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# Narrating the unspeakable. Person marking and focalization in Nabokov's short story 'Signs and Symbols'

**Abstract:** This article investigates the interaction of person marking and focalization in the short story 'Signs and Symbols' (first published 1948, *The New Yorker*) by Russian-American author Vladimir Nabokov. This story has been studied extensively for its symbolism, its metafictional aspect, and its narrative structure. However, researchers have consequently ignored its most striking linguistic features: the almost exclusive use of pronouns in referring to the main characters and their characterization solely through lexical expressions focusing on outward appearances. This article offers a cognitive-stylistic analysis of these linguistic features in order to explain why many readers of 'Signs and Symbols' report a feeling of uncanniness while reading. Drawing on insights both from empirical linguistics and literary studies, the article aims to explain the role of pronominal expressions and deictic descriptions in reader's theme-construction and affective response to the text.

**Keywords:** Nabokov, focalization, person-marking, pronouns

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## 1 Introduction

This article investigates the interaction of person marking and focalization in the short story 'Signs and Symbols' (first published 1948, in *The New Yorker*)<sup>1</sup> by the Russian-American author Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977). 'Signs and Symbols' is by far the most studied of Nabokov's short stories and has been investigated extensively for its symbolism, its metafictional aspect, and its narrative structure. Since its publication, Nabokov scholars have been on an ever-continuing search

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1 All references made in this article are to the 1995 Penguin edition.

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for a hidden key to unlock the story's enigmatic plot. However, their analyses consequently ignore the most striking linguistic features of the story, which constitute part of this key. First, there is an almost exclusive use of pronouns in referring to the main characters. Personal pronouns (e.g. "she", "they") and possessive pronouns (e.g. constructions like "her husband") pervade the story. The second feature is the characterization of the primary characters solely through lexical expressions focusing on their outward appearances (e.g. "his old hands", "her drab gray hair"). We term this type of reference to fragments of a character through a possessive full noun phrase *deictic description*. Third, the ascription of viewpoint in the story is problematic. We claim that the general feeling of uncanniness readers report when reading the story is constituted by the way person marking and focalization interact, and that this interaction triggers ambiguous feelings of distance and intimacy in readers.

In order to strengthen this claim, we performed a corpus study of personal and possessive pronouns in 'Signs and Symbols', on which we based our subsequent analysis of the workings of person marking and focalization. The corpus study and analysis are based on insights from literary studies concerning the concepts of *foregrounding* (Mukarovskij 1964) and *focalization* (Genette 1980; Bal 1997), and on cognitive-stylistics based ideas on text-processing and affective response. We also draw on empirical evidence from psycholinguistics to back our and other readers' initially intuitive claims about the meaning and thematic focus of the story. For reasons of space and copyright 'Signs and Symbols' cannot be reproduced here, and readers are encouraged to read it in its entirety to fully understand the analysis. The plot can be summarized as follows: The parents of a mentally disturbed young man go to the sanatorium where he resides to bring him a meticulously chosen birthday present, but are denied access to him because he has recently attempted suicide. At home, they both go about their daily business; the man then goes to bed and the woman reflects on their son's predicament. The man wakes up in an agitated state in the middle of the night and proposes to get their son out of the sanatorium. The woman indulges his request; then suddenly the phone starts ringing. The story is divided in three parts, labeled 1, 2, and 3, and we follow this distinction in our analysis.

## 2 Style, theme and affect

Many readers of 'Signs and Symbols' report a feeling of uncertainty or uncanniness while reading the story (Dolinin 2004; Toker 1993; Trzeciak 2003). One often quoted reason for this is its open-endedness: the parents receive two phone calls, in short succession, of an unknown girl dialing the wrong number. The story ends

with the phone ringing a third time, leaving the reader guessing as to who the caller is. A frequently heard interpretation is that the sanatorium staff are trying to reach the parents on account of another, possibly successful, suicide attempt of their son (Rosenzweig (2012 [1980])). This open ending reflects the ambiguous thematic content of the story: it is no easy task to describe the story's theme.

The plot summary suggests that the story is about two parents worrying about their mentally ill son. In a way, this is indeed the case, but if we look not only at the plot but also at the style of the narrative this picture is complicated. The main thematic focus of the story becomes more abstract and ambiguous: intimacy, or the lack thereof. Readers' general feelings of uncanniness toward the story appear to have their roots in the discrepancy between the mode of description of the narrative world, its characters and events on the one hand, and their affective engagement with the story on the other. The mode of narration and narrative is distant: we have third person narration or omniscient narration, very little direct speech presentation, and the main characters are referred to by personal pronouns, in possessive constructions and through the use of deictic descriptions. On the other hand, the story prompts readers to engage with it affectively: they report empathizing with the characters, especially the woman, and note a feeling of tenderness between the elderly man and woman, a strong bond forged by years of shared hardship (Trzeciak 2003). Hence, the central question of our stylistic analysis becomes: Why is it that readers feel that they know the characters intimately, even though the elderly couple and their son are only presented from a big distance?

