was passing: on Friday she would be twenty-six*", "*the life has passed*", "*I wasted all my life*" and etc.). Happiness (including distress of soul) of Russian people is not in material existence (they nowhere pay attention to *life in a house of glass*), but in availability or absence of a meaning of life.

In relation to the said questions that the characters of the novel ask themselves analysis of the revealed opposition of life/existence and of the other side of life requires special attention. This opposition of meanings of life is actually opposed in accordance with the line: material – ideal, physical – spiritual, external – internal. Thus, on the one hand, the life has an everyday secular meaning, that was reflected in the following contexts: "*he would have to spend his money on subsistence*", "*I only hope to God I can get to Paris. Life's more free and easy there.*", "*In the sense of routine Ganin's day became emptier*" and etc. On the other hand, it will have the greatest, sacral meaning, that in theory is specific to it potentially, out of the context meaning, because it is associatively connected with the world of a man's soul, that has not been completely explored. Thus, "*For a moment he saw life in all the thrilling beauty of its despair and happiness, and everything became exalted and deeply mysterious — his own past, Podtyagin's face bathed in pale light,*", "*It is at moments like this that everything grows fabulous, unfathomably profound,*

when life seems terrifying and death even worse” and etc. Now we can plan a cognitive structuring of “the model of world” of the novel.

The last two given quotations reveal Ganin’s desire that should be regarded as axiological fundamentals of Russian character, to Absolute (ideal), that is lofty, with which he compares his own life. Concept of a man reflected in the Ganin’s character implies domination of his spirit in opposition to his body. Here it will be suitable to remember a detail that is an integral part of Ganin’s portrait – *bright* face (please note beforehand: not white, not pale, not troubled); “Your face looks somehow brighter”; “and he again noticed, as he had the day before, the unusual brightness of Ganin’s expression” and etc. Epithet “*bright*” obtains additional meaning “*happy*”. This idea is urgently confirmed by the mentioned analogy of similarity in description of eyes and/or of look of Ganin and of Mary. While making their portrait the eyes are regarded as the most important detail: “his thick eyelashes gave his eyes a warm”; “transition from a melancholy sigh to a look of ardent vitality”. A look of ardent vitality is recognized by Ganin to be a sign of beauty – reflection in them of a wealthy internal resource, spirituality of woman. The same can be said about Ganin’s portrait, where warmth of the eyes reflects his internal, spiritual world (by analogy with Russian proverb: the eye is the mirror of the soul). “Lively” eyes are a sign of real youth. At the same time combinations specified in portraits of other characters – “*palely glistening eyes*”, “*muzzy expression*”, “*bleary smile*” are completely different from the specified portrait of Ganin and Mary (let us specify more “*her face was pale and puffy*”; “*Her face was paler than usual*”; “*Podtyagin pale as death*”; “*their faces were like two pale blobs*”; “*his gray face had now broken out*”; “*when she saw his muzzy, confused expression*.”, “*and winked at the dial with a bleary, ecstatic smile*”; “*turned their palely glistening eyes*” and etc.). There is no doubt that the author does not restrict himself by the intent to create only a physical portrait of the characters, a portrait with the emphasis on lifelessness and that is projected for description of mental, emotional state of the characters revealing spiritual vacuum. Comparison of different portraits where the characters’ spirit is usually interpreted, allows to reveal their substantial characteristics - “lifelessness” and “deficit of meaning of life”. Russian man can not love his life after losing the meaning of life. For him life is full of hidden meaning of things and human phenomena. He strongly believes that beyond the whole real world where they live in there is a new, true one (“that somewhere far far away there are people living another completely different life”). Validity of this conclusion is

