



Exilic Trauma in Nabokov's *A Matter of Chance*: A New Historicist Reading

Jiaxin Zhou

Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an 710128, Shaanxi, China

Abstract: The study employs New Historicism to analyze the dialectical relationship between chance and historical inevitability in Nabokov's short story *A Matter of Chance*. By examining how the text is embedded in its historical context and actively participates in the construction of historical meaning, the study reveals how spatial metaphors, characterization, and narrative strategies embody both "historicity of texts" and "textuality of history". The findings demonstrate that *A Matter of Chance* is not only a product of historical violence but also a literary practice that actively shapes historical understanding, reflecting the powerlessness and struggle of exiles within the tide of history.

Keywords: Nabokov, *A Matter of Chance*, New Historicism

1. Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov's short story *A Matter of Chance* was written in 1924 during his exile in Berlin. The story takes place almost entirely inside a train carriage travelling across Europe. It focuses on a Russian exile who is contemplating suicide. A chain of chance events leads to his inevitable death. This paper will adopt New Historicism to analyze how "chance" profoundly illuminates the exiles' struggle for survival through the dynamic interplay between text and history.

2. Theoretical Framework: New Historicism

"A literary text is to be thoroughly 'embedded' in its context with other components inside the network of institutions, beliefs, and cultural power relationships." [1] Because art is inherently social, it inevitably embodies multiple ideologies. These ideologies arise from the struggles inherent in social and political life, giving rise to specific configurations of values and interests. [2] It is this embeddedness within the socio-ideological field that constitutes the "historicity of texts".

The concept of the "textuality of history" encompasses two key meanings: first we cannot access a society's true and complete past without preserved texts. Secondly, when these texts are transformed into documents, they themselves once again function as media for textual interpretation. Human subjectivity inevitably permeates these texts. [3] By this fact, one is justified in stating that history is a text.

3. New Historicism Duet in "*A Matter of Chance*"

Nabokov's *A Matter of Chance* is not a metaphysical aesthetic principle, but rather an ideological product of intellectuals within a specific historical context. It constitutes a highly stylized aesthetic response and strategy of resistance to the trauma of historical chaos.

3.1 Historical Context: The Russian Revolution and Exilic Trauma

The story of *A Matter of Chance* is directly rooted in the upheaval of the 1917 Russian Revolution and its bloody aftermath. The new Soviet regime systematically persecuted and purged opponents of the old order. This forced vast numbers of nobles, intellectuals, military officers, and others to flee their homeland in haste to escape persecution and war, creating a massive wave of exile.

In the early 1920s, Berlin became one of the most important gathering places for Russian exiles. Many former nobles and intellectuals were forced to take up manual labor or menial jobs to survive. [4] This led to a significant psychological toll, homesickness for their homeland and uncertainty about the future, mirroring the protagonist's despair.

3.2 The Embodiment of the "Historicity of Texts"

A Matter of Chance stands as a manifestation of "historicity of texts", it is a potent representation of the historical trauma experienced by Russian exiles and an active participant in the construction of meaning to that trauma through narrative strategies.

3.2.1 Spatial Metaphor: the Train Carriage

The train carriage, as the central spatial element, is by no means coincidental. It serves as a potent metaphor for the forced displacement and rootless existence of White Russian refugees following the Revolution. The carriage's enclosed nature mirrors the profound isolation of exile, evoked in the phrase "the German cars swayed violently".[5] Its uncontrollable movement along fixed tracks directly signifies the absolute domination of historical forces over individual destinies, captured in the sentiment "a through train now thundered into the station".[5]

3.2.2 Characterization: The Embodiment of Trauma

The protagonist, Luzhin, a Russian gentleman harboring suicidal thoughts is a direct consequence of brutal historical violence. The rupture between his ingrained aristocratic elegance and his current destitution vividly reflects the trauma of class annihilation, signaled by details like his frayed cuffs and acute sensitivity to the scent of cheap perfume. Luzhin's recurring hallucinations are manifestations of the profound identity dislocation experienced of the exiled community: "his most frequent recollections were of a house in St. Petersburg, with those leather buttons on the curves of overstuffed furniture, and of his wife Lena".[5] His morbid fixation on "chance" lays bare a pervasive psychological crisis among exiles: caught between the collapse of traditional values and the void of an uncertain future, the individual is driven to embark on a futile quest for meaning amidst the flux of contingency. For instance, a mere glance from a stranger as a profound sign from fate.