We posit two binary oppositions that we will refer to while answering this question. They can be seen as different sub-themes, reflected in the style of the text, which add to the reader's mental construction of the main theme. Moreover, the style of 'Signs and Symbols' not only contributes to (sub-)thematic construction semantically, but also affectively. The analysis of the stylistic devices mentioned will thus help us get a grip on the following sub-thematic oppositions and the overall process of theme-building:

distance	opposed to	nearness
communication	opposed to	silence

Different instances of foregrounding are related to these sub-themes in section 4, where we give an interpretation of the frequency, distribution and contextual embedding of the pronouns in 'Signs and Symbols'. Our overall concern in that section is to offer an account of the possible effects the different types of foregrounding encountered in this story can have on readers.

### 3 Foregrounding

From a cognitive-stylistic based perspective, foregrounding can be defined as “the use of either unusual linguistic forms or an unusually high or low density of particular linguistic forms, these being sufficiently prominent to contribute to the overall interpretation of a text, including controlling the attention paid to different parts of it.” (Sanford and Emmott, 2012: 73) Although foregrounding has a content as well as a language component, we focus on linguistic foregrounding in this article, in order to describe how the story’s style contributes to theme-construction. Interestingly, Emmott links foregrounding to the production of ‘affective response’ in readers. She argues that foregrounding can “stimulat[e] emotional involvement in interpreting a theme rather than simply [add] to our understanding of the propositional content of a text.” (Emmott, 2002: 92) This idea is consistent with our earlier observation that the role of style in ‘Signs and Symbols’ contributes to theme-construction not only in a formal and semantic way, but also in an affective way. Louwerse and Van Peer (2002) also mention foregrounding as a function in order to highlight literary themes and Miall’s (1995) and Miall and Kuiken’s (1994, 2002) empirical studies show foregrounding devices’ abilities to induce affect.

#### 3.1 Pronominal foregrounding

‘Signs and Symbols’ exhibits pronominal foregrounding (Toolan 1990: Chapter 6) in a remarkable way. The story’s most striking feature is unarguably its lack of names of the main characters, who are only denoted by personal pronouns, indefinite descriptions, and lexical expressions referring to their relationships. This relationship is evident in the use of possessive pronominal constructions such as “their boy” and “she and her husband”. Here we see one pole of what we call deictic description, in that entire characters are referred to by such lexical expressions. There appears to be a distinctive background-foreground fluctuation characterizing the interaction between the different types of referring expressions. The construction of narrative perspective is influenced by this interaction, while exerting its own influence on the workings of the referring expressions.

In theoretical terms, we look at how textual cohesion comes to pass due to the workings of ‘cohesive chains’ of reference to the main characters in this story (Emmott, 2002; Hasan 1985). “Each of these chains consist,” argues Emmott, “of all the references to a key character in a text, including names, lexical expressions (e.g. ‘the woman’) and pronouns” (Emmott 2002: 92). She furthermore states that such ‘cohesion analysis’, based on Halliday and Hasan (1976), offers

an important tool to study the relationship between style and theme, because these devices have the function of binding a text together. Toolan, following a similar theoretical engagement, suggests that cohesion analysis, focusing on pronominal reference and substitution, can provide insight into how textual coherence is maintained and how important descriptive and evaluative effects are achieved (Toolan 1990: 129–130).

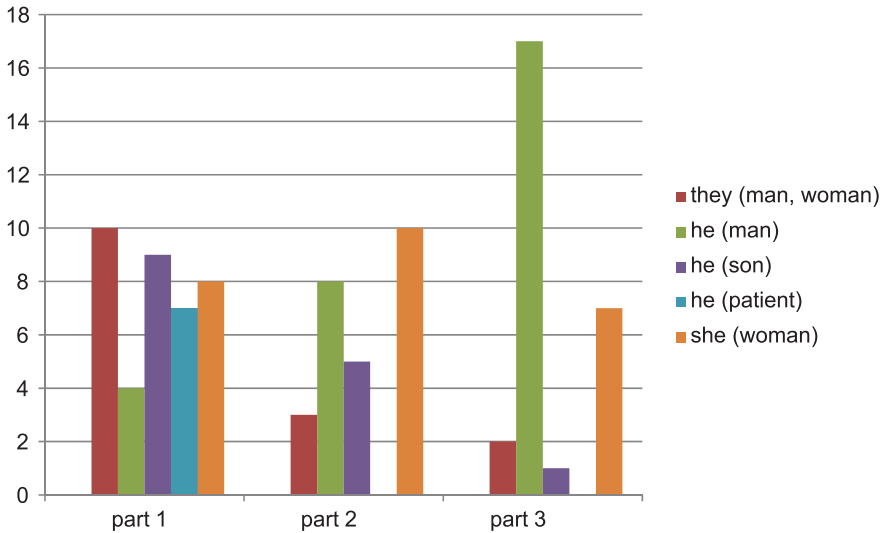
The use of personal and possessive pronouns in ‘Signs and Symbols’ can be said to be foregrounded in three ways. Firstly, the foregrounding takes the form of a highly frequent use of personal and possessive pronouns. Almost all literary narratives exhibit variation among different ways of referring to characters, and readers expect characters to be denoted by names. When characters are only referred to by personal pronouns and in possessive pronominal constructions, readers’ attention will be automatically focused on this unusual way of referring. Secondly, there are named characters in the story, but these are all off-stage ones who do not function as autonomous characters.<sup>2</sup> This naming of background characters contrasts with the namelessness of the main characters and exclusive pronominal reference to the latter category is thus foregrounded. Thirdly, within this heightened frequency of exclusive pronominal reference, different constructions stand out in different parts of the story. They are foregrounded in their own right, providing an extra interpretive layer for readers, who need to disentangle the complex web of back- and foregrounding. As a basis for further discussion on the effects of the foregrounding, graphs are presented showing the distribution of personal pronouns and possessive pronouns. Regarding the latter category a further distinction is made between possessive constructions denoting an entire character and possessive constructions denoting only fragments of a character.