confirmed by the fact that spiritual and moral sphere during the process of metaphoric projection in the novel is transferred to the sphere of outer space of reality of the characters. Thus, states connected with a deficit or modification of colority, are specific for nature (“*strolled slowly along the pale April streets*”; “*The morning was a gentle, smoky white*”; “*The day had a milky chill about it; ragged white clouds*”; “*sky had dimmed in a vesperal swoon*”; “*a pale cloud enveloped the window*”; “*from the cold of the pale dawn*” and etc.), subject world (“*The tables, chairs, creaking wardrobes and bumpy couches at once faded*”, “*pale Rhine vine*”; “*The steps were lit by a cold yellow light*”; “*white clockface*”; “*holding behind his back a bouquet of pale flowers*” and etc.), abstract objects (“*Nothing relieved his colorless depression*”. “*it was time to break off this dreary affair*”; “*whether it was about the dullness of his past life*”; “*all the rest, those torments and tiffs, seemed so pale and insignificant – these torments of misunderstanding*” and etc.). Among other things it must be noted that a frequently used adjective *pale* is not associated with a color or a light, it is included in synonymic row of shadows of white (let us specify them: *pale green, pale-blue, pale, faded, colorless, dreary, white, milky, the color of dry clay, muzzy, grayish, gray, dark gray, milky-white, mellow pink, blue, smoky-blue, tan – colored, yellowish-gray metallic* and etc.) and is characterized by general functions. In semiotic palette of the work a special role is given to a black color. Black color accompanies all narration of the novel and adds an ominous character to the events: “*were three rooms, numbered with large black figures*”; “*between black walls, whose sooty blackness was either coming off in patches*”, “*lined with black leather*”, “*he took out the black wallet*”, “*The black trains roared past*” and etc. Let us specify the subjects characterizing black color (*well, figures, dog, folds, board, domes, cape, roof, seas, Remington, wallet, trains, water, rowboat, seagulls, bath, bank, shadow, darkness, night* and etc.). It must be noted that the usage of black color in description of darkness hours is more essential, because it is related to nightfall: “*plunge into the black, bubbling darkness*”; “*And on the black stormy night*”; “*black water in the night fog*” and etc. A space that is a memory, dream, a world from the past, is most frequently characterized by description of darkness hours, therefore, black colors are also frequently observed. Provided that, the more intense black color is used in description of nature, the greater intense of emotions is in the plot. Here black night obtains the “strengthening” meaning and stands as a symbol of depth of feeling. It is more difficult to describe the element belonged to the female character in Ganin’s imagination is (because here bright Ganin’s past is described) – a black bow that apparently tells

about the growing tension in relations between Mary and Ganin and their further break down forever, and that is an indication of disaster. For this reason we want to note that black color bears a some kind of symbol of impossible. Black color also participates in creation of physical portrait of other characters: shadows (of people), figure (of the man), action figures (of people), suit, jacket, dress, cloak, silk, shawl, hair, Herr, stoker, people, back. Eyelashes and etc. ("The prim and sad little *black figure* of Frau Dorn", "the driver's back towering like a *black mountain* behind the glass partition", "wrapping herself in a *black shawl*" and etc.).

Availability of semantic relation making a connection between black and pale shadows (complex semantic structure of senses put into each other: mourning clothes and dark environment), becomes the intensifier of negative evaluator, on the one hand, forms the image of a *black man with a pale face* – infernal image, symbol of reversed reality, horror of death and, on the other hand, provides the impression of despair, tragical inevitability of disaster of life, death. Actually, it forms a space of existence without capacity for a man to exist therein. Thus, on the basis of color semantic component appears a metaphoric review of the notion of death. "The death is this absolutely dark darkness..." [6: 195]. At the same time it must be noted that the death in this novel is not a final stage of human life (all, except Podtyagin and Frau Dorn are young and middle-aged), it characterizes moral state of the man, whose life is not full of events, feelings, therefore, there are also no emotional and evaluative connotations: neither positive, nor negative. The death is described as a loss of vividness, and as a breath of life that is connected with forced existence in a strange land. But this is not the only meaning. Let us go further.

We can take one more step further in understanding of the analyzed contexts. There are almost no lexemes nominating notions of death (*nonexistence, death, abyss, lifeless*), but there are lexemes using which this notion is represented. Thus, for example, lexemes "*chill*", "*cold*" participating in creation of landscape ("*The day had a milky chill*", "*the air had grown chilly*", "*it had been a cold January dawn*"; "*the night was a cold blue outside the uncurtained windowpanes*", "*from the cold of the pale dawn*" and etc.) have a parallel with a world of people: "every time dousing him in the *chilling*, unpleasantly familiar *smell of her perfume*"; "*white cold snow. It's cold, nasty and depressing*"; "the steps were lit by a *cold yellow light*" and etc. The weather can be used for description of physical and moral state of a man: cold weather → a man gets cold. However, it is easy to note that lexemes "*chill*", "*cold*" create a dark background of the world of non-living, "dead"

and unreal people, that is an artificial world, moreover, they participate in creation of metaphor of loneliness of a man in a strange land. Lexeme "*warm*" alas is a sign of physical life, for example: "giving off the *warm, stale smell* of an elderly man not in the best of health", "*something warm* and tasting of iron was trickling out of his mouth" and etc. In description of internal world lexeme "*warm*", "*warmness*" is mentioned in description of portrait and feelings of Ganin and Mary: "a look of *ardent vitality*", and "*warmth* of eyes". If we try to understand the planned opposition we will observe opposition of "natural" internal life of the character to "artificial" external world, of a person to things, mechanisms.

