



University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
**TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative  
Exchange**

---

Chancellor's Honors Program Projects

Supervised Undergraduate Student Research  
and Creative Work

---

5-2022

## **Framing the Portrait of Life: Functions of Embedded Texts in Vladimir Nabokov's The Gift**

Caroline Sisk

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, [csisk6@vols.utk.edu](mailto:csisk6@vols.utk.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj)



Part of the [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Sisk, Caroline, "Framing the Portrait of Life: Functions of Embedded Texts in Vladimir Nabokov's The Gift" (2022). *Chancellor's Honors Program Projects*.  
[https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_chanhonoproj/2498](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/2498)

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Supervised Undergraduate Student Research and Creative Work at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chancellor's Honors Program Projects by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

Senior Honors Thesis

Framing the Portrait of Life: Functions of Embedded Texts in  
Vladimir Nabokov's *The Gift*

Winnie Sisk

1st Reader: Dr. Seshagiri

2nd Reader: Professor Blackwell

## Introduction

The use of embedded texts within a biography relates to the way real lives are shaped through written text, fairytales are tied to childhood memories and letters sent and received are able to share important events. Seeing how the use of embedded texts shapes the narratives of people's lives is important to focus on when reading biographies, as the texts chosen by the biographer allow them to choose the perspective of the subject's life. This allows multiple different narratives to exist for a singular person's life, showing that a written narrative of someone's life will never be able to fully encapsulate the person's experiences.

Within Vladimir Nabokov's *The Gift* there are multiple biographies written by Fyodor Gordunov-Cherdyntsev, such as one on his father and Nikolay Chernysehvski, and his own autobiography. He frames these lives through his use of embedded texts, as he constructs the narrative of their lives through poems, letters, references, and other written works he sees fit for his desired perspective. Fyodor sometimes includes texts that hold more personal sentimentality, rather than that of the subject, as his role as writer allows him to relate memories of the subject to texts which evoke the same emotion for the writer. This highlights the highly personal role of biographer and the way written narratives of people's lives are intertwined with that of the writer, even when they did not personally know one another. The embedded texts chosen by Fyodor help frame his perspective on his subjects and he chooses references that are linked to the emotions and memories, as his view on biographies is to create a highly personal retelling of their life, rather than focusing solely on their professional achievements.

Within literature on *The Gift*, there are discrepancies over the structure of the novel, as Fyodor's role as character-narrator allows different interpretations to his function within the novel. For this interpretation, there is an embedded autobiography supplemented by a

commentary on it, all done by Fyodor, an approach which is promoted by Julian Connolly in *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other*. The structural style of *The Gift* is explored by Marina Kostalevsky in "The Young Gordunov-Cherdyntsev or How to Write a Literary Biography", where she explains Nabokov's characteristic device of employing an embedded narrative within his novels. While in this case she is speaking on the Chernyshevski biography, it could be interesting to see how her perspective on the function of the embedded text can relate to the less explicit biographies within the novel. While looking at the embedded texts in the novel, they work on different planes of authenticity in relation to the larger embedded autobiography, as some are real within the book, but not outside of it, and others are fake within the book as well as real life. The authenticity of the texts is discussed in Alexander Dolinin's "Nabokov's Time Doubling: From *The Gift* to *Lolita*", as he writes "the notion of 'reality' in Nabokov is relative", emphasizing the issues with distinguishing whether a text is only fake within real life or if it is also fake within the novel.

### **Interpretation of Novel**

Vladimir Nabokov's *The Gift* can be divided into two parts, the first one being the portion told in third person with Fyodor as a character, and the other being the combination of the first and third person portions where Fyodor is the narrator. For the purpose of this paper, Fyodor as character will be represented by Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, and Fyodor functioning as narrator will be represented by Fyodor<sub>N</sub>. The third person portions belong to Fyodor<sub>N</sub>'s autobiography "The Gift" which exists within the total book *The Gift*, though there are first person portions being told by Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, so it is important to understand the distinction between first person narration and Fyodor<sub>C</sub> speaking in the first person. The differences between these two will be represented by

Fyodor's "The Gift" being *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> and Nabokov's novel as *The Gift*<sub>1</sub>. This interpretation of who is functioning as narrator and the various fictive levels based on pronoun usage, background knowledge of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, and the subtleties in *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> creates a circular narrative style. While "one should take into consideration that the notion of 'reality' in Nabokov is subjective", for this interpretation, the story of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> is real in the sense that it is an autobiography for the overarching narrator (Dolinin 1995, 6). Connolly shares this similar viewpoint that "the authorial consciousness responsible for the discourse of the novel, then, is that entity which the authorial potential within Fyodor becomes when it is liberated from its character shell" (217). This means that the first person narrative breakthroughs by Fyodor<sub>N</sub> are existing within *The Gift*<sub>1</sub>, to contextualize what is happening within the timeline of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>.

#### *Comparison to Internal Book Review*

Within the first chapter, there is an imaginary book review of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s *Poems*, as Fyodor<sub>C</sub> dreams up a perfect review after his friend, Alexander, told him one was published. This review is an analysis of *Poems*, with intermittent narrative breakthroughs by Fyodor<sub>N</sub> which provide backstory to the poems that are based on his childhood. This non-existent book review is scattered throughout the chapter with narrative breakthroughs pertaining to the background information on the poems, which an actual reviewer of *Poems* would not know. This solidifies the idea that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is Fyodor<sub>N</sub> at a later point in time.

The structure of this fictional book review mimics and anticipates the overall structure of *The Gift*<sub>1</sub>, as *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> and *Poems* are not given in their entirety and are mangled to follow the narrative flow. The embedded poems guide the narration, as Fyodor<sub>N</sub> relates what is happening within the texts to memories existing outside *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>'s timeline.

### *Pronoun Usage*

The first person portions can be interpreted as narrative breakthroughs by Fyodor<sub>N</sub> to provide further background information to his autobiography, *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>. The first person portions appear sporadically, with pronoun changes happening even mid-sentence. The first person portions of the text allow Fyodor<sub>N</sub> to offer backstory on the subject matter happening to Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, as the autobiography in the novel spans over the course of three years, while Fyodor<sub>N</sub> fills in the blanks and adds additional details about Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s past. The narrative breakthroughs by Fyodor<sub>N</sub> show the reader that he has extensive knowledge of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s past, which promotes the idea that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> in the future is the narrator of his autobiography.

#### A. Inconsistencies with Pronoun Usage

If all the first person portions of *The Gift*<sub>1</sub> were analyzed as a complete, self-contained book, it would not be cohesive, so for this interpretation it must be understood that portions of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> are skipped over for narrative flow. This mimics the fictional book review in Chapter One, as *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> does not exist within its entirety, much like how Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s book *Poems* is not shown in its entirety but is understood through Fyodor<sub>N</sub>'s narration.

An example of an inconsistency that comes with the mixing of pronouns appears when Fyodor<sub>N</sub> is giving a description of the woods Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is walking through in the final chapter. During this detailed account, there is confusion based on the timelines that both Fyodors are functioning at, specifically during Fyodor<sub>N</sub>'s account, when he writes “here is the exact spot where an airplane fell the other day” (331). It is ambiguous as to whether Fyodor<sub>N</sub> was walking through this exact forest recently and is telling a current story of what happened, or whether he is remembering the airplane crash from the time

he was Fyodor<sub>C</sub>. While this is not pertinent to the story of whether or not the airplane fell a few days prior to Fyodor<sub>N</sub> or Fyodor<sub>C</sub> walking through the woods, it is an example of the ambiguity that can come from the narrative style.

### *Background Knowledge*

While it is understood that Nabokov as writer of *The Gift*<sub>1</sub> would have extensive background knowledge on the character Fyodor, for the purpose of this interpretation, narrative breakthroughs show background knowledge due to Fyodor's status as subject and writer of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>.

