That in Aleppo Once... Study Guide

That in Aleppo Once... by Vladimir Nabokov

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Introduction

After Vladimir Nabokov's death in 1977, the novelist John Updike included the following praise of him (reprinted in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov)* in an obituary:

The power of the imagination is not apt soon to find another champion of such vigor. . . . He takes with him the secret of an undiscourageable creativity, he leaves behind a resplendent oeuvre.

Updike's admiration of Nabokov's work is one shared by many readers. Although he is best known for *Lolita,* his 1955 novel about the perverse Humbert Humbert's love for a twelve-year-old girl, Nabokov wrote seventeen other novels, dozens of poems, essays, lectures on literature, and over fifty short stories. He stands today among the ranks of Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf as one of the twentieth-century's foremost literary stylists.

"That in Aleppo Once . . ." first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1943. It was included in the 1958 collection *Nabokov's Dozen.* The story's title is an allusion to Shakespeare's *Othello,* in which the title character, through the machinations of the villainous Iago, becomes so jealous of his innocent wife that he eventually strangles her and kills himself. Like *Othello,* Nabokov's story explores the issues of jealousy, marital fidelity, and the ways that a credulous mind is affected by one more crafty.

The story is like many other works by Nabokov, which demand careful reading (and rereading) to understand. Upon first glance, the story seems to be one of an innocent man whose wanton wife makes a fool of him through her adulterous affairs. However, the story, like the narrator's wife, proves more elusive and the events of its plot more difficult to pin down upon closer examination. Nabokov demanded readers tolerate ambiguity and examine the ways in which ambiguity affects the narrator.

Author Biography

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born on April 23, 1899, in St. Petersburg, Russia to an upper-class family. As a child, he and his brother enjoyed long walks at Vyra, his grandfather's estate, as well as the attention of private tutors. He learned to read English and French before Russian. All of the passions that marked Nabokov's adulthood (languages, literature, chess, lepidoptera—which is the study of insects such as butterflies and moths) were born in his happy childhood, which he describes in his 1951 memoir, *Speak, Memory.*

Nabokov's father was a lecturer on criminal law and the editor of a liberal law journal. After becoming a member of the St. Petersburg City Duma (council) and urging the adoption of such reforms as a written constitution and the guarantee of civil rights, his father was forced to resign from teaching. He served a three-month jail sentence in 1908 for signing a manifesto urging the public to disobey the Tsar, and subsequently became more involved in government reform, rising through the liberal ranks. In 1922, while attempting to save the life of a fellow official, he was killed by an assassin's bullet. Nabokov, by then a student at Cambridge, graduated the year his father died. His detestation of tyranny is apparent in many of his works.

Like many of his compatriots, Nabokov spent the early twenties in Berlin, where a large number of Russians had fled the turbulence of their native land. While in Berlin, he wrote poetry, concocted crossword puzzles, and translated *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into Russian. In 1925, he married Vera Slonim, who would become his lifelong assistant and secretary. In fact, he dedicated all of his books to her. During 1925, he composed *Mashen'ka* (translated as *Mary),* his first novel, and a number of short stories. Important works from this period include *Chelovek iz SSSR* (his first play, title meaning "The Man from the USSR," 1926), *Korol', dama, valet* (translated as *King, Queen, Knave,* 1928), *Zashchita Luzhina* (translated as *The Defense,* 1929) and *Kamera obskura* (translated as *Laughter in the Dark,* 1931). In 1934, his only son, Dmitri, was born.

As his literary reputation grew, Nabokov traveled extensively throughout Europe, visiting his siblings and giving readings of his work. In 1937, he obtained permission for his family to relocate to France, where he wrote his first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1938). With the rise of Hitler, however, the Nabokovs' time in France was short; they fled the Nazis in 1940 and sailed to the United States, where Nabokov wrote reviews, collected butterflies, and taught Russian Literature at Stanford University in California and Wellesley College in Massachusetts. His first short story in English, "The Assistant Producer," was written in 1943. "That in Aleppo Once . . ., " his second short story in English, was composed the same year. In 1945, he and Vera became American citizens.

Nabokov continued teaching, translating, and writing throughout the 1940s, but in 1955 his greatest period of fame began with the publication of *Lolita* in Paris. Fearing its scandalous subject (a middle-aged man's love for a twelve-year-old girl), the novel was

rejected by a number of American publishers. It broke onto the international scene when, in the London *Sunday Times,* the English novelist Graham Greene named it one of the three best books of 1955. After long legal struggles and the seizure of foreign copies by U.S. Customs officers, *Lolita* was finally published in the United States in 1958, selling 100,000 copies in three weeks and adding the word "nymphet" to the English language. Nabokov was now free from financial concerns and able to wholly devote the rest of his life to his art, which he did mostly in Switzerland. Although some of his later works, such as 1962's *Pale Fire* and 1969's *Ada,* met with equal critical praise, no single work of his ever saw the attention devoted to *Lolita.* His last complete work, *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories* was published in 1976. In 1977 Nabokov died of a lung ailment, with Vera and Dmitri at his hospital bedside. *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov,* edited by Dmitri, was published in 1995.

Plot Summary

Nabokov's story is written in the form of a letter from an unnamed narrator to V., his Russian expatriate friend living as a novelist in the United States. The narrator begins by telling V. that he has arrived in America. While in New York City, he fortuitously met a mutual friend of theirs (Gleb Alexandrovich Gekko), who provided V.'s address.

After fondly recalling their days as young, eager poets, the narrator begins telling the story of his doomed marriage—the real subject of his letter. He was married "a few weeks before the gentle Germans roared into Paris," which occurred in 1940. However, the narrator claims that he is "positive" that his wife "never existed." Her name is "the name of an illusion" and he is therefore able to speak of her with "as much detachment" as he would a character in a story. When he first met her, he felt no great emotions, but one night she said something "quaint" on a walk and he kissed her on the hair. Despite his recollection of this scene, she remains "nebulous" to him; he tells V. that he has great difficulty trying to imagine her face. She was younger than the narrator and the reader learns that she was initially attracted to his verse, although the narrator assumes that once she had penetrated the mysteries of his poetry, she found herself stuck with "a stranger's unlovable face"—his own.

The narrator reveals he had been planning to follow V.'s lead and move to the United States. His wife informs him that she has an uncle living in New York City. The couple writes a "passionate" letter that receives no reply. Meanwhile, the narrator has received an invitation to come to the United States from a fellow Russian living in Chicago. Although he has done little to secure the papers he needs to leave France, he knows that he has to begin the process, since the Germans have just invaded and he has written in one of his books that "Germany was bound to remain for ever and ever the laughing stock of the world." Fearing that the German commanders will be shown the book by "some helpful compatriot," the narrator and his wife begin their journey out of France on a series of "unscheduled trains" bound for "unknown destinations."

During one of their many railroad rides, his wife begins to sob about a dog they left at their flat. Although the narrator is "struck" by her grief, he is puzzled, since they never owned a dog. When he makes this point, she says that she tried to imagine that they *had* bought a setter they had previously discussed, although the narrator contends they never discussed buying a setter.

