

The tragic fate of exiles in Nabokov's *The Matter of Chance* from Reader-Response Criticism

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Abstract: *The Matter of Chance* is a story in a collection of short stories by Nabokov about Luzhin and his wife Elena who seek each other but miss them each other. This paper analyzes the tragic fate of the main characters as exiles in this story by applying Iser's theory of "blank" and Jauss's theory of "horizon of expectation" in Reader-Response Criticism. Through the interaction between the author, the text and the reader, the reader's reading interest is stimulated, and the reader is better involved in the text. Of course, the reader's experience also influences the reader. And the reader's horizon of expectation changes and adjusts along with the reader's reading activities, so that the reader's view of the novel will be reshaped. Based on this, the paper focuses on the loneliness and brokenness of the post-war exiles and shows Nabokov's sense of homelessness as an exile.

Keywords: *The Matter of Chance*; Reader-Response Criticism; blank; horizon of expectations; tragic fate

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Vladimir Nabokov is a famous Russian American author who writes the literary work *Lolita*. He also contributes to the fields of entomology and chess. *The Matter of Chance* is one of his short stories. It tells the story of Luzhin, a Russian exile working as a waiter on an international dining train. Through a series of coincidences, he misses his wife. And finally, he ends his life because he is trapped between the beauty of the past and a present he cannot face. This paper analyzes characters' tragic fate as exiles primarily based on Iser's "blank" and Jauss's "horizon of expectation" in Reader-Response Criticism. Reader-Response Criticism takes reader reception as the primary object of criticism and explores the interrelationship between the reader, the writer, and the work. The blank and open-ended ending of the story inspires the reader to explore the reasons for the characters' tragic endings. Luzhin, who has experienced the war, misses the good life before the war. He becomes degraded after the war and relieves himself by dying. Elena is anxious after talking about the war. It all shows that war has caused them tragic fate and great trauma. The damage caused by war is permanent and difficult to eradicate. A peaceful world is everyone's wish.

The blank in this story is reflected in the incoherence of the plot. The blanks stimulate the reader's imagination and fill in the characters' misfortunes. Wolfgang Iser was the founder of the Constance School of Reception Aesthetics. "Iser argues that the reader and the text are no longer separate entities, but become one, constituting an interactive whole that makes the imaginary work of literature a reality" ^[1]. Different readers will fill in different blanks, thus enriching the understanding of the text. Iser divides the literary work itself into the spoken and the unspoken parts, and the reader can only provide meaning to the unspoken parts of the text if he or she is implicated in the events. The spoken part becomes a background reference, and the unsaid part comes to life in the reader's imagination. This story is not as detailed as other stories. Through the sense of plot division to leave a lot of blanks, readers can deduce the cause and effect of things, thus creating a sense of twists and turns. Readers have a sense of "so that's it". As the reader uses his or her imagination to fill in the blanks, the disconnected emotions become continuous, the trauma of the war and the tragic fate of the characters slowly emerge in a blur, and the emotional experience constantly strengthens, allowing the reader to become more immersed.

Iser holds that the blank of the text could inspire readers to understand the meaning of the text and fill the blank in the process of reading. "He claimed that the part written in the text informed us, but only the part unwritten would enable us to see the thing we want"^[2]. The first few paragraphs of the story describe Luzhin's now homeless life. He reminisces about the good old days and misses his wife who he has lost track of. It provokes the reader to think about the reason for the dramatic change in Luzhin's life. The reason why the other two waiters like him shows that he has

a unique charm. Then it describes that he is now addicted to drug and planning to commit suicide. This suggests that Luzhin does not spontaneously go on to become addicted to drug, but that there are triggers to make him do that. It inspires the reader to fill in the blanks on their own. Then the story shifts to the Princess Ukhtomski and a young woman, and the conversation between the two of them ends abruptly. Immediately afterward the story begins about Luzhin's intoxication with drugs. The subsequent misses of Elena and Luzhin are disjointed. The reader is taken to a twisting situation. The reader wants to know if Luzhin and Elena will encounter. However, Luzhin finds the Princess familiar but does not confirm it. "Everything else was clear, only this one blind spot remained"^[3], then he misses Elena. That is because he is preoccupied with his death and his memory is blurred caused by war. Elena misses Luzhin without dinner because of the man and drops the ring. The dropping of the ring will raise the reader's hope again that perhaps Luzhin will find the ring. However, the ring is picked up by Max, who does not know Russian, and Luzhin's life comes to an end. Nabokov uses this mutant plot to show life itself, suggesting that life is not a one-way progression, but some kind of free dispersion with surprising bumps and changes. The fragmented narrative makes the reader's emotions rise and fall even more, making the story feel more tragic. The sense of loneliness brought by war and the dramatic nature of destiny leave people feeling helpless.