As explained in the fictional book review section, Fyodor<sub>N</sub> holds extensive knowledge of the memories linked to the poems in *Poems*, as he is Fyodor<sub>C</sub> at a later point in time. While the memories linked to the text could be explained by Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, as he is the one envisioning the review, portions offering background information are offered by Fyodor<sub>N</sub>. Other background knowledge is offered through the text's circularness and Fyodor<sub>N</sub>'s narrative breakthroughs that provide information that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> will create the novel he exists in.

### *Circular Narrative Style*

Existing within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, there are hints that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> knows he would one day write the book he is now the protagonist in. The quotes hinting at the circularness of the story solely exist within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, but not within the narrative breakthroughs. The first mention of his future novel appears with the description at the start of the book of "one cloudy but luminous day, towards four in the afternoon" where there are two people waiting for their furniture to come out of a moving van (3). After Fyodor<sub>C</sub> watches this scene, Fyodor<sub>N</sub> writes "some day, he thought, I must

use such a scene to start a good, thick old-fashioned novel” (4). This scene existing within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> shows that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> conceptualized the beginning of the book he is now in, and is being written by himself in the future.

The circular narrative structure is explored by Dolinin in his article “Nabokov’s Time Doubling: From *The Gift* to *Lolita*”, when he states “at the intersection of the story time and the the discourse time, the protagonist turns into the author and the reader has to return to the beginning of the the book to read it as a novel by Godunov-Cherdyntsev” (40). The circular narrative structure is unexplicit until the end of the novel, which prompts the reader to read the book again once learning of the structure. This sentiment is also presented by Boyd, who states “he has constructed *The Gift* accordingly, inviting us to return again and again to discover more and more unsuspected designs even after we think we have already discovered far more than one set of events could ever seem to hold” (467). Also mentioned in Boyd’s article is the second reality in the novel, being the autobiography Fyodor<sub>N</sub> is writing, which is “an autobiography which describes its own prehistory, tracing the pattern of destiny which eventually leads to the character’s metamorphosis into the author” (11). There are secondary autobiographical aspects which exist in the narrative breakthroughs, but not within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, as the retelling of Fyodor’s childhood experiences are told in first person by Fyodor<sub>N</sub>. This metamorphosis allows for Fyodor<sub>C</sub> and Fyodor<sub>N</sub> to be the same person in the totality of *The Gift*<sub>1</sub>, but exist on different planes depending on the interpretation of the pronoun changes.

While it is unknown whether Fyodor<sub>C</sub> was planning on calling his autobiography “The Gift”, there are hints that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> believes his writing ability and how he is able to capture true life through text is his gift. His *gift* is mentioned in the first chapter after Fyodor<sub>C</sub> published *Poems*, when he envisions a book review of his work. Fyodor<sub>C</sub> imagines there are “in the person



of a few hundred lovers of literature who had left St.Petersburg, Moscow and Kiev, who would appreciate his gift” (9). His understanding of his gift at the beginning of the novel changes as he matures as a writer and grasps his purpose through his failures. This idea is portrayed by Leving, stating Fyodor “relates the story of his artistic maturation from the distance of mature artist” hence his growing ideas of his purpose as a writer throughout the novel that his gift to be offered has not reached full potential at the earlier points in the autobiography (266).

Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s gift is mentioned when he is leaving the literary soiree, where Fyodor<sub>N</sub> writes “he was already looking for the creation of something new, something still unknown, something genuine, fully corresponding to the gift which he felt like a burden inside himself” (94). He thought this as he reflected “with heavy revulsion of the verses he had written that day” and was hoping for something new that would spark his excitement in writing (94). He is becoming more critical of his writing and is looking for something deeper than his previous poems, as shown by his reaction when Zina asks him to sign her copy of *Poems*. Fyodor<sub>C</sub> tells her “I only wanted to say something about that book of mine: it’s not the real thing, the poems are bad, I mean, they’re not all bad, but generally speaking” (180).

In the final chapter, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is on a walk when he thinks “where shall I put all these gifts with which the summer morning rewards me and only me? Save them up for future books? Or immediately for the practical handbook: *How To Be Happy*” (328). Fyodor<sub>C</sub> hints at the title of a book he may write, but this title seems to play off his emotions at the time of sitting outside on a warm spring day. At this point, Fyodor<sub>N</sub> also talks about the change Fyodor<sub>C</sub> experienced with his new early mornings and how “in life’s new light (in which blended somehow the maturing of his gift, a premonition of new labors, and the approach of complete happiness with Zina) he experienced a direct pleasure from the speed and lightness of these early risings” (337). The

evolution of his gift could be understood as the maturation and satisfaction of his artistic abilities which we see throughout the text in Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s commentary on his own work. At the beginning of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, he is critical of his abilities as a poet, as shown through his harsh reviews on his writing skills and the looming feeling that his works are misaligned with his purpose as a writer. The development of his writing skills is shown in *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, where his final form of writing is displayed through his prediction that he will write “a classical novel, with ‘types’, love, fate, conversations...” (349). “By the end of chapter 5, Fyodor’s last work is born, *The Gift* itself”, as Fyodor<sub>C</sub> has been building up to this work throughout the whole novel (Davydov 360).

### **Secondary Embedded Texts**

Within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, there exists other secondary embedded texts such as Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s works *Poems* and *The Life of Chernyshevski*, his other poems, letters to his mother, and various book reviews on his Chernyshevski book. These texts can be interpreted as real within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> under the interpretation that the book is autobiographical. These larger biographies contain embedded texts that guide the narratives and help Fyodor reflect on memories hinted at in his works. These secondary texts are important to the overall narrative, as *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> creates the overall narrative of Fyodor’s life through the inclusion of his works. This is promoted by Tammi’s interpretation of the novel, that “his creative exercises are seen to produce a whole series of autonomous constructions, variously conjoined with the primary narrative” (81).

#### *Poems*

During the first chapter, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> has recently published a book “containing about fifty twelve-line poems all devoted to a single theme: childhood” (9). Within the analysis of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s

book, there is commentary provided by Fyodor<sub>N</sub> and the fictional reviewer imagined by Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, on the memories the poems elicit, offering a more complete picture of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s childhood. The poems guide the retelling of memories that are linked to them, showing the connection between written texts and the effect they have on both the author and the reader.

The only poems that are given explicit titles are the first and last ones which together create a sense of closure within the collection. The first is titled "The Lost Ball", and on the surface tells about a ball from his childhood that rolls around and ends up trapped under "the impregnable sofa" (10). This is the first poem analyzed in this section, and Fyodor<sub>C</sub> harps upon its details and his dissatisfaction with his diction choice. The final poem is called "The Found Ball" which is opposite to the first one in its explicit meaning, because the ball is "revealed in a corner" (29). The book begins with a problem and ends with a solution, much like *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> itself. At the beginning of the novel, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> grasps for some unknown in his writing career, and the novel ends with a promising idea for a new novel. This theme is brought up by Boyd, who says "frustration suddenly replaced by joy at the generosity of life: that is the pattern of *The Gift*" (450). These two poems, the only ones with a title and presented in full, hold more information than the other unnamed, fragmented poems. The wholeness of the poems and the inclusion of their titles highlight their importance to the reader and to larger themes within the novel.

Within the book review, there is a sequence of two poems mentioned, with one only being quoted as a fragment within a sentence, as Fyodor<sub>N</sub> states:

"This was the clown in satin plus fours which was propping himself on the two whitewashed parallel bars and who would be set in motion by an accidental jolt,

To the sound of a miniature music

With a comical pronunciation

tinkling somewhere beneath his little platform, as he lifted his legs in white stocking and with pompons on his shoes...” (12)

Fyodor<sub>N</sub> prefaces the poem as relating to “the memory of two precious, and, I think, ancient toys”, but only gives a small fragment of the poem within the review, serving as information to bolster Fyodor<sub>N</sub>’s description of the toy. These poems are not given in their entirety and are merely described by the narrator in order for the reader to come to conclusions over what the poems could have possibly said. This also hints at the way the memories can overshadow the text, as Fyodor<sub>N</sub> writing this “review” gets to choose what to include for the reader.