At Faugeres, a stop on the way to Nice, the narrator leaves the train for ten minutes to buy food. When he returns, the train is gone. Several attempts at finding his wife by telephone and telegraph fail, so he decides to continue, hoping to discover that she has continued the journey on her own. A week after his arrival in Nice, a detective informs him that he has located the narrator's wife. He takes the narrator to a seedy hotel where he says the narrator's wife is living. When they arrive, the narrator finds that the woman identified by the detective is not, in fact, his wife.

The narrator leaves the hotel and, on the way back to his lodgings, sees his wife standing in a line outside a food store. She tells him that she had returned to Faugeres, where she met a party of refugees and stayed with them, sleeping in a bicycle shop. When she realized that she did not have enough money to reach Nice (since he had both of their tickets), she borrowed some from one of the refugees. She then boarded the wrong train, arrived in a town whose name she had forgotten, and only made it to Nice two days before he found her. However, she later tells him that this story is a lie and that she had spent several days in Montpellier with a man she had met on the train. Stunned, the narrator grills her for information about her adultery as his anger and jealousy increases to unbearable intensity. During these days of interrogation, the narrator and his wife are also trying to secure the necessary papers permitting them to go to the United States—a formidable task.

At some point during this trying time, the narrator breaks down and begins weeping. Inexplicably, his wife then tells him that she did not commit adultery and that her whole story of the man on the train is a lie. Eventually, with great struggle, the narrator believes her. He also obtains the necessary visas allowing them to travel to the United States. After obtaining them at an office, he returns to their flat to find her and all of her things gone. Distraught, the narrator asks a number of acquaintances if they have seen her but no one provides any information. An old woman, Anna Vladimirovna, accuses him of being "a bully and a cad"; the narrator's wife had apparently told Anna a story about falling in love with a Frenchman and the narrator's refusal to grant a divorce. Anna also rebukes him for hanging his wife's dog before leaving Paris, another story told to her by his wife. Frustrated and indignant, the narrator leaves Anna to sail to the United States alone.

During his sea voyage, the narrator meets a doctor on the ship whom he knows from Paris. The doctor tells him that he saw the narrator's wife in Marseille two days before boarding the ship. The wife had apparently told the doctor that the narrator would be joining her soon with their bags and tickets. "It was at that moment," the narrator explains, "that I suddenly knew for certain that she had never existed at all." When he arrives in New York City, he checks her uncle's address but finds it to be "an anonymous gap" between two buildings. Gekko informs him that the uncle had moved to San Francisco after the death of his daughter.

The narrator concludes his letter by asking V. to tell this story in order to "clarify" it "through the prism" of his art. He is no longer certain if his wife is an adulteress or a pathological liar. He adds that he fears she is walking along the beaches of Marseille, waiting for him to arrive. Fearing that his guilt over leaving her may cause him to replicate the actions of Shakespeare's Othello, who killed himself after realizing he had murdered his innocent wife, he asks V. not to allude to the play in the story's title. Of course, this is exactly what V. does.

Summary

"That in Aleppo Once..." is Vladimir Nabokov's short story about adultery, jealousy, and remorse in the war-torn France of 1940.

The story is written in the form of a letter directed to the narrator's friend, named 'V,' whose address was provided by an old, mutual friend. The narrator is writing to tell V that he is also now living in New York City. He proceeds to tell V some of the events that have occurred, since they were last together as young writers in France.

The narrator begins by telling V of his marriage a month after V left France in 1940. The narrator has the marriage documents but no other proof that his wife ever existed. He now views his relationship with her as if she were a character in one of V's stories. The narrator continues by saying that he held no real emotional attachment to the woman and decided to marry her on a whim, when she said something clever during an evening walk.

The narrator has difficulty in remembering his wife's face and thinks that, if she had worn more makeup, it would have helped his recollection. The narrator's wife had been quite a bit younger than he and possibly attracted to the fact that her husband was a poet but then became disillusioned, when she encountered the real man.

Due to the political unrest of the time with the invasion of France by the Germans, the narrator had hoped to move to America to follow V's example. The narrator's wife has an uncle living in New York City, yet no reply comes from him after a letter is sent. The narrator has received more positive news from a colleague living in Chicago. Therefore, the process of getting the appropriate travel papers has begun.

Realizing that the American travel paperwork takes a while to complete, the narrator and his bride begin their honeymoon and find themselves in the midst of people trying to escape Hitler's reach. As time goes on, the narrator realizes that he and his wife are running from something more monstrous than "a booted and buckled fool."

The narrator begins to realize the extent of his wife's compromised mental state, when she laments the loss of a dog that they neither owned nor talked about owning. The trip turns even more disturbing, when the narrator and his wife encounter a refugee family. The family has tried in vain to bury an old man along the road but cannot dig the hard earth with the only tools available, their hands and sticks.

Moving on, the couple stops at a town called Faugeres, where the narrator exits the train during a brief stop to purchase food. When the narrator returns to the tracks, the train has left the station, and the attendant chastises the narrator for exiting the train. With diminished communications in this rural area, the narrator places failed phone calls, opting instead to send telegrams in an attempt to locate his wife.

The narrator then boards a train that takes him past the couple's initial destination of Nice but does not locate her along the way. So, he opts to take the train to Marseilles and then to Nice instead of returning to Faugeres, where the ill-fated parting occurred. Finding that the Nice police are of no real help in his search, the narrator turns to Russian expatriates in the area for help. The narrator learns of Russian Jews, who have been shipped to concentration camps, and puts his own situation in perspective. However, he still cannot help but feel a sense of loss, as he wanders this idyllic city.

A week after the narrator's arrival in Nice, a plain clothes detective accompanies him to a rundown hotel, where the young wife is supposedly living. The young woman in question is not the narrator's wife, and he argues that fact with the resolute detective but ultimately leaves and walks back to his own neighborhood. While passing a food store, the narrator sees his wife in line trying to look around a group of people to see what is available for sale that day.

The wife says that she had returned to Faugeres, although she did not return to the train station where her husband had left a message for her. Instead, the young woman joins a group of refugees with whom she spends the night in an empty bicycle shop, sleeping near three elderly women. As the narrator has the couple's money and train tickets, the young woman is forced to borrow money from one of the old women to purchase a ticket.

Unfortunately, the young woman boards the wrong train and has made her way back to Nice, arriving just two days ago. Members of a Russian church advise her that her husband is in the city and will certainly find her soon.

Later that day, the young woman tells her husband that she had lied about her activities during the past week. She had not been with refugees, but with a man she had met on the train. Over the course of the next several days, the narrator grills his wife for information about her illicit rendezvous. She only reveals a little bit of information each time, which increases her husband's jealousy with each revelation.

To complicate the strained situation, the narrator is still trying to obtain the U.S. travel papers, and the marriage is deteriorating quickly. One evening, the pressure reduces the narrator to tears. He tells his wife that all else would be bearable now, if she had not committed adultery. Amazingly, the young wife denies the adulterous behavior and that she made up the story of the man on the train to test her husband's love.

Over the next several days, the wife brings little gifts to her husband as gestures of reconciliation, and the narrator is able to write again. The marriage is now salvageable, and the narrator attributes the jealousy and sadness to the nature of true bliss.

During this time, the couple's travel papers are finalized. The narrator goes immediately from the documents office to Marseilles to purchase two tickets for the next ship sailing for America. When the narrator returns home, he discovers that his wife has left him and has not even left a note of explanation.