### 3.2 Pronoun distribution in ‘Signs and Symbols’

Figure 1 shows the distribution of personal pronouns in the entire story, based on their occurrence per narrative part. It allows us to view the general trends in personal pronoun use, as well as the departures from these trends. Instances of ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘we’ are left out of this graph, because they only occur in the dialogue in part 3 and thus can be said to have a different status.

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<sup>2</sup> These are: Mrs. Sol; the man’s brother Isaac, 598; Rebecca Borisovna; Herman Brink, 599; Aunt Rosa, 601; Dr. Solov; Elsa; Charlie, 601. For an interpretation of the meanings of these names in the context of ‘Signs and Symbols’, see Yuri Leving (2012 [2011]).



**Fig. 1:** Distribution of personal pronouns in ‘Signs and Symbols’

Some general observations can be made based on the data in this graph. First of all, the pronoun ‘they’, denoting the parents, is most prominent in part 1 (10)<sup>3</sup>, then declines noticeably in part 2 (3) and part 3 (2). ‘He’, referring to the man, shows a reverse parallel movement evolving from relatively few mentions in part 1 (4), doubling in part 2 (8) and finally reaching its highest point in part 3 (17). The occurrence of ‘she’, referring to the woman, peaks in the second part (10), but is quite a constant presence overall, with equal mentions in part 1 and 3 (7). The graph further shows a presence of ‘he’ referring to “the patient” in part 1. This appears to be a generic reference to all mentally ill persons suffering from ‘referential mania’, like the son in the story. Reference to the son himself (‘he’) shows a decline not unlike that of ‘they’, starting with most occurrences in part 1 (9), halving in part 2 (5), and ending with only one mention in part 3.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of possessive pronouns in the narrative, again per story part. The data in this graph represents the ‘possessor’ in the possessive constructions, so it is not as significant in itself as the data in Figure 1; to fully understand the interpretative effects of the specific use of possessive pronouns in ‘Signs and Symbols’, we need not only look at ‘who possesses’, but also at ‘who/what is possessed’. We will discuss this on the basis of the data in Table 1 and 2.

<sup>3</sup> From here on, the number of occurrences of a specific referring item is indicated between brackets.

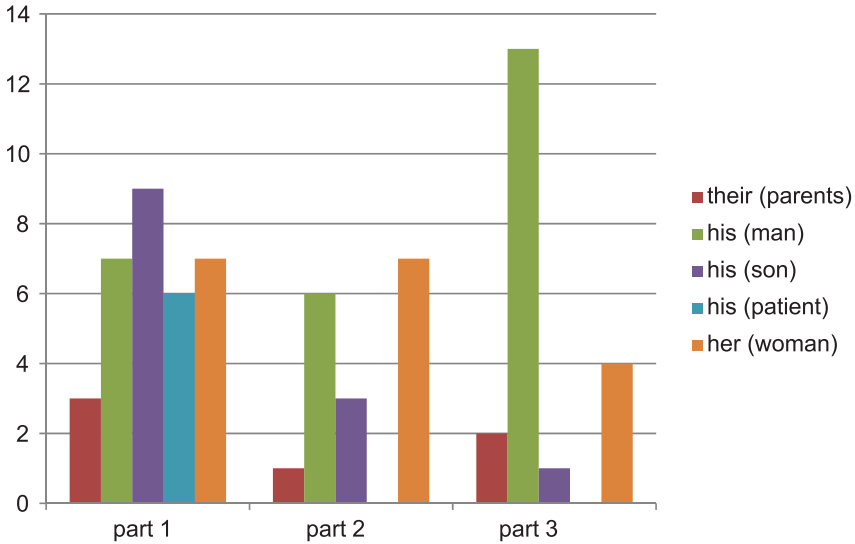


Fig. 2: Distribution of possessive pronouns in 'Signs and Symbols'

Table 1: Possessive pronominal referring expressions for an entire character in 'Signs and Symbols'

	part 1	part 2	part 3	Total
man and woman	1	1	0	2
man	4	1	2	7
woman	0	0	1	1
son	1	1	0	2
the patient	0	0	0	0
Total	6	3	3	12

Table 2: Possessive pronominal referring expressions to fragments of a character in 'Signs and Symbols'. The amount of expressions referring to the mental state or inner life of a character are between brackets.

	part 1	part 2	part 3	Total
man and woman	0	1 (0)	2 (0)	3 (0)
man	6 (0)	6 (1)	12 (0)	24 (1)
woman	3 (1)	4 (3)	2 (1)	9 (5)
son	7 (6)	2 (1)	0	9 (7)
the patient	6 (6)	0	0	6 (6)
Total	22 (13)	12 (5)	16 (1)	51 (19)

Nevertheless, Figure 2 shows remarkably similar trends in occurrences of possessive pronouns, when compared to those of personal pronouns.