Within the review, an unnamed, but complete poem describes the treasures of his father’s, and after it is given, Fyodor<sub>N</sub> writes “this poem is the author’s own favorite, but he did not include it in the collection because, once again, the theme is connected with that of his father and the economy of art advised him not to touch that theme before the right time came” (24). This quote could be interpreted as Fyodor<sub>N</sub> writing this about Fyodor<sub>C</sub>’s thoughts at the time, or it could be read through the voice of the imaginary reviewer Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is envisioning. This poem is given within the book review, and while Fyodor<sub>C</sub> decided not to include it in the collection, Fyodor<sub>N</sub> still provides the poem within the narrative of his childhood. This creates a divide between *Poems*, the book review, and the narrator’s knowledge. Fyodor<sub>N</sub> is now fitting in other texts within this book review that a removed reviewer would have no knowledge of. Fyodor<sub>N</sub> includes another text within this review, which is a “conundrum” that Tanya would exchange with Fyodor when he was a child, and includes a three line fragment of it within the recollection of his childhood. Fyodor<sub>N</sub> tells the narrative and is guided by the poems, but the memories these poems relate to are connected to additional texts as well.

While the other poems are incomplete, they still hold importance for guiding Fyodor<sub>N</sub>'s retelling of his childhood. The fragmentation gives way to the interpretation that the poems told are not important to the reader's understanding of *Poems*, but are included to bolster the narration. These fragments provide footing for the memories that they evoke in Fyodor<sub>N</sub>, rather than their meaning that could be understood from solely reading the book.

Later in the novel, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> gives descriptions of the poems from *Poems* which he thought succeeded in their purpose and those that did not much, where Fyodor<sub>N</sub> states "one or two out of those fifty octaves, it was true, he was now ashamed of" (155). The revisiting of these self-proclaimed failures, the bicycle poem and the dentist poem, serves to bring up his maturation as an artist once again through his inclusion of his writings. Both of these poems are given in their entirety in the first chapter, and are even framed by a description of the poem, unlike some of the others mentioned that offer no resources to understanding what they could be about due to their fragmentation. The dentist poem is criticized in the first chapter as well, with the previously stated comment over the "cottonwool cap", while the bicycle poem is praised by Fyodor<sub>N</sub> in his description, where he states that Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s poem on his feelings towards the change from tricycle to bicycle is "well-expressed" (26). This attitude change towards the bicycle poem could only be understood with the passage of time, as the later Fyodor<sub>N</sub> is perfectly satisfied with the poem through his description, while Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is unhappy with it in the realm of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>. During this recollection Fyodor<sub>N</sub> also writes that "the lost and found ball, for instance, had come out very nicely, and the rhythm of its last two lines still continued to sing in his ear with the same inspired expressiveness as before", which as previously touched upon, they are given in full along with their titles (155). Their importance comes from their entirety and the later critique he has on the poems.

*Poems Existing Outside of Poems*

The poems existing outside of the portion of *Poems* are shown in the *The Life of Chernyshevsky*, his reading at the poetry soiree, and the poems which exist solely within the plane of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>.

Some poems that he has written elsewhere in the novel are not explicitly stated, but exist within the realm of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> as works that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> has written that only Fyodor<sub>N</sub> has knowledge of. At the beginning of Chapter Three, it says that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> begins his days by writing poems, yet these poems are not explicitly stated to the reader. While Fyodor<sub>N</sub> could include these poems like he did in the book review, only a description is given of their content. This plays with the way that Fyodor<sub>N</sub> is able to relay what is happening at the time in Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s life, but can choose to withhold information from the reader. Fyodor<sub>N</sub> writes that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> was “composing that particular kind of poem of which a gift is made in the evening so as to be reflected in the wave that has to be carried out”, which goes along with the ambiguity Fyodor<sub>N</sub> employs surrounding other writings by Fyodor<sub>C</sub> (147). These poems are written in his room during the timeline of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, which prompt Fyodor<sub>N</sub>'s breakthrough to explain Fyodor's introduction to writing. These small everyday poems he writes remind Fyodor<sub>N</sub> of how at his childhood home “everyone did some scribbling”, where there is then a digression to the various types of writings his family members did (147). This mention of non-explicitly stated poems reminds Fyodor<sub>N</sub> of his past, further emphasizing the way textual references, no matter how insignificant, have emotional ties to the writer. These texts exist within the realm of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, but their importance is tied to the memories they evoke, rather than the text itself.

During the digression following the soiree scene, Fyodor<sub>N</sub> breaks through talking about his boyhood and his start to writing, where he provides a poem he toyed with that produced “the

most complicated and rich sounding scheme possible” (151). This poem is explicitly stated by the narrator rather than Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, as he has chosen to include this poem in its entirety in his breakthrough to fill in the context of Fyodor’s maturation as writer. Fyodor<sub>N</sub>’s narrative breakthrough is purposeful in the way that *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> was not going to go over this backstory, and thus must be supplemented by his commentary.

The poems at the literary soiree are given in untitled fragments, but their topics are presented to the reader to add context. The first poem Fyodor<sub>C</sub> read at the function was said to be about Russia, but only one line was offered: “The yellow birches, mute in the blue sky...” (93). This poetic fragmentation is also shown when Fyodor<sub>C</sub> reads the next poem over Berlin, as the reader is given only the first stanza. Finally, it gives nine lines over “the memory of a young woman, long dead, whom Fyodor loved when he was sixteen” (94). Like the others, this poem’s content does not provide information to its backstory, as even Elizaveta did not know that the poem was about a dead lover of his. The fragmentation is understood through the lens of artistic maturation and Fyodor<sub>N</sub> as a writer not wanting to include the entirety of a poem he no longer sees as good. It says that Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, on his way back home after the reading, “thought with heavy revulsion of the verses he had written that day, of word fissures, of the leakage of poetry” (94). Fyodor<sub>C</sub> makes these similar comments over his skills as a writer when dissecting *Poems*, as to this point there has been nothing he has created which has satisfied his artistic desires. The comments over the mistakes made in his work allow the reader to view his artistic maturation over the course of the novel, especially once it comes to his satisfaction with the Chernyshevski narrative and his plans for future projects.

When Fyodor<sub>C</sub> and his mother are talking after the soiree, she brings up “funny rhymes” he would write as a child, quoting lines at him such as “Your blue strip, Coatocalid, shows from

under its gray lid,” and “a dead leaf is not hoarier than a newborn *arborea*” (95). Her quoting adds another aspect to the artistic progression of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, all the while encapsulating the idea that his mother’s memories of him as a child are connected to these short rhymes he wrote. The way his past is framed by texts in the novel shows the ways in which memories and pieces of literature are intertwined, no matter how disconnected they seem at their conception. After she quotes these lines, Fyodor<sub>N</sub> digresses to tell the story of what was happening in his life when they were created. This digression at even the faintest mentioning of a rhyme from his childhood highlights ability for poems to reawaken memories for Fyodor as both narrator and character.

### *The Life of Chernyshevski*

Fyodor<sub>C</sub>’s novel *The Life of Chernyshevski* was first mentioned before its materialization in Chapter Three during a conversation between Fyodor<sub>C</sub> and Zina, where she tells him to “write something huge that will make everyone gasp”, to which he responds jokingly that he will write a biography of Chernyshevski (194). He employs his previous pattern of amassing every text related to his subject as “the very next morning he signed out the complete works of Chernyshevski from the state library” (195). His writing of the Chernyshevski biography differs from the way he wrote his father’s biography as Fyodor<sub>N</sub> states “he did not allow himself the former slovenliness in the use of sources and provide even the smallest note with an exact label of its origin” (199). He planned for this narrative to be “on the brink of parody” as he told Zina, as he chooses a narrative perspective that makes fun of formalist biographies (201). As Nabokov states in *Strong Opinions*, “satire is a lesson, parody is a game”, which proves true through the mechanisms Fyodor<sub>C</sub> employs to create a factual, but convoluted retelling of Chernyshevski’s life (78).