The friends of the couple either cannot or will not disclose any information about the young wife's location. Finally, one of the older women, Anna Vladimirovna, escorts the narrator to the garden, where she accuses him of being a bully. Apparently, the young wife had told all the couple's friends and neighbors about her love for a noble Frenchman, who could provide well for her. Yet, she stated, the narrator refused to grant a divorce.

According to Anna, the wife told of other atrocities within the marriage. However, Anna cannot forgive the narrator for hanging the young woman's dog before the couple left Paris. This fabrication is the last insult the narrator will bear. He determines to let his wife go her own way and sets out on the trip to America.

One morning, on deck, the narrator encounters a doctor he had known in Paris. The doctor inquires about the young wife's health on board. When the narrator claims that he is traveling alone, the doctor is perplexed. He had seen the young woman in Marseilles shortly before sailing, and she confirmed her imminent passage to America with her husband.

The narrator is not clear about whether his wife is an adulterer, a liar, or both. However, he does know that she never really existed at all. The address, which was given as the young woman's uncle's address, is empty space in New York, and the relatives moved to California upon the death of their child.

At the letter's end, the narrator shares his fear that his wife is still looking for him in Marseilles. He feels that he has made a huge mistake by leaving France without her. The narrator's volatile state of mind prompts him to tell V that he fears "It may all end in *Aleppo* if I am not careful," alluding to Othello, who commits suicide when he discovers that he has killed his wife, who has not been unfaithful to him like he has been told. The narrator ends the letter by asking V not to use the Aleppo inference in a title for a story, which is clearly what V does.

Analysis

The story is told in the first person narrative point of view, which means that the reader has insight into the narrator's thoughts and emotions, as well as the action of the plot. The narrator is living in the United States at the time that he writes the letter, and the actual story begins in France from where the narrator and his wife try to escape the German invasion in 1940.

The time is further defined as a few weeks "before the gentle Germans roared into Paris." The narrator's sarcastic tone extends to a description of Hitler as "a booted and buckled fool with his assortment of variously propelled junk..."

The story is actually a letter and reads in the expected conversational tone with personal references interjected, for example, the initial writing experiences shared by the narrator and V. The tone of the letter is sincere and purposeful, which leads the

reader to believe his version of the events that occurred during the couple's evacuation from Paris.

The significance of the story's title stems from Shakespeare's play, *Othello,* in which Othello is convinced that his wife has committed adultery and kills her. As it turns out, Othello has received false information about his wife, and Othello kills himself out of grief and sadness. Before he stabs himself, Othello tells the witnesses, "And say besides that in Aleppo once, Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, I took by the throat the circumcised dog And smote him - thus."

The narrator feels grief at leaving his young wife in France, where she is vulnerable to the invading Germans. He compares himself to Othello, who has also sacrificed his wife out of his own uncontrolled emotions. There is no way to determine if the narrator's wife is lying about her adultery. Nonetheless, the weight of her possible innocence hangs over the narrator, even as he sits in Central Park in New York City.

The author also uses foreshadowing and an allusion to *Othello* in the instances describing the death of the imagined dog. In both circumstances, when the young woman cries for the abandoned dog, and when Anna chastises the narrator for hanging the dog, the author refers to the suicide scene when Othello claims, "I took by the throat the circumcised dog And smote him - thus." The imagined dog symbolizes the narrator's desire to kill himself, when he realizes the scope of his actions by leaving France without his wife.

In the end, the narrator wants V, who seems to have a happy marriage and family, to tell the narrator if he is a fool or a betrayed man. The narrator will know the answer based on V's title to the story and the allusion to Aleppo.

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Characters

Gleb Alexandrovich Gekko

An acquaintance of both the narrator and V. who has also emigrated to the United States, Gekko supplies the narrator with V.'s address.

Holmes

Holmes is the "plain-clothes man" from the Nice police who assists the narrator in the search for his wife. Unlike his namesake, the infallible detective Sherlock Holmes, he fails in his attempt to solve the mystery at hand and leads the narrator to a seedy hotel, where he insists that a stranger he produces is the narrator's wife.

The Narrator

"That in Aleppo Once . . ." takes the form of a letter written by an unnamed narrator to V., a fellow Russian expatriate living in New York City. A harmless, earnest, and innocent man, the narrator is reduced to despair over his wife's probable infidelity. Her seeming naiveté is what first attracted him to her. He met her several times "without experiencing any special emotions" and only kissed her on her hair (rather than, for example, her mouth or neck) when she said "something quaint." He cannot imagine her as a potential adulteress. During a railway stop in Faugeres, he kindly steps off the train to buy some food for himself and his new bride. When he discovers that the train has left, he feels he is facing an "atrocious void" and takes great pains to find his missing wife. His concern for her is both believable and commendable. Clearly, he suspects nothing. When he finds her in Nice, he believes her "hazy" yet "perfectly banal" story of how she met up with a band of refugees and friends at a Russian church. The fact that he is admiring her beauty ("she was combing her soft hair and tossing her head back with every stroke") while she delivers the terrible news of her betrayal suggests just how unsuspecting of her he is at that moment.

As if this is not sufficient torture for any husband to bear, his wife then tells him that she did not commit adultery. Her excuse—"Perhaps I live several lives at once. Perhaps I wanted to test you."—is unconvincing to the reader, yet somewhat sufficient for him, since he yearns to live again in the world of quaint remarks and kisses on the head. Although he grows to accept her excuse, he cannot rid himself of the nagging doubts that her presumed "test" of him have engendered: the "happier" they become after this rift, the stronger he feels "an undercurrent of poignant sadness." The narrator's telling himself that such a feeling of sadness is "an intrinsic feature of all true bliss" is an attempt by him to impose order on the chaos that has infected his mind.

Such an attempt to make sense out of his wife's disappearances and reappearances is what fuels the narrator's letter. He hopes that V. will be able to use his talent by making

sense out of disparate pieces of data and "clarifying things" through his art. By the letter's end, however, the narrator appears a hopeless man whose doubts about his wife cause her to seem "an illusion."

The Narrator's Wife

As the narrator tells the entire story from his point of view, the reader is never allowed to view events through the lens of the story's presumed adulteress. There are different possibilities for her behavior, however, room for all of which Nabokov allows. The first is that, as the reader most likely suspects, she is an unfaithful wife who attempts to retract her confession with a lame excuse and eventually spreads rumors about her husband amongst their expatriate friends. This seems the most likely scenario. After an incident when she cries about leaving an imaginary dog in their home, the narrator says, "There had never been any talk of buying a setter," and the reader has little reason to doubt him. In addition, the narrator hardly seems like the kind of man who would kill such an animal in cold blood, as his wife tells Anna Vladimirovna he did. His wife's reappearance on the embankment, telling the doctor that the narrator "would presently join her with bag and tickets," causes the reader to regard her as an adulteress who assumes that her credulous husband will always receive her into his arms.

However, the possibility remains that she is *not* the strumpet she appears to be in the narrator's account of their marriage. Such a reading would imply that she suffers from some mental disease that prompts her to create stories and tell them to other people (like the narrator, her Russian friends, Anna Vladimirovna, and the doctor). While this possibility may seem unlikely, or even ludicrous, the narrator's guilt in leaving her at the end of the story suggests that he has certainly entertained this idea. Either she is an adulteress and he has, in his mind, rightfully forsaken her—or he has abandoned a sick woman to the Nazi menace in France. Both possibilities haunt the narrator.