Then the article will analyze the characters' tragic fates and endings from the reader's horizon of expectation. Hans Robert Jauss, a prominent founder of Reception Aesthetics, proposed the concept of the "horizon of expectation". This term describes the reader's established mental framework through textual reading, rooted in the principles of Hermeneutics. It facilitates a dynamic interplay between the text and the reader, shaping literary interpretation. Broadly, the concept encompasses three key dimensions of meaning: First, the reader relies on a pre-existing knowledge base for literary experience. Second, because literary works appear in the course of history and the perception of the reader, it is impossible for the reader to reveal them in a completely new state. Third, the horizon of expectation is not fixed and can change to the point of creating a new horizon of expectation. As the famous saying goes: "There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes." Every reader cannot be ignorant before he or she reads a text. Whether the book he has read or anything he has experienced, it will have an impact on his reading experience, the thoughts he generates, and the emotions he feels.

After joining World War I, Russia appeared a lot of problems, such as economic collapse, shortages, soaring prices, and desperate living conditions for the people. Under the leadership of Lenin, the October Revolution broke out in Russia. "The October Revolution opened a new era in human history. With the October Revolution as the starting point, world history entered a new era of gradual transition from capitalism to socialism"^[4]. The October Revolution changed the destiny of Russia, and at the same time, brought about great disasters and indelible consequences for the marginalized exile community. Although the story does not depict the October Revolution in a very specific way, Luzhin is addicted to drugs to paralyze him, and he feels that "his life had wasted away to nothing and there was no use continuing it" (Nabokov 36); Elena's search for her husband and her "diminutive" wedding ring reveal her hardship; and the Princess accepts everything calmly. These reflect the tragic fate of the exiles and the author's concern for them. When a reader reads a book or a story, the first thing they focus on is the title. When looking at *The Matter of Chance*, the first thing that comes to the reader's mind may be encounters, destinies, important turning points and opportunities in someone's life. When reading that Luzhin has not seen his wife for five years, readers will associate Luzhin's reunion with his wife under the influence of the title. Of course, the story does not develop like that. It is the case that they have the chance to reunite but miss the chance which leads to their no reunion. The chances that lead to their failure to reunite are Luzhin's suicide plan that keeps him from getting any closer to the Princess; the man pestering Elena so that she doesn't have dinner; and the dropped ring that Max picks up. A chain of woven events causes Luzhin and Elena to be on the verge of meeting each other only to miss it by a whisker.

After World War I, trauma research shifted from psychiatric and pathological levels to psychological research, and the analysis and treatment of trauma suffered by soldiers during the war became the reason for the resurgence of

trauma research at that time. War means killing and death. There is no absolute justice or absolute defeat in war, and the countries and people who go through war must pay a heavy price. “The Russian exiles experienced revolution and a long period of upheaval, resulting in both physical and mental trauma, and these memories accompanied the exiles and became an ineradicable mark on their lives” [5]. One of the most obvious points in this story is the obscurity of character memories. Ambiguity brings uncertainty, and uncertainty gives the reader a lot of space to imagine and create, which facilitates the reader’s interaction with the text. The first is the obscurity of Luzhin’s memory. Luzhin sees the Princess and feels familiar. He feels as if he has seen her in a dream. “But the more he strained his mind, the more irritatingly the recollection would slip away” [3]. The second is the obscurity of Elena’s memory. How Elena deduced that Luzhin was dead is unknown. In Berlin, her friends told her that Luzhin is alive. Such inferences and rumors do not prove the reliability of Elena’s sources. The third is the obscurity of the Princess’s memory. “My memory is not so good” [3]. She can’t remember the names of Luzhin and his brothers and she also can’t tell Luzhin from his brother. Trauma of the exiles not only emulates from spatial separation, but also from the interruption of time. The exiles are trapped between the “Russia of the past” and the “present to which they cannot belong”. War creates exiles, and the hardships and injuries of exiles deepen their post-war trauma. The ending of Luzhin’s accidental death goes against the suicide plan, and the abrupt ending for the rest of the characters gives the reader a sense of unfinished business.

Unlike the New Criticism’s focus on the text itself, Reader-Criticism Theory puts the reader in the process of literary criticism and puts a lot of weight on the reader. It provides a new perspective for literary criticism. *The Matter of Chance* is not a very famous essay by Nabokov, but it is valuable to study. The title seems to suggest that this is a hopeful story, but as reader reads deeper, he realizes that the tragic fate of the characters is briefly described by the lucky “chance”. Iser’s blank allows the reader to fully interact with the text and provokes the reader to think about the tragic fate of the characters, making the reader better engaged in the text. Jauss’s horizon of expectation starts from the reader, based on the reader’s own experience. This article analyzes characters’ tragic fates in terms of war and post-war trauma. It also illustrates Nabokov’s own loneliness and nostalgia as an exile, the linguistic dilemma of writing in English as a Russian, and the historical shadow of “chance”.

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