Fyodor<sub>C</sub> was no longer pulling at loose ends compared to his father's biography, as throughout that convoluted retelling he lost faith in his writing multiple times. However, before he wrote this biography, Fyodor<sub>N</sub> states "from the very beginning the image of his planned book had appeared to him extraordinarily distinctly in tone and outline, he had the feeling that for every detail he ran to earth there was already a place prepared and that even the work of hunting up material was already bathed in the light of the forthcoming book" (200). Fyodor<sub>N</sub> remembers his emotions at the time he wrote the biography to bolster confidence in the upcoming chapter, as Fyodor<sub>N</sub> knows the consequences faced from the book.

This book is real within both *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> and *The Gift*<sub>1</sub>, as Fyodor includes this as supplementary text for what Fyodor<sub>C</sub> accomplished during the period the autobiography focuses on. It is also a work that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> was confident in at the time of writing and Fyodor<sub>N</sub> does not see reason to critique it with his interjections. The first person portions of the biography are written by Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, as he is the writer of the chapter, without the first person breakthroughs of Fyodor<sub>N</sub>. Though Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is the writer of the Chernyshevski biography, there is an implied author of the book, that is separate from Fyodor, and is shown by the references to him by the narrative voice within the chapter. The narrator of the Chernyshevski biography is different from that of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, as even though he wrote it, he is not playing the role of speaker.

### *Book Reviews of The Life of Chernyshevski*

In the biography, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> focuses on the typically unspoken aspects of Chernyshevski's life, such as his amorous affairs, friendships, and personal writings, which prompts reviewers to shame Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s choice of exploring the emotional parts of a historical figure's life. Dolinin mentions that reviewers portray "prominent emigre literati under disguise", as they can be

connected to Nabokov's opinion of different influential critics at the time it was published (1995, 140).

The first review is from "Valentin Linyov (in a Russian emigre paper published in Warsaw)" (301). This review is a direct stab from Nabokov at reviewers that do not read the works they are reviewing or do not care to do any external research into the topics, as this writer does not pick up on the true way Chernyshevsky died. Linyov writes that after Fyodor tells of Chernyshevski's demise by hanging, "he is not satisfied with this and for the space of still many more unreadable pages he ruminates on what would have happened 'if' - if Chernyshevsky, for example, had not been executed but had been exiled to Siberia", which shows his lack of knowledge on the subject (302).

The next reviewer is Christopher Mortus from Paris, who says "it is completely unimportant whether Gordunov-Cherdyntsev's effort is credible or not" since he is choosing to focus on the "author's general mood" as he says Fyodor's artistic style makes the reader uncomfortable (303). He does not praise the need for functional biographies as it seems worn out at this point, but Fyodor's style of writing still does not make the book worthwhile to him. Mortus airs his complaints of "who wants to know about Chernyshevski's relations with women?", as he does not see the life aspect of the book coming to fruition with the mentions of things that are external to professional accomplishments (305). Mortus, like Anuchin, does not want to know the personal aspects of Chernyshevski's life, as these downplay the way he is glorified in the public eye.

The most thorough reviewer is Professor Anuchin, who published his review in a Russian emigre magazine in Paris. His scathing review calls the book "repellant", though he does praise Gordunov-Cherdyntsev for his knowledge over his subject matter (305). Anuchin also claims

that the content is unrelated to Chernyshevski's life, as he promotes the perspective that biographies on prominent political figures should primarily focus on their professional accomplishments. He writes "it is completely unimportant that Chernyshevski understood less about the questions of poetry than a young esthete today," and what is important is "whatever Chernyshevski's views may have been on art and science" (306). He does not praise the use of Chernyshevski's youthhood diary, as these are not the thoughts that correspond with the general public's ideas of him, and describes the compilation of these sources as "if someone had tried to restore the image of a person by making an elaborate collection of his combings, fingernail pairings, and bodily excretions" (307). While this is given as an insult, it also accurately describes the way Fyodor wanted to form the image of Chernyshevski, as he amassed every material he could find to focus on the less talked-about aspects of Chernyshevski's life.

Professor Anuchin also reveals that Stannolyubski, one of the prominent "sources" Fyodor employs in his narrative, is "a non-existent authority", which further emphasizes the complexities of Fyodor's biography (306). He brings up that the employment of this fake source "makes fun, not only of his hero", but "also makes fun of his reader", as there is no reason for the reader to disagree with sources used in an academic work on a political figure's life (306). The use of this fake character, says Anuchin, does not allow the reader to understand the stance Fyodor takes on Chernyshevski, but from reading his plans before the novel, it is known that while he takes his writing seriously, there are aspects that he wants to play around with in order to create his particular narrative. He claims the truth Fyodor employs in the biography does not align his narrative with the larger truth held by the general public over Chernyshevski. Thus, the " 'truth' it contains is worse than the most prejudiced lie" (307).

The only positive review offered is from Koncheyev, who is previously mentioned as Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s quasi role model. He wrote, "among the emigration one will hardly scrape up a dozen people capable of appreciating the fire and fascination of this fabulously witty composition" (308). While he understands the book's disapproval, his slighted praise is enough for Fyodor<sub>C</sub> to feel "a burning radiance forming around his face and quicksilver racing through his veins" (308). This is one of the last reviews mentioned, and while it is the only positive one, it is not given in its entirety like the negative ones, which bolsters the idea that "the book found itself surrounded by a good, thundery atmosphere of scandal which helped sales (309). The lack of inclusion of the Koncheyev review could also be due to the supplemental, dreamscape conversation Fyodor<sub>C</sub> has with "Koncheyev" later in the novel.

The dream conversation in Chapter Five between "Koncheyev" and Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is a figment of his imagination, as Koncheyev critiques him on his biography. The man who Fyodor<sub>C</sub> believes to be Koncheyev scrutinizes Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s "excessive trust in words", "awkwardness in the reworking of sources", the degree to which he brings up parody, and his mechanical transitions (339). It is only revealed at the end of this conversation that he is not Koncheyev, but a young German man who merely resembles him. This ambiguity is unknown to the reader until after the conversation aligns with Alexandrov's idea that "such unsigned transitions between events that are real on the one hand, and dreamed or imagined on the other have the important ancillary effect of blurring the distinction between imagination and reality" (129). While the critique of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s work aligns with mistakes he made in the narrative, the fact that this conversation is imaginary plays with what can be interpreted as real and fake in regards to his critique. Also, this imaginary critique could be interpreted as a self-critique on the part of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, much like the imaginary book review.

Once read through again, “Koncheyev’s” comments on Fyodor<sub>C</sub>’s work can be read through the lens that Fyodor<sub>N</sub> is actually the one speaking, as the conversation exists within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>. During the conversation, “Koncheyev” says “the real writer should ignore all readers but one, that of the future, who in turn is merely the author reflected in time” (340). As Koncheyev stands as a role model for Fyodor, this dream conversation with him is written by Fyodor<sub>N</sub> and therefore reflects the critique Fyodor has on his own writing through the words of someone he admires.

### **Tertiary Embedded Texts**

Within his father’s convoluted biography and *The Life of Chernyshevski*, there exist tertiary sources used to bolster these texts. These tertiary texts are employed by the writer to exert autonomy over the biographies he is writing, by framing the way a reader interprets the subject through the choice of textual references. The embedded texts can be relevant to the subject or not, as they are chosen by the author in order to create the perspective he is wanting to portray to the reader.