Dark images and intense atmosphere is largely contrasted to bright, multi-colored, warm, sunny background, created by Ganin in his imagination, in which he was living for the last time: "*It was not simply reminiscence but a life that was much more real, much more intense than the life lived by his shadow in Berlin.*" Let us try to describe a small fragment of a system of the past without completeness and sufficient strictness of this description. Environment in constructed virtual life of Ganin captivates by its harmony, beauty and life: "Reaching the end of the avenue, where a *white bench gleamed amid the dark greenery* of fir needles, he turned back, and now far ahead in a gap between the lindens could be seen the *orange-red sand* of the garden terrace and the *glittering panes* of the veranda"; "helped Ganin to remember more vividly yet the rainy Russian late August and early September, the *torrent of happiness*"; "Where is the *happiness, the sunshine*?". The life is characterized by internal emotional and psychological state – happiness. The sun is a perpetuum mobile of Ganin's life, main components of his life in Russia. Such semantics of the world *sun* in other temporal dimension – in the past – is determined by words regarding it as a source of life, because it provides light and warmth. Thus, despite all multiversity of life it is still absolutely hidden from other characters, it is the other life that is available for Ganin.

Let us examine one more significant thing, mentioned in the beginning of our narration. Let us refer to the text: "It was as if an iron draft kept always blowing *through the house*", "in which lived seven *Russian lost shades*", "the ghosts of his dream-life in *exile*", "*His shadow lodged* in Frau Dorn's pension, while he himself was in Russia"; "as though *only his eyes had been alive and his mind had gone into hiding*"; "*this thought somehow persisted*", "*the street came to life*". It would be naive to leave this fact without consideration. According to the text the present habitants are "dead" by definition, that means that they are alive from the physical point of view, but

have dead spiritually, Russian people philosophizing about the “truth” of the meaning of life, losing existential meaning of life (earthian, usual side of life is not necessary), become weaker physically and spiritually (“*only his eyes had been alive and his mind had gone into hiding*”). For us starting point is their stay in a board during emigration, a real fact of their real life. However, the characters are not present in explicit form, because there are almost no events and their participation in them. Explicit metaphor of “dead souls” and “human shadows” form a sign of unreality, non-existence of anything or of anyone though there are formal signs of their existence. Moreover, the characters are not individual, resemble each other according to the sign of “a black man with a pale face”.

### Conclusions

Contextualization plays the most important role in the analysis of (global) meaning of the text, results of which form aspects that are a compound complex of contextual meanings. Understanding of the novel has been based on initial factors one of which is symbolic image of elevator. In traditional usual understanding elevator moves “from the bottom-upwards”, in literary space of the text this direction transforms in a wider format: “earth – heaven” life, in other words in a format of “life-death”. “*We glided up in silence and then suddenly — stop*”. If we regard the action of the elevator as movement, mobility of life, its stop is a “mortified” result of this movement. Opposition of life in emigration to past/virtual life of Ganin is implemented in opposition of categories of life-death, existence-non-existence, living-non-living. At the same time researchers- specialists in study of V. Nabokov’s works repeatedly talk about duality of his world (word duality) [7], [8], [9] and etc. Therefore, reference to Nabokov’s concept of life is not occasional because, firstly, in previous researches we have determined that “V. V. Nabokov, despite creation of imaginary reality in his novels <...>, tries to find any ability to demonstrate his interest in vivid reality, in completeness of life, in presence of various events and affairs in it” [10: 79], secondly, quantitative ratio of lexemes representing notions of life and death, is not coequal and proves the dominance of the concept of life in the novel “Mary”, thus, it has represented his interest: what does life mean to the author. It was found that the death in this context is not the end of physical life (end of life journey). Theme of death is used only as a way of description of the period of exile in life of the characters (including Ganin’s) and of the characters themselves, who in fact become “dead souls”, living

the actual life without the meaning. Their life already is the death. Availability of analyzed contextual connections forms the united external space for special society. This opposition of life and death is projected to personal oppositions: of individual (Ganin) to mechanized team of Russian board of Frau Dorn, of true (original, natural) to false (artificial, unreal), of living (natural, “warm”) to dead (artificial, “cold”), of internal beauty (spiritual) to soullessness, homogeneity, resembling to each other. An ideal existence is a state of harmony in accordance with the world, presented in the Ganin’s visionary world, where, however, real events are impossible. And in final lines we observe Ganin’s return from visionary world to real life. Moreover, the theme of death emphasizes how short and finite the human life is, and on the basis of importance of existential problematics of the meaning of life of Russian man in a strange land and of the whole life in general is determined. Thus, category of life becomes the most important vision coordinate, an instrument of modelling the world that helps to expand a system of understanding the specific of linguistic worldview of the writer, reflecting ideas of Russian national mentality.

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