V.

Very little is known of V., the narrator's friend who left France for the United States several weeks before the Germans entered Paris. The fact that he is a novelist, however, suggests to the narrator that V. is capable of making sense of his story. The narrator tells V. that he "can hardly be expected to puzzle out my misfortunes in terms of human communion, but you may clarify things for me through the prism of your art." The narrator seeks a kind of literary third-party to arbitrate the disputing versions of his wife's actions. Regardless of V.'s chosen interpretation of the facts, his naming the story what he does is a suggestion to the narrator that the narrator, like Othello, should take his own life.

Anna Vladimirovna

Anna Vladimirovna is a busybody of a woman who knows the gossip and rumors concerning her fellow émigrés. When the narrator asks her if she has seen his wife,

Anna Vladimirovna calls him "a bully and a cad" and scolds him for not granting his wife a divorce. She never suspects (like the narrator and the reader) that the narrator's wife invented her tale of a "young Frenchman who could give her a turreted home and a crested name." She also berates the narrator for hanging his wife's dog, another story told by his wife that Anna Vladimirovna, like the other refugees, wholly believes.

Themes

Communication and Miscommunication

Nabokov's France is a place where attempts at communication routinely break down. For example, when the narrator and his wife write to her uncle in New York, they receive no reply. After finding his wife (and the train) gone at Faugeres, the narrator engages in a "nightmare struggle with the telephone" trying to find her, and sends "two or three telegrams which are probably on their way only now." These examples of bureaucratic miscommu-nication serve to underscore the more subtle examples of miscommunication that occur throughout the story. For example, the narrator's wife is initially attracted to his "obscure" verse, only to eventually find behind it "a stranger's unlovable face." She had thought the man would be as mysterious as his poetry, but was mistaken. Similarly, before his wife tells him that she has been unfaithful, her body language communicates to him tenderness (he "held her by her slender young hips") and beauty ("she was combing her soft hair and tossing her head back with every stroke"), not the horrifying and jarring news she is about to impart. The narrator's visit to Anna Vladimirovna also raises this issue for Vladimirovna accuses him of hanging his wife's dog, despite the fact that he and his wife never even owned one. Apparently, his wife's lies about her marriage are more believable than his truths.

The story's primary communication occurs at the very end, when the narrator tells V., "It may all end in *Aleppo* if I am not careful." With this remark, he is telling his friend (in a literary and roundabout way) that he is considering suicide. When V. titles the story as he does, he is implying to the narrator that he *should* "end in *Aleppo"* and take his own life.

Jealousy

In *Othello,* the evil Iago offers his famous warning to Othello:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!

It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock

The meat it feeds on.

Of course, Iago knows that a mind infected with jealousy is almost impossible to set right again. As his own wife remarks, jealous men "are not ever jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they are jealous." The meat that feeds a jealous mind is never in short supply.

Like Othello, the narrator becomes obsessed by the tormenting thoughts of his wife sleeping with another man. When his wife tells him that she spent "several nights in Montpellier with a brute of a man" she met on the train, the narrator struggles to extract

every shred of information he can about the affair. As Othello becomes wracked with a seizure after imagining his wife making love with Cassio (her supposed lover), the narrator spends his days "crushing and crushing" his "mad molar" until his jaw "almost burst with pain." Also like Othello, nothing the narrator does to dispel his jealousy has any effect. Although he says that he eventually believed his wife when she later said she was not unfaithful, he still "felt an undercurrent of poignant sadness." While he tries to console himself with the lame excuse that this sadness "was an intrinsic feature in all true bliss," he cannot cleanse his mind of the jealousy and mistrust that has taken root there.

Unlike Othello, however, who learns that his jealousy was the result of Iago's malice, the narrator never knows if his jealousy is grounded in fact. His not knowing the truth concerning his wife's activities proves just as torturous as having a definitive answer. As Iago tells Othello,

That cuckold lives in bliss

Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;

But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er

Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves!

These last lines perfectly describe the narrator, who still feels very strongly for his wife (he is considering suicide over leaving her) yet cannot shake the suspicion that she has betrayed him. This inability to ever know the truth is what leads him to seek the assistance of V., whom he hopes will be able to tell him whether he is a cuckold or a callous man.

Style

Setting

Nabokov presents the narrator's struggles with his wife against the background of the German occupation of France during World War II. Thus, domestic horror is likened to national horror; the bureaucratic problems the narrator has with the "consuls and *commissaires'"* in obtaining the necessary papers to leave France are likened to the marital problems he faces upon learning of his wife's possible infidelity. The narrator is married in 1940, the same year when the "gentle Germans roared into Paris." As the Nazis bring suffering to everyone in their path, the narrator's wife inflicts tremendous emotional and mental pain upon her husband.

While describing their flight from France, the narrator explains,

the farther we fled, the clearer it became that what was driving us on was something more than a booted and buckled fool with his assortment of variously propelled junk—something of which he was a mere symbol, something monstrous and impalpable, a timeless and faceless mass of immemorial horror that still keeps coming at me from behind even here, in the green vacuum of Central Park.

Here, Hitler (the "booted and buckled fool") is a symbol of death. All humans are conscious of their inevitable ends, but many are able to keep this thought at bay during their day-to-day lives. Death, however, haunts the narrator even in the pastoral setting of Central Park, which is supposed to be, as he calls it, a vacuum where such thoughts of destruction never occur. Because the narrator is fearful of his own death by suicide, the Nazis are presented as a force whose power extends beyond the reach of both space and time. While the narrator once penned that Germany would "remain for ever and ever the laughing stock of the world," he is now the laughing stock, humiliated by his wife's possible infidelity.

Allusion

The story's title is an allusion to Shakespeare's *Othello.* Othello's wife, Desdemona, is free from corruption, yet Othello, provoked by the words of Iago, comes to believe that she has been unfaithful to him. At the end of the play, Othello murders Desdemona, learns that Iago has duped him, and then kills himself out of grief and shame. Before killing himself, however, Othello addresses the nobles who have rushed to the chamber where Desdemona lays strangled by his own hands:

Set you down this;

And say besides that in Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,

I took by the throat the circumcised dog

And smote him—thus. *He stabs himself.*

Like the narrator, Othello asks others to tell his story; also like the narrator, he has felt the burden of immeasurable jealousy. Unlike Desdemona, however, the narrator's wife is, perhaps, not wholly innocent. Othello's story about the "malignant" and "turbaned Turk" is a metaphor for himself: a man who hurt a Venetian (Desdemona) and "traduced the state." By killing himself, Othello seeks the punishment he deserves for behaving like a "circumcised dog." At the end of his letter, the narrator writes, "It may all end in *Aleppo* if I am not careful." He fears that he, too, will kill himself out of remorse, if his wife is innocent and he left her to her fate with the Germans. Although the narrator begs V. not to allude to *Othello* in his title, Nabokov's doing so implies that the narrator will meet the same fate as Shakespeare's tragic hero. As Stephen Jan Parker writes in *Understanding Vladimir Nabokov* (1987), "The serious point of these games of parody and allusion" is that they set Nabokov's works "within a line of literary antecedents" which add depth to the works at hand. Thus, "That in Aleppo Once . . ." is enriched greatly by a reader's understanding of *Othello.*

Nabokov also has his narrator allude to the marriage of the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin: "She was much younger than I—not as much younger as was Natalie of the lovely bare shoulders and long ear-rings in relation to swarthy Pushkin," but young enough to allow "a sufficient margin for that kind of retrospective romanticism which finds pleasure in imitating the destiny of a unique genius." Like Pushkin, the narrator is a Russian poet with a younger wife. More significant is the fact that Pushkin was betrayed by his wife as the narrator fears he has been. The narrator states that Natalie "yawned" whenever Pushkin's verse "happened to exceed the length of a sonnet," but that his own wife was "attracted by the obscurity" of his poetry. The narrator's wife's fascination with his verse, however, proves ephemeral, since she eventually "tore a hole through its veil and saw a stranger's unlovable face."