#### *Father’s Biography*

The biography of Fyodor’s father is hard to navigate within the novel, as it is framed by multiple tertiary texts such as letters, Pushkin quotes, letters that include Pushkin quotes, notes, newspaper verses, and a fairy tale. The mangled biography is a conglomeration of narrative breakthroughs, embedded text, and dream scenarios that create an indiscernible whole text, much like that of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>.

His father's biography is foreshadowed in Chapter One after a poem of his father's treasures was mentioned during the book review, where Fyodor<sub>N</sub> writes "a special intuition forewarned the young author that someday he would want to speak in quite another way, not in miniature verse with charms and chimes, but in very, very different, manly words about his famous father" (15). In his letter to his mother, Elizaveta, at the end of Chapter Two, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> tells her "I have realized, you see the impossibility of having the imagery of his travels germinate without contaminating them with a kind of secondary poeticization, which keeps departing further and further from that real poetry which the live experience of these receptive, knowledgeable and chaste naturalists endowed their research," which highlights the way Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s plan for his father's biography does not come to fruition within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, as he is unhappy with his dramatized version and poetic interludes that muddy the true story (139). While the father's biography in this chapter presents itself as a tangled recollection between the two Fyodors, the overall sentiment is there that this chunk of text is representing the work Fyodor<sub>C</sub> wrote about his father, with Fyodor<sub>N</sub> providing supplemental information.

### *Elizaveta's Letters*

The letters from Elizaveta are given in whole during this chapter and the first one is prefaced when Fyodor<sub>N</sub> wrote "he wrote her about what he had conceived, what he had been helped to conceive by the transparent rhythm of 'Arzrum' "(96). While at this point it is unknown to the reader that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> was planning on writing a biography about his father, when Elizaveta's letter is quoted at the beginning of Chapter Two, the reader is able to grasp what is to happen next in the story. While the description of Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s letter is sparse, the content of Elizaveta's letter moves the plot along as she gives clear instructions of what Fyodor<sub>C</sub> should

research if he wants to write a biography of his father. Within her first letter, there exist other texts that she tells Fyodor<sub>C</sub> to read to help his research over his father, though these texts are only named and not quoted. She tells Fyodor to read the books of Gigoriy Efimovich and the Grand Duke, who are real naturalists from the late 19th century, drawing attention to the way that *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> makes historical figures and fictional characters exist within the same plane. This first letter helps guide the subsequent research and helps move the plot along, hinting at the directions Fyodor<sub>C</sub> will follow in his writing.

Fyodor<sub>C</sub> later writes a letter to Elizaveta asking her to “tell me something about you and him”, in order for him to get a larger sense of their relationship (103). This subsequent letter is not given in its entirety, as the given portion is the story of her honeymoon and his Tashkent expedition. The portion of the letter solely offers these stories, allowing Fyodor’s inclusion of it to serve as part of the biography of his father, without removing the context of it as a letter. While this letter is Elizaveta’s stories about Fyodor<sub>C</sub>’s father, they are framed by her point of view during the matters, where he has abandoned her on two separate occasions in order to continue with his butterfly hunting. The story about the honeymoon tells about his planned stroll that resulted in a day-long chase for a butterfly, which she claims “he would have spent the night in the mountains” to catch (104). The subsequent story was her mission to meet up with him before an exhibition and the feelings that led her to do so. The stories are not his father’s as her telling of the events deals primarily with her emotions during this time of abandonment.

Elizaveta’s final letter is a response to Fyodor<sub>C</sub>’s letter where he talks of the problems he faces during the writing process. She writes to him that “I am convinced that some day you shall write this book”, which plays with the structure of the biography, as this letter comes after it in the chapter (139). This letter solidifies that much of the biography was written outside the

timeline of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, as he has not been able to make his findings into a cohesive written work. While the mangled biography contains narrative breakthroughs by Fyodor<sub>N</sub>, the reader can interpret these as ways to fill in information that has not been accounted for by Fyodor<sub>C</sub> during his writing process. The letter to his mother at the end of the biography adds to the complexity of the chapter, as it plays with the idea of what is real within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, and what is created by Fyodor<sub>N</sub> outside this timeline.

### *Pushkin*

At the conception of his father's biography, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is intensely studying Pushkin, which influences his writing in his father's biography. The overlap in research of the two figures is shown when Fyodor<sub>N</sub> writes "with Pushkin's voice merged the voice of his father" (98). Fyodor<sub>C</sub> references Pushkin throughout his father's biography, as his role as writer gives him the ability to choose texts he finds relevant to the perspective he is taking on the narrative. Fyodor<sub>N</sub> writes "from Pushkin's prose he had passed to his life, so that in the beginning the rhythm of Pushkin's era commingled with the rhythm of his father's life", highlighting his awareness of the intermingling of the two men (98).

The merging of these two important people first presents itself with his reading of *Memoirs of the Past* by A. N. Suhoshchokov, which details a story of Fyodor's grandfather and his return from America which left him in the dark over Pushkin's death. This is a playful tale that is not pertinent to the biography of his father, but shows the beginning of the transition from Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s studies on Pushkin to his family's history. Suhoshchokov, within this text, wrote out a poem by Pushkin, where he says "I can remember to this day, both mentally and visually, so that I can even see its position on the page", tying together the idea that memories are preserved



through important texts (99). Fyodor's choice to include this story, which is relating to his grandfather, is combining his personal interests and drawing comparisons between his father and Pushkin. Dolinin writes that this is a fictional story, as he compares Suhoschchokov to Strannolyubski, but within the realm of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, it is unknown whether this is a fictional story (1995, 148). While this is not real outside *The Gift*<sub>1</sub>, there is ambiguity as to its truth within the novel, as it is not explicitly called fake, like Strannolyubski is.

Fyodor<sub>N</sub> invokes Pushkin again when he is going over the possible demises of his father and where he possibly could have gone, as he mentions "his very journey out of Asia is merely attached in the shape of a tail to this fiction (like that kite which in Pushkin's story young Grinyov fashioned out of a map)" (138). This is a reference to the Pushkin story "The Captain's Daughter" in which Grinyov, who is a young boy, makes a kite out of a map while his tutor sleeps. While the scenarios of the two events, the father's journey and Grinyov's disobedience, do not seem to be related, the relation between these exists in the realm of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, as Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is the one drawing distinctions between Pushkin and his father based on his studies. This reference is not exact in its meaning to his father's situation, but serves to bolster the relationship Fyodor<sub>C</sub> sees between the two.

### *Fairytale*

The jumbled biography of his father includes a description and quote from a Kirghiz fairy tale that Fyodor<sub>C</sub> says his father read to him as a child. This portion is told within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> and summarizes the story to contextualize the quote. This part, like Elizaveta's letters, is biographical in a highly personal sense, because this memory of Fyodor's father is only relative to him.

Nonetheless, the fairytale pushes the reader to see the connection Fyodor has between the story and memories of his father, as the text is linked to his childhood.

In the fairytale, the prince tries to buy a bride with gold, but her old mother instead offers him a small bag to fill. The quote offered from the story describes the prince's process of filling the bag "All his treasures gathering/public funds and everything/in the bag the good khan threw/shook, and listened, shook anew/ threw in twice the as much again/ just a dingle in the drain" (134). When the prince inevitably comes back to the girl with the bag, she tells him that it is an eye and "want to encompass everything in the world" (134). Fyodor's approach to encapsulating his father's life within the bounds of a book is too wide, as Fyodor seeks to include everything about his father in order to put himself within his father's world, which he was not allowed into as a child. He tells his mother in a letter at the end of chapter two that "out of swarms of drafts, long manuscript extracts from books, indecipherable jotting on miscellaneous sheets of paper, penciled remarks straggling over the other writings of mine... out of all of this I must now make an orderly lucid book" (138). This fairytale and the prince's attempt to encapsulate the world in order to get the bride parallels Fyodor's endless search for knowledge about his father to understand his life, but in the end he is unable to accomplish it within the realm of *The Gift*.

