



## THE ARCHITECTONICS OF V. NABOKOV'S NOVEL "BEND SINISTER"

Pulatova Sabina Sharifovna

Third-year PhD student of Bukhara State University

[s.sh.pulatova@buxdu.uz](mailto:s.sh.pulatova@buxdu.uz)

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### ABSTRACT

*This analysis examines the intricate architectonics of Vladimir Nabokov's novel "Bend Sinister", exploring its unique positioning within both a personal and political context. It posits that the work functions as a powerful critique of totalitarianism, specifically targeting the oppressive ideologies of fascism and communism as embodied in the fictional state of Padugrad. The study explores how V. Nabokov utilizes structural and semantic devices, including heraldic symbolism, recursive motifs like the "puddle," and a "matryoshka" meta-textual architecture, to represent the "crooked world" of political terror. Ultimately, it argues that the circular structure and authorial intervention demonstrate how the intellectual and creative existence of the individual can maintain sovereignty even in the face of systemic oppression and tragedy.*

**Introduction.** Every artistic work is a uniquely bounded world, representing either a holistic picture of life or the expression of a momentary emotion [1]. As such, every creative piece is a singular phenomenon shaped by specific historical and social conditions, embodying the writer's worldview, the spirit of the era, and their attitude toward social reality. From this perspective, the novel "Bend Sinister" serves, on one hand, as an expression of Vladimir Nabokov's opposition to the fascist regime and the persona of Hitler; on the other, it is a clear example of a critical stance toward communist ideology, which was often viewed as an alternative force to fascism.

V. Nabokov began writing this 18-chapter novel in December 1941 and completed it in June 1946. Unfortunately, the novel, published in June 1947, failed to gain the attention of the general public and critics, much like his first English-language work. However, unlike his first novel, the evaluation given by critics was generally positive [2].

One of the most positive critical remarks can be found in H. Borland's article, "Strategy of Terror." The author praises the novel as a "powerful and moving work describing the condition of a civilized man in a despotic state." In his review, H. Borland emphasizes: "If this work does not find its reader, it will be a serious mistake, for the war still continues. The struggle between free thought and totalitarian power is still relevant for us" [3].

In early American critical approaches, because the novel was published during the "Cold War" and a period of rising anti-Soviet sentiment, it was primarily interpreted and highly

valued as an ironic work sharply criticizing the narrow-mindedness and irrationality of totalitarian thinking and actions [4]. In subsequent years, this novel became the object of research for scholars such as L. Geller, A. Mulyarchik, G. Barabtarlo, B. Binstock, B. Boyd, J. Barton, L. Maddox, R. Peterson, and W. Rowe.

“Bend Sinister” possesses an anti-utopian character [5], depicting an imaginary society based on the theme of “political terror” which is a world of cruel oppression where personal opinions and freedoms are trampled. By describing such a fictional society, V. Nabokov invites the reader not only to criticize the existing system but also to reflect on vital questions of humanity and freedom.

“Bend Sinister” is a heraldic term referring to a diagonal band stretching from the upper right corner to the lower left of a shield. The presence of such bands in the flags of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union suggests that the events in the novel allude to these specific totalitarian regimes. Historically, such a band appeared on the coats of arms of the illegitimate children of aristocrats. This is likely why the work was translated into Russian as “Под знаком незаконнорожденных”, though V. Nabokov did not approve of this translation. Furthermore, as an idiom, “bend sinister” denotes a “mark of imperfection” or a “stain of defect” [6]. In our view, these meanings are closer to the novel’s essence, as it demonstrates the flaws of a corrupt political system established in an imperfect state. The architectonic foundation of the novel is built upon this concept of a “crooked world” (anti-reality).

The plot may seem simple at first glance. Its exposition begins with the famous philosopher Adam Krug remaining under the pressure of a totalitarian regime following the death of his wife, Olga. The events take place in a fictional Central European country called Padugrad, which embodies the characteristics of 20th-century despotic regimes (Germany and the USSR). After a coup, power is seized by a dictator named Paduk, leader of “The Party of the Average Man” (or the Ekwilist Party). The author notes that the Ekwilist ideology and slogans advanced by Paduk incorporate “*scraps of Lenin’s speeches, some fragments of the Soviet Constitution, and elements of Nazi falsehood*” [7]. The main goal of Paduk’s “average man” doctrine was to build a totalitarian society based on ideas of “spiritual uniformity” [8]. We believe this hybrid dictatorship environment serves not merely as a background but as the primary factor in determining the structural-semantic construction of the novel. V. Nabokov’s attitude toward such a cruel system—specifically the choice of Adam Krug, Paduk’s former classmate, as the sole force opposing the authoritarian regime—creates the conflict between the hero and the environment, driving the chain of events.

Due to Krug’s internationally recognized prestige, Paduk forces him to serve the interests of the state, as Krug’s support for the new system would bolster the external influence of Paduk’s power. Consequently, to pressure him, Krug’s friends and acquaintances are arrested first; however, he remains loyal to his liberal views. Soon after, when Krug himself is deprived of freedom, the novel reaches its climax: his eight-year-old son, David, is placed by Paduk’s servants into an “Institute for Abnormal Children” [9]. To save his only son, Krug agrees to fulfill any demand set by the government. Unfortunately, he is too late. As a result of a cruel psychological “experiment” conducted on the child at the institute, David dies tragically [10]. This tragedy is the highest emotional point of the work’s architectonics, revealing the horrific face of systemic terror directed against humanity. For Krug, already in

deep grief due to his wife's death, the loss of his only child is a final, devastating blow that drives him to madness. Nevertheless, the pressure does not end; when the mad philosopher attempts to attack the tyrant Paduk at the end of the work, he is shot by soldiers. The philosopher's death is interpreted as a release from suffering and a transition to a metaphysical "other world," giving artistic expression to the theme of "otherworldliness" which is a recurring motif in V. Nabokov's work.



**Conclusion.** "Bend Sinister" is a complex, multi-layered metatext (as noted by S. Davydov) shaped like a "matryoshka" doll, with architectonics that appears circular. The author's choice of the name "Krug" (Russian for "circle") is not accidental; the structural-semantic integrity of the entire work is manifested within this name. At the beginning of the work, the worlds of the author and the character meet in the image of a "puddle." The grief of Krug, who lost his wife, represents a "puddle of tears"; in subsequent chapters, Krug's subjugation to the cruel system and forced abandonment of his identity signifies his drowning in a second "puddle of darkness." The loss of his son becomes a "puddle of a stain in his soul," causing him to lose his mind. In the final 18th chapter, the author depicts himself at his desk, with a "puddle of ink" flowing from his pen, signaling that all of this is a fiction. By intervening in the text, the author grants his character death, opening the doors to the "other world." Thus, no matter how strong political terror may be, it is shown that it cannot conquer the intellectual existence of a human being. The fabula of the work begins with a "puddle" and concludes with the same image..

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