The narrator makes another allusion when he tells V., "I come to you like that gushing lady in Chekhov who was dying to be described." The lady in question here is the title character of Anton Chekhov's story, "The Lady with the Pet Dog" (1899). Chekhov's story concerns Anna Sergeyevna, a young woman in an unhappy marriage who eventually betrays her husband with Dmitry Dmitrich Gurov, a married man whom she meets while on holiday. The narrator's comparison of himself to Anna Sergeyevna is significant, for in Chekhov's story she is a confused person who cannot reconcile her desires with her duty, just as the narrator cannot reconcile his love for his wife with what he thought was his duty to himself in forsaking her.

Symbolism

While describing to V. the first time he kissed his wife, the narrator compares the moment to "that blinding blast" caused when a soldier picks up "a small doll from the floor of a carefully abandoned house." In the context of World War II, the doll is meant to be viewed as a booby-trap containing an explosive detonated by the unwitting soldier; in the context of their marriage, the soldier and the doll symbolize the narrator and his wife. Like a doll, the narrator's wife seems innocent and harmless, but, like *this* particular doll, she is capable of destruction. Like the soldier, the narrator is attracted to the doll but fails to realize that the house has been "carefully abandoned": the doll is part of a larger set-up meant to destroy such unsuspecting fools. Death lurks in unlikely places, such as the abandoned house or the "vacuum" of Central Park, where the narrator composes the letter intimating his suicidal thoughts.

A second symbol is the dog mentioned by the narrator's wife to him at the train station and to Anna Vladimirovna in Nice. Although the dog does not exist, the narrator's wife becomes distraught at the mere thought of such an animal being abandoned and "whining behind a locked door." Similarly, at the end of the story, the narrator feels remorse for abandoning his wife to the Germans in Marseilles.

Historical Context

On May 10, 1940, German forces attacked the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. By June 9, the Germans had crossed the Somme River and effectively destroyed any hopes of French retaliation. In an attempt to appease the Germans and end the destruction they caused, Henri Philippe Petain (an eighty-four-year-old Marshal who had become the French premiere on June 16) asked the Germans for an armistice, which they formally granted on June 22. Petain offered the Germans the control of northern France (at France's expense) and asked if the French could establish a government in the southern city of Vichy. The Germans agreed and on July 2 the Vichy government was established. At this time the Nazis held approximately two-thirds of France.

Petain was named chief of state of the Vichy government on July 10, 1940. As many suspected during its formation, the Vichy government proved to be a puppet regime for the Nazis. With his prime minister, Pierre Laval, Petain ruled the unoccupied area of France as a totalitarian dictator and operated in complete collusion with Hitler. Although Petain dismissed Laval for fear of his growing power, the Germans reinstated him in 1942.

Occupied France was essentially a war zone. French citizens were routinely interrogated, arrested by secret police, and forced into labor. Many Jews found in France were sent to concentration camps— a fate that Nabokov's wife, Vera, escaped. During this period of occupation, however, the French general Charles de Gaulle, who had once been an aide to Petain and had escaped to London shortly after the fall of his country, drummed up Allied support for his besieged people and formed the Free French. The Free French was a committee established in London on June 28, 1940, which sought to continue the fight against Germany until France was freed from Nazi terror. Eventually, the Allies invaded Normandy on June 6, 1944 (D-Day), and France was liberated shortly thereafter. The Free French troops, with de Gaulle at their head, were the first to enter liberated Paris on August 25, 1944. Petain and Laval were tried for treason and collaborating with the enemy. Laval was executed and Petain died in prison, after having his death sentence commuted.

The events of "That in Aleppo Once . . ." reflect the nightmarish sense of life under the Vichy government. Any author who criticized the Germans in his or her work was arrested and punished, which explains why the narrator feared that "some helpful compatriot" of his would point out to "the interested party" the passages in his books where he argues that Germany will be "for ever and ever the laughing stock of the world." On his long journey by rail, the narrator speaks to some fellow Russians in Nice, remarking that he "heard those among them who chanced to have Jewish blood talk of their doomed kinsmen crammed into hell-bound trains." The narrator's discovery of his wife at the end of a long line at a food store reflects the short supply of things as common as oranges during the occupation. Finally, the criss-crossing of trains and confusion endured by the narrator reflects the difficulties many refugees had in

escaping the German menace. At the time Nabokov wrote this story (1943) in the city of Boston, Massachusetts, that menace was still very powerful.

Critical Overview

While generally overshadowed by towering works such as *Lolita, Pale Fire,* and *Ada,* "That in Aleppo Once . . ." has piqued the curiosity of several Nabokov scholars. In his 1995 study *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction,* Michael Wood places the story in the context of several Nabokov works featuring "ordered but unsympathetic" worlds "run by a heavy-handed deity"—in this case, V., who is certainly unsympathetic when he uses the title, "That in Aleppo Once . . ." as he does. While Wood explains that "[t]his is not the way the world is, for Nabokov or for us," he does state that this is "the way it may feel" to people in times of crisis. Writing in *The Garland*

Companion to Vladimir Nabokov (1995), Gennady Barabtarlo praises the story as "a concentrated study of jealousy on a severe scale, jealousy that is capable of quaking and deforming reality." Barabtarlo also examines the ways in which the narrator's inability to know exactly what sins his wife has committed leads to his implied suicide. His "suffering is real" even if it is based upon events that did not actually occur, and it is reasonable to conclude "when his suffering becomes unbearable, the hero takes his life." Unlike Barabtarlo, the biographer and critic Andrew Field argues in his 1967 work *Nabokov: His Life in Art* that the narrator's wife acts "with a morbid and sadistic self-consciousness." However, Field allows for the possibility that the narrator has made some fatal error in abandoning her in Marseilles; mistakes lead to "our phantoms, our losses, and, in the end, madness." Field also explains that the story fits into Nabokov's overall negative attitude towards Germany and quotes Nabokov's German translator as bemoaning the fact that Nabokov never acknowledged the existence of "another Germany, a country consisting of art, culture, and humanism."