### *Father's Works*

In the portions of his father's biography, it mentions the publications of his father's such as "*Lepidoptera Asiastica* (8 volume published in parts from 1890 to 1917), *The Butterflies and Moths of the Russian Empire* (the first four out of six proposed volumes came out in 1912-1916) and, the best known to the general public, *The Travels Of a Naturalist* (7 volumes 1892-1912)"

(102). The works of his father exist within the reality of *The Gift*<sub>1</sub>, to both Fyodor<sub>C</sub> and Fyodor<sub>N</sub>, as his father's biography in this chapter is written primarily in Fyodor<sub>N</sub>'s voice. These works are not heavily focused upon in the biography, as Fyodor's perspective on biographies is to focus on the aspects of life that exist outside of people's professional careers. While the texts are mentioned, Fyodor primarily focuses on the aspects of his father's life that he finds the most thought-provoking, such as his father's exhibitions.

Another text of Fyodor's father in the biography is a short description of his father's last letter to the family stating that he would be home "with the maximum haste", but the removal of the entirety of this letter is an interesting choice on the part of Fyodor<sub>N</sub>, as he includes full letters from his mother but not his father's final letter (135). This is a specific choice on Fyodor's part, as this last letter is not examined for the reader, but instead opens up discourse to his ideas of what his father might be doing if he did not die on this final expedition.

### *Issues with Interpreting Father's Story as a Complete Biography*

At the end of the chapter about his father, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> writes a letter to his mother where he tells her that his endless collection of information over his father is not enough for him to grasp the entirety of his father's life, and he tells her "I already doubt the book will be written at all" (138). This comes after the majority of the father's biography is written within *The Gift*<sub>1</sub>, but it is unclear whether some portions were written after the timeline of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> or were written by Fyodor<sub>C</sub> during the time he tried to write it.

Within the biography of his father, there are shifts between Fyodor<sub>C</sub> and Fyodor<sub>N</sub> that are distinct, as shown during Fyodor<sub>N</sub>'s recollections of his father's anger at the wars going on when he states:

“[he] now not only stayed at home but tried not to notice the war, and if he ever spoke about it, he did so only with angry contempt. ‘My father,’ wrote Fyodor, recalling that time, ‘not only taught me a great deal but also trained my very thoughts, as a voice of hand is trained, according to the rules of his school...’ (127)

This shows the direct change from Fyodor<sub>N</sub> speaking in first person, and the change to what Fyodor<sub>C</sub> has written about his father. Though there are other times when the first person portions are not distinct as to whether it is Fyodor<sub>N</sub> or Fyodor<sub>C</sub> speaking. When it seems that the biography is truly beginning, as it says “My father was born in 1860”, it convolutes the idea that the first person portions are solely belonging to Fyodor<sub>N</sub>, as this appears to be the official start of the memoir.

While there are pronoun switches throughout the biography, it is hard to distinguish which ones are written by either Fyodor<sub>N</sub> or Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, as at the end of the chapter there is a first person portion by Fyodor<sub>C</sub> which says “I do not know if I shall ever read the drafts and extracts rammed under the linen in my suitcase, but I do know that I will never look in here again” (145). This portion, while is in first person, belongs to Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, as later in the novel he has a realistic dream where he enters his old apartment after his mother tells him to meet her there.

While Fyodor<sub>C</sub> does not finish his father’s biography within the timeline of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, as shown through his conversation with Zina, who tells him “I’m sorry that you didn’t write your book after all” (193). The work he had done on his father is still with him, which opens the interpretation that Fyodor<sub>C</sub>’s work on his father was not an entire biography, so Fyodor<sub>N</sub> supplements the work Fyodor<sub>C</sub> completed during the timeline of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>.

### *Dream Scenarios*

While there are portions of Fyodor's father's biography that are factual references within the realm of *The Gift*<sub>2</sub>, there are also dream scenarios probably written by Fyodor<sub>N</sub> of how he imagines his father's journeys went. These stories place Fyodor in his father's expeditions and create a way for him to create memories with his father, even though they are only real on paper. Fyodor<sub>N</sub> states "I try fervently in the darkness to divine the current of his thoughts, and I have much less success with this than my mental visits to places I have never seen" (119). Fyodor creates stories of his father to fill in the blanks of the biography, as the details of his father's stories are unknown to him. This idea is promoted by Alexandrov, who claims that "Fyodor grants a mode of reality to imagined events that persists even when their true nature is revealed" (129). His role as writer allows him to create these memory-like visions through his writing to give closure to the experiences he was not able to participate in.

### ***The Life of Chernyshevski***

Fyodor<sub>C</sub> encapsulates the life of Nikolay Chernyshevski through his choice of embedded texts which he uses to frame the narrative of Chernyshevski in a way that highlights his personal, rather than professional life. He employs Chernyshevski's personal letters and writings to give a deeper, personalized stance on describing his life, showing his emotions through the choice of embedded texts. Fyodor<sub>C</sub> uses these texts to give an emotional and highly personal perspective on his life, as life consists not only of professional achievements, but includes one's love life, friendships, and stories of hardships.

Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s authority as writer allows him to frame the narrative by how he wishes to portray his subject, as shown through his father's biography. He chooses the texts to include,

allowing the story of Chernyshevski's life to relate to textual references he is reminded of when writing the story. This allows the narrative to combine the texts that are pertinent to Chernyshevski's life and those which Fyodor<sub>C</sub> sees fit, creating an unexpected connection between writer and subject due to Fyodor's parodic stance.

### *Gogol*

After the biography of Fyodor's father, the chapter ends with the quote "the distance from the old residence to the new was about the same as , somewhere in Russia, that from Pushkin Avenue to Gogol Street," which foreshadows Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s Gogol preferences he uses throughout the Chernyshevski narrative as he did with Pushkin references in his father's biography (145).

The first mention of Gogol within the chapter is when Nikolay is riding in a carriage and looking at the scenery passing him by, where Fyodor<sub>C</sub> writes "the landscape hymned by Gogol passed unnoticed before the eyes of the eighteen-year-old Nikolay Gavrilovich" (214). While this portion is written about the scene passing Nikolay by, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is the one comparing it to Gogol, as it would be unknown what Nikolay was thinking in the carriage. This comparison to Gogol mimics the comparisons Fyodor<sub>C</sub> employs in his father's biography, when he relates his father to characters from Pushkin's tales, even though these connections exist only for Fyodor<sub>C</sub>. Another example of a comparison drawn by Fyodor<sub>C</sub> rather than Nikolay appears when Fyodor<sub>C</sub> analyzes a text from Nikolay's childhood diary, to which Fyodor<sub>C</sub> interjects "an almost Gogolian exclamation mark appears fleetingly in his student diary" (215). Fyodor<sub>C</sub> draws the comparisons for himself and the reader, when it is unknown whether Nikolay even thought about these references to Gogol, highlighting the way that Fyodor as author includes references that intertwine his studies to create a specific narrative about his protagonist.

Later on, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> ventures to talk about Belinski's viewpoint on European authors' supremacy compared to his view of Gogol. He believes that authors such as Shakespeare and Homer hold more significance than Gogol, and then Chernyshevski is quoted by his take that "Gogol is a very minor figure in comparison, for example, with Dickens or Fielding or Stone" (254). This quote allows the reader to draw upon the fact that the numerous Gogol references throughout the chapter are based on the author's bias towards him, rather than Chernyshevski's personal interest in the writer. This is followed by a paragraph that repeats the phrase "Poor Gogol!" with intermittent statements that are at times utterly unrelated to the topic at hand, which shows Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s flippancy pertaining to the subject matter at hand (254). Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s exclamations allow his voice to come through in the text and give his own rebuttal to what Chernyshevski had said about this author Fyodor<sub>C</sub> alludes to repeatedly.