Instances of ‘your’ are left out of the graph, considering these only occur in the dialogue part. ‘My’ and ‘our’ do not occur at all in the entire story. The occurrence of ‘his’ (man) peaks in part 3 of the narrative (13), similar to the end point of ‘he’ (man). The graph also shows that, in contrast with the noticeable decline of ‘they’ referring to the parents, the associated possessive pronoun ‘their’ is quite stable over the three different parts (1, 3, 2). ‘His’ (son), however, follows almost the same gradual scale of decline as ‘he’ referring to the son in Figure 1: It starts out with the most mentions of all possessive pronouns in part 1 (9), then declines considerably in part 2 (3), and finally reaches its lowest count in part 3 (1). ‘His’ referring to “the patient” scores 6 mentions in part 1 and, just as the personal pronoun referring to him, disappears in the next parts of the story. Finally, ‘her’ (woman) as possessor does not echo the parabolic movement of ‘her’ in Figure 1, but has steady mention in part 1 and 2 (7), with a lower count in part 3 (4).

In order to grant proper significance to the use of possessive pronouns in ‘Signs and Symbols’, Table 1 shows occurrences of possessive constructions by which an entire character is denoted.<sup>4</sup> The total amount of reference to the man occurring in possessive pronominal constructions (i.e. in which he is the one ‘who is possessed’) is high when contrasted with the numbers found for other characters, peaking in part 1. Moreover, all instances are of the form of “her husband”, in which ‘her’ refers to the woman. Three out of the seven instances furthermore are part of the full NP “she and her husband”.

Table 2 shows an equally interesting distribution, this time of possessive pronominal referring expressions to fragments of a character. These expressions include either outward description of characters (of objects, such as “his umbrella”, and of physical appearance, such as “his clenched fist”) or description of a character’s mental states or inner life (“her silliness”). The table shows the total amount of possessive pronominal referring expressions to fragments per part, with the numbers between brackets indicating how many of those expressions refer to character’s inner life. Overall, the category referring to outward description is by far the largest one, as the bottom-row shows: Only 19 of a total of 51 expressions denote a character’s inner life. The distribution over the three parts of ‘Signs and Symbols’, in relation to the different characters that are referred to, is even more interesting. First, the man is by far the character most described in terms of fragments, and almost exclusively by external elements. This type of

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<sup>4</sup> Although reference to the patient in this way is non-existent, this character is included in the table, because reference is made to him by the constructions in table 2, presenting related data.



deictic description of the man peaks in part 3. Second, the woman, son and patient are less often described through fragmentary description. When this occurs, it mostly offers a depiction of their inner life. The man and woman together are referred to least often in fragments, and never by inward description.

## 4 Interpretation of the frequency, distribution and contextual embedding of the pronouns

Based on the data presented in Figure 1 and 2, and Table 1 and 2, we hypothesize that the explanation for readers' feelings of uncanniness can be found in the interplay between outward/inward description, external/internal focalization and exclusive pronominal reference to the main characters. The next sections provide arguments supporting this view, within a cognitive-stylistic analytical framework.

### 4.1 Distance opposed to nearness

The obvious question to arise from the exclusive use of pronominal constructions and indefinite descriptions in referring to characters, is why the use of names and even definite descriptions has been omitted in the first place. Subsequently, the issue of the transformed functioning of pronouns in 'Signs and Symbols' in comparison with their functioning in other literary narratives comes into play. The effects of pronoun use to refer to a character depend on the context of the narrative, and must be judged per text (Toolan 1990; Emmott 2002). However, there are some general expectations about pronominal usage that can explain, to a certain point, what the effects of exclusive pronoun use could be. If we further analyze the exclusive pronominal reference in this story in relation to perspective taking, more specifically the narrator/character interplay of focalization, the distance/nearness opposition can be partially explained.

The repeated use of pronouns to refer to the three main characters in 'Signs and Symbols' (man, woman, son) constitutes different cohesive chains for referring to them. These chains are characterized by cumulative anaphoricity (Halliday and Hasan 1976) and the remarkable absence of names. The characters' individual cohesive chains of reference are composed quite differently, although they all consist of personal and possessive pronouns and deictic descriptive expressions. The characters' cohesive chains of reference can be found in appendix A. They form the central data for our analysis.