The tension between the standardized production of Western cosmetics in the 1920s and Elena's individualized application of makeup serves as a potent metaphor for the societal reorganization following the Revolution. Her act of applying lipstick transcends a mere personal pursuit of beauty, but also a micro practice through which the entire exiled community attempts to rewrite their identity. It functions as a potent, illusory symbol of respectability desperately grasped by an exiled aristocracy severed from its material foundations and cultural signifiers.

3.3 Narrative analysis and the "textuality of history"

The scene in *A Matter of Chance* serves as profound footnotes to the New Historicist concept of the "textuality of history".

3.3.1 A Voice for the Voiceless: The Unspoken Trauma of Elena

The sexual violence endured by exiled women after the Revolution constitutes a collective trauma inaccessible to direct observation. Nabokov's sensory description of the scene, "with a kind of rough tenderness the man clutched her by the upper arm. She stifled a scream and yanked away her arm so violently that she nearly lost her footing",[5] acts as a condensation of traumatic history, providing concrete form to abstract violence. In the archives of real history, the experiences of exiled women were often erased, lacking preserved textual records.

Throughout the short story, Elena exhibits heightened sensitivity to war-related topics or objects. When the suspicious man stood up behind her, her fear intensified: "the man in the beige suit had waited to get up when she had." Furthermore, as the man walked along the corridor behind her, Elena "suddenly thought he must be a spy, an informer..."[5] In actual history, documented accounts of exiles' suspicions regarding secret police informants are exceedingly rare—survivors remained silent, archives were destroyed. Elena's portrayal reveals an intense, visceral vigilance against perceived danger. Despite being physically outside Russia, she remains haunted by the fear that agents of the Russian political police might pursue her.[6]

3.3.2 Escape: Luzhin's Self-Destruction

For the young Luzhin, five years had passed, yet the anguish and trauma of war remained lodged deep within his heart, impossible to dispel. Since fleeing abroad, he had shifted restlessly between jobs seeking a sense of security, even turning to drugs to numb himself. Luzhin's morphine induced artificial paradise is the displacement of unbearable historical loss into a sensory, virtual text. Constantly immersed in memories of his idyllic pre-war life, he was unable to confront his rootless existence, separated from his wife and without a true home, he ultimately succumbed to the abyss, choosing to end his own life. The drug represents an escape from historical truth, while his suicide constitutes the ultimate violent revision of that text.

4. Conclusion

Nabokov's dialectical treatment of chance and inevitability in *A Matter of Chance* embodies a literary instantiation of New Historicist theory. The dropped ticket, the train's inexplicable delay, the appearance of the unknown woman suggest individual fate governed by the arbitrary. These "chance" events remain perpetually confined within a framework of historical inevitability: the train moves along unalterable tracks, ultimately propelling Luzhin towards his inescapable death upon the rails.

Meaning in history never lies dormant in the dust of events; it is born from the text's recoding of that dust. *A Matter of Chance* is simultaneously a product catalyzed by revolutionary violence and an active participant in the inscription of historical significance. The train whistle's fading cry at the end of the tracks still sounds its warning to us today: to understand

history is to understand how we are imprisoned by the tracks of language, how we may glimpse the starlight of freedom within the interstices of the text.

References

- [1] Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993.
- [2] Lu Yang. On New Historical Criticism[J]. *The Journal of Humanities*. 2020(08):79-85.
- [3] Zhu Anbo. “Historicity of Texts and Textuality of History”: The Perspective of New Historicism in the study of Shakespeare[J]. *Foreign Languages and Literature*. 2008(05):39-43.
- [4] Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton UP, 1990.
- [5] Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.
- [6] Du Yingying. Interpretation of Character Trauma in Nabokov’s *A Matter of Chance*[J]. *JinGu Creative Literature*. 2024(01):29. DOI: 10.20024/j.cnki.CN42-1911/I.2024.01.009.