### *Chernyshevski's Diary and Personal Writings*

Chernyshevski's boyhood diary is referred to throughout the chapter as a way of grounding the text in Chernyshevski's real life. The quotes from his diary show a different side of Nikolay, as these references are usually tied to his emotions or amorous affairs, but the choice to use these texts does not fare well with the text's fictional reviewers. The diary "becomes a mirror reflecting the psychology of his personality" and the choice to use it is a direct jab at biographers who solely focus on the professional writings and accomplishments of the people they are memorializing (Kostalevsky 287).

The first mention of his boyhood diary bolsters the claim that "the young Chernyshevski's sentimentality was a concession to an epoch when friendship was magnanimous and moist" (220). The quote following this talks of tears that were shed at a funeral for a student,

where he writes, “remind me not of foolish tears that many times I shed, alas, when my repose oppressive was...” (220). These sentimental words flowing from Chernyshevski offer a softer side of him that would not typically be touched upon in his biographies. This highlights the way Fyodor<sub>C</sub> shapes a new conception of Chernyshevski, offering him as a person full of emotions, such as love and pain, rather than solely politically and professionally motivated. This idea is brought up again when he says that in the diary “politics, literature, painting, even vocal art, were pleasantly entwined with Nikolay Gavrilovich’s amorous emotions” (225). This highlights the breadth of Chernyshevski’s interests, but many times the romantic aspects of a famous historical figure’s life are disregarded, as after death personal matters do not matter as much as a person’s lasting works and impressions on society.

### *Strannolyubski*

Strannolyubski is a fake source created by Fyodor<sub>C</sub> in the biography, but this is unknown to the reader until it is revealed by Profesor Anuchin in his review of the book in the subsequent chapter. Once this is known, it is interesting to look back upon his quotes and see how they work within the biography.

Strannolyubski’s quotations are sometimes prefaced with comments over his writing or Fyodor<sub>C</sub>’s viewpoint on him as an author, promoting the idea that he is a real biographer. One instance is when the narrator says “or, as his best biographer, Strannolyubski, puts it...”, which proves to be a comical sentiment as Fyodor<sub>C</sub> has written everything which Strannolyubski says in the biography (220). Another time when Strannolyubski is critiqued is when the narrator says “...remarks Strannolyubski here (somewhat mixing his metaphors)”, where narrator then quotes a convoluted statement from the fake source, even though Fyodor<sub>C</sub> could have made the sentence



coherent, since he is Strannolyubski (295). These small comments over Strannolyubski on the part of Fyodor<sub>C</sub> make the reader believe he is a real reviewer, but upon looking at the quotes he offers, there is little biographical information offered on Chernyshevski. Strannolyubski mainly offers comments that are his own take as to what is happening in Chernyshevski's life, rather than factual evidence. Fyodor<sub>C</sub> further conveys the idea that Strannolyubski is a real person when he writes that Sasha "moved to the country house of Strannolyubski (the critic's father?)", now bringing in a fake father of Strannolyubski who may or may not have housed Chernyshevski's son (298). While Fyodor<sub>C</sub> knows that Strannolyubski is not real, his use of the imaginary source hurts his reliability as writer through his bolstering of Strannolyubski's credibility.

The ideas of Fyodor<sub>C</sub> present themselves through the comments made by Strannolyubski, as he writes "'there lies concealed in the triad,' says Strannolyubski, 'a vague image of the circumference controlling all life of the mind, and the mind is confined inescapably within it. This is truth's merry-go-round, for truth is always round; consequently in the development of life's forms a certain pardonable curvature is possible: the hump of truth; but no more'" (244). The circularness of life is presented by the narrator earlier in the chapter when he speaks on "the motifs of Chernyshevski's life" when he says "in the course of development they merely describe a circle" (236). The voice of Fyodor<sub>C</sub> presents itself through Strannolyubski as he uses this fake source to bolster his claims on how to view biographies and life in general, as they both agree that life forms some sort of infinite circle of ideas. This idea relates to another quote from Strannolyubski within the chapter, when Fyodor<sub>C</sub> writes "again historical patterns come into that odd contact 'which thrills the gamester in the historian' (Strannolyubski)", drawing on the point that figuring out how biographies fit within the larger themes of life is the goal of the historian

(269). For Fyodor<sub>C</sub> and his puppet, Strannolyubski, the theme they want to point out in Chernyshevski's biography is the circularness of life.

### *Nekrasov*

Nekrasov is first mentioned in the chapter when Fyodor<sub>C</sub> draws biblical comparisons, with Chernyshevski as Christ, assigning “the role of Peter to the famous poet Nekrasov, who declined to visit the jailed man” (215). The connection between the two men is shown through the emotions Nekrasov's poems evoke within Chernyshevski and the mentions of said poems in Chernyshevski's personal writings.

The narrator takes it upon himself to place a Nekrasov poem within the biography where he sees fit; For example, after the theme of pastry shops is presented, Fyodor<sub>C</sub> writes “Nekrasov's ditty is appropriate here,” followed by a small poem about eating sweets (227). He takes the artistic liberty to include a poem by someone Chernyshevski lauded, yet he also includes references to Gogol, whom Chernyshevski did not admire, showing the way Fyodor's interpretation that Chernyshevski is an Gogolian character despite Chernyshevski's stance on the writer. The inclusion of the Nekrasov poem furthers the idea that the two men's lives were connected, as a story from Chernyshevski's life is similar to a poem written by his friend.

The effect Nekrasov's poems had on Nikolay is expressed later in the narrative, as Fyodor<sub>C</sub> writes that Chernyshevski “placed Nekrasov the poet above all others” (251). Then he goes on to write “Chernyshevski, who confessed that poetry of the heart was even dearer to him than poetry of ideas, used to burst into tears over those of Nekrasov's verses (even iambic ones!) which expressed everything he himself had experienced, all the torments of his youth, all the phases of love for his wife” (251). Within the biography, the narrator expresses the way in which

texts evoke emotions and memories, as he writes how Chernyshevski compared Nekrasov's poems to his own life and the trials he went through in his youth and marriage. This highlights the idea that texts can express memories and emotions, as shown through the way Fyodor<sub>N</sub> within *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> reflects upon the memories which certain texts evoke.

Later on, the narrator compares the way in which Chernyshevski collecting flowers for his son mimics "Princess Volkonski in Nekrasov's poem about the Decemberists' wives bequeath her grandchildren 'a collection of butterflies, plants of chita'" (289). Again, Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s choice to compare aspects of Chernyshevski's life to the poems of Nekrasov functions as a way to draw upon the men's connection, even though it is unknown whether Nikolay is drawing upon these similarities as well. This bolsters Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s story by providing textual references to other works, and shows the way Chernyshevski's memories remind Fyodor<sub>C</sub> of texts, creating the connection between real life memories and memories of texts.

### *What to Do? and Chernyshevski's other Works*

When these prominent books and articles of Chernyshevski's are mentioned in the biography, they are presented with backstory of Chernyshevski's emotions and what was happening in his personal life at the time of their conception. When *What to Do?* is first mentioned, the narrator quotes it in relation to his paragraph devoted to the theme of pastry shops in Chernyshevski's life. The narrator writes, "our hero's youth had been bewitched by pastry shops, so that later, while on hunger strike in the fortress, he - in *What to Do?* - filled this or that speech with the involuntary howl of gastric lyricism," which is then followed by a quote asking where the pastry shops are from the novel (226). This comparison of the light themes of Chernyshevski's affinity for bakeries to the more serious themes in *What to Do?* is part of

Fyodor<sub>C</sub>'s plan to create a parody of the biography. While it is all factual, as shown in Paperno's "How Nabokov's Gift is Made," it produces a comical effect as it related an important political work to Chernysehvski's affinity for pastry shops. While this relates to the real life of Chernyshevski, it simultaneously downplays the work by relating it to something so mundane.