Cognitive stylistics posits that linguistic items are interpreted as meaningful in relation to other choices available in the language system and in the context of the overall narrative. Moreover, “repeated references using a particular linguistic form can sustain a theme over a stretch of text, integrating a particular *attitude* towards a character into the plot [. . .].” (Emmott 2002: 100, 104. Italics added.) The repeated references in the cohesive chains of ‘Signs and Symbols’ furthermore gain meaning by constituting cumulative anaphoricity, ascribed the following function by Halliday and Hasan (1976):

This phenomenon contributes very markedly to the internal cohesion of a text, since it creates a kind of network of lines of reference, each occurrence being linked to all its predecessors up to and including the initial reference. The *number* and *density* of such networks is one of the factors which gives to any text its particular flavor or texture. (Quoted in Toolan (1990): 130. Italics added.)

We can see that the main protagonists of ‘Signs and Symbols’ have quite distinct cohesive chains of reference that differ in both number and density. These chains also show internal variation across the three story-parts. It can thus be expected that the reader’s attitude towards the characters also varies across these parts.

Part 1 appears to create a feeling of intimacy between the elderly couple, which is communicated to the reader through the interplay of the man and woman’s cohesive chains. The elderly couple is not only mainly presented as ‘they’, as one story-entity, but the deictic descriptions in part 1 also help to convey a sense of the couple’s intimacy. For example, the woman is mentioned as a separate entity for the first time by the fragmentary possessive pronominal expression “Her drab gray hair” (598VN), before she is actually established as an individual person in the next sentence. This is a foregrounded type of marked-order anaphora or cataphora (Halliday and Hasan 1976; Huddleston 1984). This type of referring is marked in itself: one would expect to first read a sentence in which a character is presented that is referred to in subsequent sentences by a personal pronoun. This is how normal anaphora, or unmarked-order anaphora work. The cataphoric expression under scrutiny here is not only foregrounded because of its marked-order type of referring, but also because the backwards referring has a complicated structure. The expression “Her drab gray hair” refers to the woman, but is informed by the earlier mentions of “they” and “his parents”, as well as the given information that the man and woman have been married for a long time. The woman is thus a construct, pieced together by the reader’s implicit knowledge of her being a mother and a wife. These roles define her: she is first someone’s mother and someone’s wife, and only second an individual person. The text’s initial description of the woman presents this view to us quite literally. The fragmentary deictic description denoting part of her plays into this interpretation

as well: the reader first gets to know her as an individual through a fragmentary outward description, before she is described as a whole person (“she”).

Although the woman is first presented in a fragmentary way, she becomes an individual person, a “she” mentioned seven times in part 1. In part 2 and 3 a similar trend can be observed. The man, however, starts out as a fragmented character and remains one throughout the entire story. This is due to the nature of pronominal reference to the man and the specific type of focalization the narrative presents, which we will discuss later. The first time the man is established as an individual in part 1, he is referred to in the possessive pronominal expression “her husband” (598 VN). Like the woman, he is first someone’s parent and spouse, and only second an individual person. This expression occurs two times before the man becomes a “he”, a process taking on a very different guise from the woman becoming a “she”. The only four mentions of the man as “he” in part 1 are clustered within a short passage describing the man and woman leaving the sanatorium after they are denied a visit to their son:

*She waited for **her husband** to open his umbrella and then took his arm. **He** kept clearing his throat in a special resonant way **he** had when **he** was upset. *They* reached the bus-stop shelter on the other side of the street and **he** closed his umbrella. (VN 599)<sup>5</sup>*

This passage includes the second mention of the man as “her husband”, which anaphorically influences interpretation of the subsequent instances of the man as dependent on the woman. The specific position of this passage in part 1 is also telling. The previous paragraph includes only mentions of ‘they’ in referring to the couple; its five instances constitute half of the total of ten in this story-part. This makes for a very dense distribution of this pronoun, which is accompanied by two of the three instances of ‘their’ in part 1. It is thus a very couple-focused passage, describing them being denied a visit to their son and deciding to offer their birthday present the next time they visit him. The subsequent paragraph presents a topic shift (the parents have left the sanatorium and are heading home, without conversing about their son), so in order to signal a change in theme a change in reference can be expected. As Sanford and Emmott state, “overspecification (in terms of what is required for referential clarity) suggests a change in theme, rather than mere co-reference.” (Sanford and Emmott, 2012: 98) But why do we read “She waited for her husband” instead of “She waited for him” or maybe even the more obvious “The mother/the wife waited for her husband”?

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<sup>5</sup> References to the man are in bold face, possessive constructions are underlined, and personal pronouns not referring to the man (as individual) are italicized.

The choice for the pronoun “She” is foregrounded here, because the coreferential tie crosses a major discourse boundary (Toolan 1990: 173). The previous mention of “she” is far removed, in the second paragraph of the story, so readers may be alerted to the varying reference (from “they” to “she waited for her husband”). But what are the effects of the particular choice of pronominal reference here?