Two critics who have examined "That in Aleppo Once . . ." at some length are L. L. Lee and Geoffrey Green. Writing in 1965 in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Lee examines the ways in which the story uses dialectically opposed images and characters to ultimately "make the reader aware of his own ambiguity, of his possession or lack of self." In his 1988 book *Freud and Nabokov,* Green examines the events of the story in light of the works of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. As Green acknowledges, "Nabokov hated Freud and psychoanalysis with a passion" and "sustained the grandest and most extravagant contempt for psychoanalysis known in modern literature." Still, Green manages to find interesting connections between the story and Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Civilization and Its Discontents,* ultimately arguing that the story dramatizes a number of Freudian "drives" that lead the narrator to his suicide.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Moran is a teacher of English and American literature. In this essay, Moran examines Nabokov's use of ambiguity and how he draws upon the reader's understanding of Othello.

In his opening paragraph to V., the narrator of "That in Aleppo Once . . ." explains that he learned V.'s address from a mutual acquaintance who "seemed to think somehow or other" that V. "was betraying our national literature." While the opinions of "good old Gleb Alexandrovich Gekko" matter little to V. or the narrator (who even slightly mocks him), this easily forgotten character raises the issue of betrayal in the story's first paragraph. The different types of betrayal dramatized in the story are dizzying: the narrator may have been betrayed by his wife; the narrator may have betrayed his wife by leaving her to the Nazis in France; the Germans betray humanity; and V. betrays the narrator by giving his letter the title he does.

In light of this title, the narrator is linked to his Shakespearian counterpart, who betrays his wife and is betrayed by "honest" Iago. Betrayal is certainly one of Shakespeare's predominant themes: works such as *Hamlet, King Lear, Henry IV Part 1, Richard III, Coriolanus,* and, of course, *Othello* all explore the ways in which a character betrays his or her love, family, or country—and is sometimes betrayed by them as well. However, in Nabokov's story, the distinctions between betrayer and betrayed are blurred and confused, perplexing the first-time reader who searches for clues concerning the "truth" of the events described by the narrator. Did his wife cuckold him? Was she really "testing" him with her story of the salesman? Does she really believe that she lives "several lives at once?" Or is the narrator the guilty party, who, like a character from the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, tells his story with the most honest of intentions while simultaneously revealing his own perceptual limitations? These questions are deliberately left unanswered by Nabokov, who invites the reader to assume the role of judge yet never allows him or her the relief of hearing the gavel sound its note of finality. The issue facing a re-reader, therefore, becomes one not of facts (what really happened) but feelings (how it *feels* to betray or be betrayed). Despite his foolishness, King Lear can justly state, "I am a man / More sinned against than sinning," but Nabokov's narrator can never stand on such terra firma, nor can the reader, for whom all the story's evidence remains inconclusive. Only V. passes judgment and whether he does so after a careful weighing of the evidence *or* simply as an act of cruelty to his desperate friend is never explained, although an understanding of *Othello* suggests the latter possibility as more probable.

The incident involving the uncle of the narrator' s wife can be read as a representative example of the kind of ambiguity that haunts the narrator and perplexes the first-time reader. His wife tells the narrator that she has an uncle living in New York. After she and the narrator compose a "dramatic letter" to him, however, they receive no reply. At this point, the reader assumes that the uncle is, like the narrator's wife's imaginary dog, "whining behind a locked door." After his arrival in the United States, the narrator investigates the address his wife had given for her uncle and finds it to be "an

anonymous gap between two office buildings." The uncle's name does not appear in the directory, which adds to the narrator's (and the reader's) suspicion of his wife and makes her adultery much more likely—she seems a very untrustworthy figure. However, immediately after these conclusions are drawn, Gekko (who significantly "knows everything") tells the narrator that "the man and his horsey wife existed all right, but had moved to San Francisco after their little deaf girl died." Now the reader is back where he or she started; nothing concerning the uncle can be said with any definitiveness other than that he existed. The narrator's wife may have been lying about the address *or* she may have simply made a mistake. This ambiguity unsettles the reader but traumatizes the narrator, who can think of nothing concerning his wife to have any definitiveness. "Viewing the past graphically," he explains, "I see our mangled romance engulfed in a deep valley of mist between the crags of two matter-of-fact mountains." Mountains are likened here to immovable and unalterable truth, which is what the narrator seeks from V.: a "mountainous" explanation of what happened with his "misty" wife.

The narrator, like many people when faced with painful doubts, hopes to turn his mists into mountains and writes to V. for assistance in this endeavor. Early in his letter, the narrator fondly recalls his days as a poet composing his first "udder-warm bubbling verse." Although he states "just now I am not a poet," his artistic vocation deserves to be examined against V.'s vocation. The reader learns that V. has become a writer of fiction; he has moved from an art form often concerned with the impressions of things to one that (in its traditional sense) offers its readers a series of events possessing clarity and definitiveness. This clarity is missing from the story of the narrator's wife, which is why she seems so unreal to him and why he asks V. to transform his miserable set of impressions into a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. While the narrator knows that V. "can hardly be expected to puzzle out" his "misfortune in terms of human communion," he does ask V. to "clarify things for me through the prism of your art." In effect, he is asking V. to impose the order of fiction on the chaos of experience.

But what does V. do? He does not write a story about the narrator. He *reprints* the narrator's letter, with all its pathetic pleas and confusion. No one who wrote such a letter would want anyone other than its recipient to read it, but this obviously does not affect V. Rather than offering his friend an artistic version of his suffering at the hands of a deceptive wife (which would vindicate him and excuse his jealousy) or one in which his friend is portrayed as a horrible man who abandoned his wife (which would be devastating but would at least ease his doubts), V. changes nothing in the letter. Since the narrator advises V. that he should not make the doctor he met on the ship a doctor in the story, "as that kind of thing has been overdone," and the doctor remains, the reader can assume that V. has changed nothing else in the letter itself. V. also titles the story with the very phrase the narrator begs him to forsake: "Spare me, V.: you would load your dice with an unbearable implication if you took that for a title." But V. does not spare the narrator and tacks the phrase from *Othello* before the text of the letter.

Why V. employs the accursed title can be understood by comparing the characters of the story to those of *Othello.* The narrator is obviously the Othello-figure, who moves from obsessive jealousy ("I must find out every detail, reconstruct every minute") to remorse at destroying the woman he loved by leaving her in occupied France

("Somewhere, somehow, I have made some fatal mistake"). His wife is the Desdemona-figure, who uses a smile to "wriggle into the semi-security of irrelevant commentaries" when interrogated. While the audience never questions Desdemona's innocence, it is questioned by Othello, just as the narrator's wife falls under suspicion here. The hair-lotion salesman with whom the narrator's wife may or may not have slept is like Cassio, the dashing and, as Bianca's presence in the play suggests, licentious young soldier. The remaining major character in *Othello* is Iago, the villain whose enthusiasm for cruelty and skill with language convinces Othello that Desdemona is false—and in Nabokov's story, the Iago-figure is V., who takes a collection of events and deliberately (and coldly) gives them a meaning he knows will drive his "friend" to suicide.

To understand how V. betrays the narrator in his own Iago-like way, consider the manner in which Iago works on Othello. In the middle of the play, after Cassio has disgraced himself with public drunkenness, Iago and Othello approach Emilia (Iago's wife), Desdemona, and Cassio, who have been discussing the way in which Desdemona will beg her husband to reinstate the dismissed Cassio. Upon seeing his superior, Cassio leaves in shame and Iago makes a seemingly nonchalant observation to Othello:

Iago. Ha! I like not that.

Othello. What dost thou say?