While the background information presented in the biography is factual, the choices of how this information is presented in reference to the larger texts of Chernyshevski's life is a choice of the author, as he elaborates on the texts in a way that aligns with his aimed perspective. Fyodor<sub>C</sub> chooses to mention the books with the emotions and experiences that Chernyshevski was dealing with at the time, such as his relations with women. This is shown when the narrator tells the story of how Chernyshevski came to write "The Relations of Art to Reality", by his quote from Strannolyubski, that it was written at a time in Chernyshevski's life when "the vague, lyrical emotions of his youth that had suggested to him considering art in the terms of a pretty girl's portrait, had finally ripened and now produced this pulpy fruit in natural correlation with the apotheosis of his marital passion" (237). While this is factual, the focus of emotions in reference to an influential work of his highlights what is frowned upon by the reviewers, such as Mortus who says, "are they really so necessary, these excursions into the realm of the past, with their stylized squabbles and artificially vivified way of life? Who wants to know about Chernyshevski's relations with women?" (305). Chernyshevski's relations with women, which Fyodor<sub>C</sub> focuses on in preference to Chernyshevski's writings, are part of the whole picture of his life, and in turn these references serve as a way of providing the experiences of his that prompted the works. While the biography's reviewers wanted a more focused look on his works and the impact they made on society, this view disregards the human aspect of the protagonist and the life experiences that led them to his achievements.

### *Reviews of Chernyshevski's Translations*

Chernyshevski, during the last six years of his life, according to the biography, is said to have translated volume after volume of Georg Weber's *Universal History*, and within the chapter, there are quotes from reviews of his translations. The reviews mimic the sentiments of the reviewers presented in Chapter Five over *The Life of Chernyshevski*, such as the liberties an author takes when writing about a prominent historical figure. The inclusion of these reviews over the works of Chernyshevski's mirrors the way there are reviews in *The Gift*<sub>2</sub> over the work published by Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, thus reverting back to the circularness of texts and the interconnectedness of biographies. The reviews mentioned within the chapter are negative as there seems to be disagreement over the artistic liberties a translator can make.

The first review mentioned is from *The Examiner*, where the reviewer comments, "there was no need for Mr. Andreyev to dilate in his Foreword on the merits and demerits of Weber, who has long been known to the Russian reader" (294). While it was Fyodor<sub>C</sub> who chose to include this review within the biography, it was Fyodor<sub>N</sub> who chose to include the reviews that mirror this in the subsequent chapter. The choice to include bad reviews on a work of Chernyshevski's, which was just a translating job, is an interesting choice as no reviews were included on his prominent works.

### *Sonnet*

The biography begins with the final 6 lines of a sonnet that is only explained at the every end of the chapter. The poem is said to be written by "(F.V. ...ski) that an unknown poet signed, in the magazine of *Century* (1909, November), fourteen lines dedicated, according to information which we possess, to the memory of N. G. Chernyshevsky" (300). It is fourteen

lines, with the first eight at the end of the chapter and the final 6 at the beginning. The poem explores the themes of life, as the beginning lines say “What will it say, your far descendent’s voice-/ lauding your life or blasting it outright:/ That it was dreadful? That another might/ Have been less bitter? That it was your choice” (300). This relates directly to the themes Fyodor<sub>C</sub> is trying to present through his biography of Chernyshevski, as he knew the artistic choices he wanted to make when analyzing the famous man’s life and he explores the different ways to play with his emotions over the figure. The decision presented in the poem of either “lauding your life or blasting it outright” is shown to be true for Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, as Anuchin’s review of the book derides Fyodor’s point of view as “everywhere and nowhere” on the matter of if he liked or disliked Chernyshevski (306).

The next stanza offered says “That your high deed was prevailed, and did ignite/ Your dry work with the poetry of Good/ And crowned the white brow of chained Martyrhood/ With a closed circle of ethereal light” (300). At this point in the poem, the idea of the writer is brought into question, as no other person quoted by Fyodor<sub>C</sub> in the biography has mentioned the circularness of life, besides Strannolyubski who is fictional. Fyodor draws upon the theme of the circle when he conceived the idea of “composing his biography in the shape of a ring, closed with the clasp of an apocryphal sonnet”, thus finding a sonnet that fits exactly with his plans of creating a ring is highly unlikely (204).

The next portion of the sonnet, which appears at the start of the chapter begins, “Alas! In vain historians pry and probe:/ The same wind blows, and in the same live robe/ Truth bends her head to fingers turned cupwise” (212). This stanza emphasizes the theme mentioned in the biography, by Strannolyubski, that “truth is always round” (244). While Strannolyubski is created by Fyodor<sub>C</sub>, the aforementioned poem aligning with the ideas of him begs the question of

whether there could be this much of an overlap between an unknown poet presented by a writer who is inclined to fabricate sources.

The poem creates the circle in which the narrative exists, encapsulating the story between the sonnet that presents the themes aimed at by the writer. Beginning the sonnet at the end of the biography and finishing it at the beginning is “encouraging readers to return to its beginning” and aligns with Fyodor’s intent as an artist (Leving 211).

## **Conclusion**

The biographies within *The Gift* encapsulate the lives of their heroes through the inclusion of embedded texts, which frames the way a reader understands the private aspects of a person’s life. Within the novel, Fyodor’s biographies on his father and Chernyshevski show his perspective on what is important about their lives through what he chooses to reference, such as poems, letters, and their famous works. These texts represent what the writer feels is relevant to grasping the complexities of his subject and the image he is trying to portray of his them.

Embedded texts serve many different purposes throughout the novel, but they especially work to evoke memories for the writer and create bonds between these memories and the text. The writer of a biography is able to enmesh texts that relate to them, rather than the subject, and the reader of the biography will then merge ideas of the subject and the embedded texts together. The writer of a biography is able to create bonds between the texts and the subject, even when there is no real life connection, which in turn makes the reader link the two together.

Understanding the purpose of these textual references opens up ideas of how texts are intertwined with life and the purpose that the written word holds for preserving memories. Texts within people’s lives relate to childhood memories, as shown through *Poems*; memories of time

spent with loved ones, as shown through Elizaveta's letters; and memorializing those who are important to society, as shown through *The Life of Chernyshevski*. Texts are embedded in our daily lives and hold the same purpose as they do within *The Gift*, as they capture emotions and experiences at a point in time and memorialize them.



## Works Cited

- Alexandrov, Vladimir E. *Nabokov's Otherworld*. Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Boyd, Brian: *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 447-478.
- Connolly, Julian W. *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Davydov, Sergei: "The Gift: Nabokov's Aesthetic Exorcism of Chernyshevskii". *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, vol.19, 1985, pp. 357-374.
- Dolinin, Alexander: "The Gift". In: *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov), New York: Garland, 1995, pp. 135-169.
- Dolinin, Alexander. "Nabokov's Time Doubling: From *The Gift* to *Lolita*". *Nabokov Studies*, vol. 2, 1995, pp. 3-40.
- Kostalevsky, Marina. "The Young Godunov-Cherdyntsev or How to Write a Literary Biography". *Russian Literature*, 43 (3), 1998, pp. 283-295.
- Leving, Yuri. *Keys to The Gift: A Guide to Nabokov's Novel*. Academic Studies Press, 2011.
- Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *The Gift*. Vintage International, 1963.
- Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Strong Opinions*. McGraw-Hill, 1973.
- Paperno, Irina: "How Nabokov's *Gift* Is Made". *Stanford Slavic Studies*, 4 (2), 1992, pp. 295-324.
- Tammi, Pekka. *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics : a Narratological Analysis*. Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1985.