A plausible explanation for this pronominal variance centers on the possible shift of perspective the quoted passage seems to indicate. Up to this point in the story, the view on the story world appears to be that of the narrative agent. The quoted passage, however, contains cues indicating that not the narrator, but the woman, takes on the role of ‘perspective-taker’. The type of *focalization* in the story becomes more ambiguous from this point on. This ambiguity is informed by both the referential workings of the mentioned cohesive chains and other perspective cues. To fully appreciate these complex interactions in the story, some information on what we take focalization to be is in order.

The term focalization is first coined by Genette (1980) and pertains to the difference between ‘Who speaks?’ and ‘Who perceives?’ in a narrative. Traditionally, the first question has to do with narrative voice in the discourse space, while the second question addresses the experiencer role of characters in the story space. However, as Phelan (2001) notes, this distinction does not do justice to how fictional narratives are experienced by readers, because it hinges on a more fundamental distinction “of *how much narrators see and know in relation to characters.*” (cf. 54; italics in original) In addition, even later revisions of Genette’s ideas still rely on the idea that the narrator cannot truly see the story world, but only report on it.<sup>6</sup> The dire consequence of this mode of thinking is that narrators can never be focalizers, which Phelan suggests does not do justice to how readers interpret stories:

If narrators are, in effect, blind to the story world, then audiences must be too. Or, more formally, if narrators cannot perceive the story world, then narratees, *implied readers*, and flesh and blood readers, who get much of their access to that world through a narrator, also cannot perceive that world – or can do so only through a focalizing character darkly. (Phelan, 2001: 57)

In using the term focalization in the analysis of ‘Signs and Symbols’, we adhere to Phelan’s views that focalization indeed has to do with ‘Who perceives?’, *not* with how much a narrator sees and knows in relation to characters, and that the nar-

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Chatman (1986, 1990) and Prince (2001).

rator can literally perceive the story world, even if it is not a human agent, and can function as the readers' viewpoint on the story.<sup>7</sup>

We can relate the concept of focalization to empirical research in psycholinguistics (Sanford and Emmott 2012). Brunyé et al. (2009) have shown that when people read simple sentences with the same propositional content of someone doing something to an object, the perspective taken by the reader depends on whether a 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun functions as subject. Sentences with 'I' and 'you' as subject trigger an internal perspective, while 'he'-sentences prompt external perspective taking. In subsequent tests featuring longer and more detailed descriptions of the referent, the 'he'-sentences were still interpreted as containing external perspective cues.<sup>8</sup> While Brunyé et al. speak of perspective, what is actually measured in these experiments is how pronoun forms can trigger different types of focalization. After all, they measure if readers *perceive* the event being described through the eyes of a bystander or through those of the active agent, so their question is: 'Who perceives?'

Deciding on who perceives the story world of 'Signs and Symbols' is no straightforward feat. Following the findings of Brunyé et al., the use of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular pronouns when referring to the main story characters can be said to trigger an external perspective. We could then tentatively extend this idea to the effect of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural pronoun 'they'. The question then arises through *which* external perspective the reader perceives the story world. Considering we are dealing with a literary narrative the logical answer would be: that of the narrative agent.<sup>9</sup> Some stylistic elements in the story definitely support this view. Consider, for example, the first sentence of the story. It contains a striking instance of distanced deictic description denoting the son of the elderly couple: "For the fourth time in as many years they were confronted with the problem of what birthday present to bring a young man who was incurably deranged in his mind." (598) This is an unusual way of describing a child whose parents are con-

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7 In much linguistics research, the term 'viewpoint' is used for what is termed 'focalization' in literary studies. In the latter discipline, the term 'viewpoint' or 'point of view' is traditionally associated with a character's/narrator's ideological view on story-events. Following Phelan, we feel that focalization, as a literary *device*, needs to be distinguished from the ideological *interpretation* readers may give to the workings of focalization in a story.

8 However, when these longer and more detailed texts were presented to participants, the sentences with 'I' as subject were interpreted as providing an external perspective in contrast to the internal perspective prompted by isolated sentences.

9 We use the term 'narrative agent' rather than 'narrator', considering the latter term is too informed by the anthropomorphic vocabulary of formalist and structuralist narrative theories. We view the 'narrative agent' as a stylistic device, offering a specific perspective on and of the story world.

sidering what present to buy him for his birthday. The subsequent detailed description of outward appearances of the parents is presented in a similar noncommittal way.

The density and use of 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns in ‘Signs and Symbols’ has additional and slightly different effects on focalization, due to the contextual embedding of these pronouns in the main characters’ cohesive chains. The main cue for external focalization, the near exclusive use of 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns, has to compete for prominence, in a way, with internal focalization cues also present in the narrative. This can be illustrated if we take another look at the passage quoted above.

**She** waited for her husband to open his umbrella and then took his arm. **He** kept clearing his throat in a special resonant way **he** had when **he** was upset/. **They** reached the bus-stop shelter on the other side of the street and **he** closed his umbrella. A few feet away, under a swaying and dripping tree, a tiny half-dead unfledged bird was helplessly twitching in a puddle.