Iago. Nothing, my lord; or if—I know not what.

Othello. Was that not Cassio parted from my wife?

Iago. Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it,

That he would steal away so guilty-like,

Seeing you coming.

Othello. I do believe 'twas he.

Everything Iago says here is designed to take a neutral, matter-of-fact event (Cassio's exit) and fill it with significance. If Iago had said nothing, Cassio's exit would have appeared to Othello as simply a man hurriedly leaving a room. Iago, however, transforms the exit into something suspicious ("I like not that"), unpleasant to discuss ("Nothing my lord; or if—I know not what"), and bordering on criminal behavior ("steal away so guilty-like"). This ability to turn, in the narrator's terms, mists into mountains in so short a time is what makes Iago so dangerous. Later in the play, he performs the same trick with Desdemona's handkerchief (given to her by Othello while they were courting): after planting it on Cassio and then telling Othello he saw Cassio wipe his beard with it, Othello's suspicions are aroused. He asks his wife, who has already expressed to Emilia her pain at having lost it, for the handkerchief. Desdemona tries to stall her husband's relentless questions, for fear of hurting his feelings, but Othello is too far away from her by then:

Desdemona. Why do you speak so startlingly and rash?

Othello. Is't lost? Is't gone? Speak, is it out o' th'way?

Desdemona. Heaven bless us!

Othello. Say you?

Desdemona. It is not lost. But what an if it were?

Othello. How?

Desdemona. I say it is not lost.

Othello. Fetch't, let me see it!

Desdemona. Why, so I can, sir; but I will not now.

This is a trick to put me from my suit.

Pray you let Cassio be received again.

Othello. Fetch me the handkerchief! My mind misgives.

By this point, Iago has shown Othello his wife through the prism of *his* art and by the time Othello sees her without the artistic embellishments offered by Iago, she will be dead.

V. and Iago are both artists who offer their readers (the narrator and Othello) logical and definitive explanations for events. The falsity of Iago's explanations and the potential falsity of V.'s explanations are irrelevant; what is important is that these explanations are taken as truth by Othello and the narrator. As the narrator asks V. to "clarify things" through the "prism" of his art, Iago *pretends* to clarify such things as Cassio's exit and the missing handkerchief for Othello. Had V. titled the story "A Deranged Wife" or "Pity the Poor Cuckold," he would have communicated to the narrator his opinion that he did the right thing by abandoning her in Marseilles, but like Iago, he frames the data before him in such a way that the confused narrator must assume that V. finds him guilty of having made "some fatal mistake."

When he learns of Iago's villainy at the end of the play, Othello asks him why he "hath thus ensnared" his "soul and body." Iago's short reply ("Demand me nothing") and refusal to speak confound the other characters. Similarly, V. offers the narrator an "unbearable implication" by titling the story as he does without offering any rationale or afterward explaining why he did so. However, while the motives of these artist-villains may seem inscrutable, there is one possibility for why each man acts as he does: each man enjoys, and employs, his creative powers as a means by which he asserts his superiority over weaker men. As artists can, in their work, create life, they can also destroy it. In *Othello,* a man kills himself because of the convincing lies (i.e., fictions)

offered to him by his "friend," as in Nabokov's story a man will kill himself because of *his* "friend's" artistic use of an allusion.

In his *Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature,* the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes Iago as "A being next to Devil—only *not* quite Devil." Coleridge's reason for this assessment of ' *'not* quite" has to do with the fact that, at times, Iago himself searches for his own motives, such as when he speaks of Othello's rumored liaisons with Emilia or when he remarks of Roderigo, "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse," as if money is the reason why Iago does the terrible things he does (Coleridge's often-misunderstood phrase "motiveless malignity" applies in this context). In other words, Iago is evil yet still retains, to a small degree, the human desire to find motives for his own inexplicable cruelty. Nabokov, however, offers no such motive-hunting in V., who offers no apologies or motives for his betrayal other than the betrayal itself which, with Shakespeare's assistance, raises betrayal to an art form: specifically, a story entitled, "That in Aleppo Once . . ."

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "That in Aleppo Once . . .," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English Literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey demonstrates that the narrator's identity as a poet is his defining characteristic, and discusses the significance this has for the story as a whole.

Vladimir Nabokov's "That in Aleppo Once . . ." is in the form of a letter from the narrator, a poet, to a friend named V., who is a fiction writer. In this letter, the narrator tells the story of his strange, brief marriage, and does so in a way that reveals the poetic nature of his thinking and writing about life. Clearly, being a poet is much more than a hobby or occupation for this man; it is his identity and it defines the way he perceives and relates to the world. His love is not the wife of whom he writes but rather poetry, writing, and words. In his letter, this love is expressed directly, indirectly, and in literary references, and the sum of these expressions makes clear that the narrator casts himself, above all, in the role of the poet.

The narrator makes direct references to himself as a poet. He recalls wistfully when he and V. were young and "wrote our first udder-warm bubbling verse, and all things, a rose, a puddle, a lighted window, cried out to us: 'I'm a rhyme!'" From his youth, the narrator has regarded the world as a source of art and inspiration. As an adult, he compares his wife to one of his poems and reveals that in response to his crumbling marriage, he composed poetry. He admires the poetry of Aleksandr Pushkin, who is widely considered Russia's premier poet and whose verse he feels he can never match.

The narrator writes poetically even when he is writing a letter to a friend. Indirectly, he reveals his identity as a poet in the way he describes the world and his feelings. As early as the second paragraph, the narrator's poetic impulse is evident in his word choice and use of literary devices. He writes:

And the sonorous souls [alliteration] of Russian verbs [personification] lend a meaning to the wild gesticulation of trees [personification] or to some discarded newspaper sliding and pausing, and shuffling again, with abortive flaps and apterous jerks along an endless [exaggeration] windswept embankment. But just now I am not a poet [irony].

The narrator introduces vivid imagery when he describes the sky as "a chaos of black and flesh-colored clouds with an ugly sunburst beyond a hooded hill." The poet's eye for contrast is evident as he describes seeing "coal dust glittering in the heat between naked indifferent rails, and a lone piece of orange peel." Examples of literary devices occur throughout the letter, as when he employs both alliteration and oxymoron in the comment, "the gentle Germans roared into Paris." Later in the same paragraph, he writes of his wife, "I am able to speak of her with as much detachment as I would of a character in a story (one of your stories, to be precise)." This comment is significant because he compares his wife to a literary figure (a character in a story). The narrator also describes his wife as being "as nebulous as my best poem," a simile with a literary element. The metaphor he chooses for his honeymoon is the theater, writing that he and

his wife were "walking through the stale stage setting of abstract towns." Again, notice the use of alliteration. Although Nabokov was born in Russia, he produced an impressive body of work in English, including this story. This is an important observation because it demonstrates that Nabokov himself— not a translator—crafted all of the story's alliterative phrases.