During the long ride to the subway station, **she** and her husband did not exchange a word; and every time **she** *glanced at his old hands (swollen veins, brown-spotted skin)*, clasped and twitching upon the handle of his umbrella, */she felt the mounting pressure of tears/*. As **she** *looked around trying to hook her mind onto something*, */it gave her a kind of soft shock, a mixture of compassion and wonder/*, to *notice* that one of the passengers, a girl with dark hair and grubby red toenails, was weeping on the shoulder of an older woman. *Whom did that woman resemble? She resembled Rebecca Borisovna, whose daughter had married one of the Soloveichiks – in Minsk, years ago. (VN 599)*<sup>10</sup>

This longer passage shows how pronoun use and perspective cues interact to construe internal focalization through the woman’s “field of vision” (Palmer 2004). The initial narrator-focalization is complemented by the woman’s, creating dual-focalization. The passage presents different cues for internal character focalization (Sanford and Emmott, 2012: 166): explicit use of verbs of seeing, noticing or related perception verbs; granularity of the description, including the level of detail; and the presentation of a character’s thoughts. The last two sentences are furthermore presented as Free Indirect Thought, blending the focalization and voice of the narrative agent with those of the woman (Phelan 2001; Vandelanotte 2004)<sup>11</sup>. The passage also contains several references to emotional states of the characters.

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**10** References to personal pronouns are in bold face, possessive constructions are underlined, and different types of perspective cues are italicized. Description of emotion is bracketed by /.../.

**11** See Clement and Maier for an extensive treatment of the grammatical category of Free Indirect Discourse, this volume.

The interesting shift from narratorial focalization to character focalization or a mix of the two types in part 1, has interpretative and affective consequences on readers' story comprehension. The distance/nearness opposition is set up in the first part, which presents a distanced as well as an intimate view of the characters. The main effect of this shifting is precisely that readers are invited to feel for the unlucky fate of the couple and their son, while at the same time remaining at some distance from the sad events that are described. The main effect of the blended focalization set up in this passage, lies in its influence on the further reading process: The seemingly more level depiction of events befalling the main characters by the narrative agent is now intertwined with the more direct experiencing of these events by one of the main characters.

The foregrounded use of "She" and "her husband" as referring expressions in the first sentence of the quoted paragraphs can thus be said to trigger internal focalization on the woman's part. Readers get access to her thoughts, her inner life, in which the man is 'her husband'. Interestingly, the construction "she and her husband" occurs three times in total in the narrative. The first time it precedes the clear internal focalization cues as annotated in the quoted passage, thus prompting readers to view this construction as a clue for internal character focalization. The second time it appears quite out of context, also in part 1, when a scientific paper on the son's illness is paraphrased. This paragraph follows a short paragraph in which the son is consequently referred to by "he" (4). The passage on his mental illness starts with the following sentence: "The system of his delusions had been the subject of an elaborate paper in a scientific monthly, but long before that she and her husband had puzzled it out for themselves." (VN 599) A more obvious choice of reference here would have been "his parents", constituting the thematic shift, but again the woman is presented as an individual person with "her husband" being dependent on her. This foregrounded instance of reference is again a cue for internal focalization.

At the end of part 2, the "she and her husband" construction makes its final appearance. In this part readers are invited to perceive the story world through both the narrator's and the woman's eyes, when external and internal perspective cues are presented. The main focus is on the woman reminiscing about the family's life before and after they went into exile, while looking at old photo albums. Not only is "she" the most prominent personal pronoun in this part (10), but the woman is explicitly reported examining the photographs and thinking about the pain they have endured. The couple's son is for the first and only time referred to as "her boy" (VN 601). Interestingly, the woman's and narrative agent's voice and focalization are now far more subtly intertwined. The narrative agent's view on the story world is mostly present through elaborate use of language, 'inserted' as it were into the woman's thought presentation. The "she and her husband" con-

struction occurs at the end of part 2, when readers are fully engrossed in the woman's thoughts. Contextually, this construction is backgrounded rather than foregrounded here, considering it nicely fits the woman's own perception of herself as completed by her husband. The interaction of internal and external perspective cues in this story-part thus reinforces the distance/nearness opposition's presence in the narrative.

A final story-feature to be taken into account regarding this opposition is the fact that the man is only described by outward description of fragments of his body ("his mouth", VN 600; "his clenched fist", VN 602) or his possessions ("his hopelessly uncomfortable dental plate", VN 600; "his left slipper", VN 602), constituting a total of 24 instances in the entire story. This type of fragmented description of the man is first encountered in the passage quoted above, in which the woman has her first appearance as focalizer. We thus consider such expressions, in addition to the "she and her husband" construction, to be cues for character-focalization by the woman. The woman perceives these fragments of the man with affection, as evinced by this type of description's first appearance (she felt the mounting pressure of tears [. . .] every time she glanced at his old hands, VN 599). However, the man still remains at a distance, given that 'Signs and Symbols' contains no further descriptions of his mental state. The only evidence for him actually experiencing emotion lies again in the cluster of expressions surrounding his umbrella (He kept clearing his throat in a special resonant way he had when he was upset, VN 599). Sanford and Emmott mention that "descriptions of the facial expressions and movements of characters" and "descriptions of actions resulting from emotions" are often used textual means of representing emotions. Furthermore, being taken into the minds of characters may "allow readers to align themselves with the perspective of a character" (2012: 196). The first focalization-instance of the woman is thus characterized by multiple emotion-laden aspects, prompting readers to engage affectively with the story.