The narrator is apparently a well-read man— not only a writer of poetry but also a student of literature. He makes literary references that are intended to make a point, not to show off his knowledge. That he makes these references in a letter to V. reveals that the two share literature as a frame of reference. At one point, for example, the narrator likens his relationship with his wife to Pushkin's relationship with his love, Nathalie. He is thrilled to have something in common with such a great literary mind. When his wife leaves, he comes upon a garden with a "blue Arabian Nights jar," a reference to the classic tales *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights.*

During the course of the letter, the narrator casts himself in many roles, but that of the poet undergirds them all. He presents himself as a friend to V., a bridegroom and lover to his wife, and a soldier in Paris. What is significant is that the poet inhabits all the other roles. For example, the narrator's description of himself as a soldier coming upon an abandoned house is imagistic as well as poignant and insightful. The reader hears the poet's voice in the soldier's description: "We all know of that blinding blast which is caused by merely picking up a small doll from the floor of a carefully abandoned house: the soldier involved hears nothing." He also relates with poetic images and figurative language a moment shared with his wife. He recalls that "her dim smile changed all at once into an odd quiver and she placed one hand on my shoulder, staring down at me as if I were a reflection on a pool, which she had noticed for the first time."

To the narrator, the roles of friend, groom, and soldier are like clothes he puts on; the self who wears the clothes is the poet. It is the poet who makes up the core of his identity, who perceives and interprets the world and his experiences in it. If his friendship with V. were to end or had never begun, if he had not served in the military, or if he had not been briefly married, he would still be a poet. The poet functions independently of the other roles, although the poet draws on the experiences they provide. Yet if he found himself alone on a desert island, he would still find inspiration to write poetry.

That this short story portrays one writer addressing another is important to understanding one of Nabokov's major themes of the story: the interdependent relationship between life and literature. First, the narrator comments that his life became fiction when his broken marriage made the rounds among the gossips. He is amazed at the dramatic rumors he has heard about what went wrong in his marriage and where his wife has gone. His life quickly became literature, although in a debased form—"popular literature" in the most literal sense. Then, the fiction writer, V., takes his poet friend's story, as revealed to him in the letter, and crafts it into a short story—a "higher" form of literature. Interestingly, when V. turns the letter into a short story, the narrator is not surprised; to the contrary, the narrator anticipates this and even comments in his letter about the title V. may choose for his fictionalized version of the tale. The narrator is a

poet with an ever-present muse, so he understands completely that his friend will draw on the letter for fictional material. Life is supposed to give rise to literature, Nabokov seems to say, and hopefully it will be well-made and thoughtful literature.

To add a final layer to Nabokov's interweaving of life and literature, the story itself is a work of literature presented in the form of a letter, as if it were a piece of a man's life. Nabokov makes a strong statement that literature is a means by which to interpret, embellish, and transform reality. At the same time, however, he seems to say that literature must be rooted in real people, experiences, and events. He underscores these points by making his characters a poet, who interprets life poetically, and a fiction writer, who turns this poetic reality into fiction.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "That in Aleppo Once . . .," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Research the events that immediately led to the German invasion of France during World War II, and the plight of those who tried to escape. Compare your findings with the presentation of such events in Nabokov's story.

Like the narrator, Nabokov also left France once the Germans invaded. Consult a biography of Nabokov and explain how he may have used experiences from his own life while creating the plot of the story.

Rewrite the story from the narrator's wife's point-of-view, giving clarity to the events that puzzle the narrator and the reader. Decide whether she is innocent, mentally disturbed, or as licentious as the narrator suspects.

Find another piece of literature whose title alludes to another work and explore how the author in question appropriates the alluded-to work as Nabokov does with *Othello.* Some possible works are Robert Frost's "Out, Out—," Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers,* William Styron's *Darkness Visible,* James Joyce's *Ulysses,* or Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls.*

Compare and Contrast

1940s: A number of authors naturally turn to World War II for their subject matter. Books such as Ilya Eherenberg's *The Fall of Paris,* Ernie Pyle's *Here Is Your War,* and Ted Lawson's *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* brought the complexities of the war into the libraries of millions.

Today: World War II is still a widely-discussed era that has inspired a number of important works of fiction and nonfiction, including Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow,* Stephen Ambrose's *Citizen Soldiers,* and Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation.*

1940s: After World War II ends, the East German Social Democrats merge with the Communists, eventually leading to the division of Germany into East and West, and the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

Today: Largely due to the actions of U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, the Berlin wall has been destroyed (1989) and the two Germanys have been reunited under a reformist government.

1940s: Technology grows exponentially. This decade sees the splitting of the atom, the development of the first automated computers, and the first uses of magnetic recording tape.

Today: The rate of technological growth has increased. Atomic energy is in use at many sites around the world, computers continue to become smaller and faster, and the recordable compact disc drive had become a standard computer feature.

What Do I Read Next?

Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* (1604) lends Nabokov's story its title and is widely regarded as one of the playwright's greatest works. Like "That in Aleppo Once . . .," *Othello* concerns the effects of jealousy on a married man's mind.

The Winter's Tale (1610), one of Shakespeare's late romances, concerns Leontes, a king whose jealousy of his innocent wife almost destroys her and her daughter. Unlike *Othello,* however, Leontes is saved from his own passions before they destroy himself and his family.

Nabokov's most famous novel, *Lolita* (1955), follows the exploits of Humbert Humbert, a pervert whose love for the "nymphet" Dolores Haze provokes great jealousy, confusion, and death.

Nabokov's 1947 novel *Bend Sinister* is a dark, satirical portrait of a totalitarian state (in some ways like the Nazis) that, in the name of equality and progress, destroys free thinking.

Speak, Memory (1951; revised 1966), Nabokov's autobiography, traces his development as an artist against the backdrop of his Russian childhood. The action of the book ends in 1940, when Nabokov and his wife emigrate to the United States.

Like "That in Aleppo Once . . . ," the plot of Nabokov's comic play *The Waltz Invention* (1938) is ambiguous. In the play's case, the ambiguity lies in whether or not the play's hero has invented a machine capable of destroying the entire world.

Lectures on Literature (1980) contains the lectures Nabokov delivered while teaching at Cornell. These lectures treat such writers as Joyce, Stevenson, and Kafka while simultaneously revealing Nabokov's own literary tastes and opinions.

Anton Chekhov's story "The Lady with the Pet Dog" (1899) is alluded to in "That in Aleppo Once . . . ." Like Nabokov, Chekhov's story concerns marital infidelity and its ramifications.

Further Study

Boyd, Brian, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years,* Princeton University Press, 1991.

This critically acclaimed and exhaustive critical biography is the follow-up to Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years. Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* begins in 1940, when Nabokov and his wife left France for the United States.

Nabokov, Vladimir, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

This mammoth volume contains all of Nabokov's stories as well as an introduction by his son, Dmitri.

Naumann, Maria Turkevich, *Blue Evenings in Berlin: Nabokov's Short Stories of the 1920s,* New York University Press, 1978.

While this book does not specifically treat "That in Aleppo Once . . .," Naumann does offer many ideas about Nabokov's expatriation and how it is treated in his early short stories.

Schiff, Stacy, *Vera (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov),* Random House, 1999.

This biography of Nabokov's wife explores the depths to which she was involved in her husband's creative and business affairs.

Werth, Alexander, *France 1940-1945,* Henry Holt and Company, 1956.

The opening chapters of Werth's book offer in-depth examinations of the Vichy government, the trial of Henri Petain, and the French Resistance.

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Shakespeare, William, *The Tragedy of King Lear,* in *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare,* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, pp. 1174-1226.

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Wood, Michael, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction,* Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 74.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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