The quoted passage almost appears to be a blueprint for readers as to how and when to ascribe focalization to the woman: When the man is fragmentarily described and/or the "she and her husband" construction is present, the woman's focalization is cued. These internal perspective cues paradoxically increase readers' sense of distance toward the narrative: The woman might be able to read the deeper meanings of the man's physical surface behavior due to their intimate relationship, but the reader is not capable of doing so. He remains 'her husband' whose tics only she can understand. We find it remarkable that the son is the character whose inner life is described most often (9), although he does not enter the story-stage in person at all; he is also the least mentioned individual character in terms of pronoun frequency. 'Signs and Symbols' thus exerts an interesting



push-and-pull movement on its readers, creating a paradoxical sense of both distance and nearness.

## 4.2 Communication opposed to silence

The opposition distance-nearness is one of two thematic strands contributing to readers' feelings of intimacy and distance towards the story, and ultimately to a more general feeling of uncanniness. The second opposition, communication-silence, is equally linked thematically to person marking and focalization. 'Signs and Symbols' is a story remarkably devoid of verbal interaction. In part 1, the only communicative exchange between characters takes place when the couple is awaiting their boy's appearance at the sanatorium, but are told by a nurse it is probably wise not to go and visit him. The couple is then reported deciding to bring their present another time. Both the nurse and the couple's speech is presented in the form of indirect speech presentation. In part 2, the only evident speech act is found to be another indirect speech presentation: "She wanted to buy some fish for supper, so she handed him the basket of jelly jars, telling him to go home." (VN 600) Part 1 and 2 present the couple engaging in activities together (riding the bus, having supper), but they are never truly reported to interact. They appear to know each other so well that the need for communication is done away with, as is obvious from such sentences: "He read his Russian-language newspaper while she laid the table. Still reading, he ate the pale victuals that needed no teeth. She knew his moods and was also silent." (VN 600) This example is also representative of the entire story in that it shows how the man and woman are both a couple as well as two separate entities within that construction. Even in an act like eating together they remain strikingly apart.

Part 3, however, contains much dialogue in the form of direct speech presentation. The couple converse about the man's proposal to bring their son home and take care of him themselves. The use of "he" referring to the man is foregrounded in this part: It is used no less than seventeen times, in contrast with a meagre four times in part 1 and eight times in part 2. The nature of the man's cohesive chain in part 3 may lead us to expect that he becomes a focalizing instance and that readers might actually gain some insight into his inner life. He suddenly becomes the most prominent character through pronominal reference and deictic description. This part also contains the only mention of the possessive pronominal expression "his wife", referring to the woman. However, expressions referring to fragments of the man also reach their peak (12) and he remains "her husband" (2). As we have seen, these references are primarily interpreted as cues for the woman's focalization, which frustrates our initial expectation. The very first sentence of this

part supports this interpretation. It sets up the woman as main focalizer by explicitly giving the reader access to her audio-visual perception and thoughts: “It was past midnight when from the living room she heard her husband moan; and presently he staggered in, wearing over his nightgown the old overcoat with astrakhan collar which he much preferred to the nice blue bathrobe he had.” (VN 601) The unique mention of “his wife” in this part also sooner confirms than undermines the woman’s focalizing role, considering its context focuses on the man’s inability to carry out a seemingly trivial action: “The telephone rang. [. . .] His left slipper had come off and he groped for it with his heel and toe as he stood in the middle of the room, and childishly, toothlessly, gaped at his wife. Having more English than he did, it was she who attended to calls.”

Nevertheless, the high frequency of references to the man in part 3 gives him a greater presence than in the other two parts. He is the main speaker in part 3, voicing his desire to bring their son back home. The man’s foregrounded position then may not be to align the reader with his view, as in the case of the woman, but to make the reader attentive to what the man is actually saying. Interestingly, he is silenced by the first ringing of the phone in more ways than one: his wife picks up the phone, because she has a better command of the English language than he does, after which the last part of the man’s monologue is presented in the form of indirect speech. The specific pronominally-induced foregrounding of the man, and subsequently that of the monologue, might thus support the interpretation offered by some literary scholars concerning the ominous last phone call. The man’s idea, indulged by the woman, to bring their son home is quite literally silenced. It foreshadows the impossibility of this enterprise, considering their son might well have succeeded in ending his own life.

## 5 Conclusion

We have shown that the general feelings readers report having when reading ‘Signs and Symbols’ can be partially explained by the interactive workings of pronoun use and focalization. We argue that different types of pronominal expressions and deictic descriptions play a significant role in readers’ theme-construction and prompt affective response towards the text. By drawing on insights from both literary studies and more empirically oriented ways of studying literary texts, our account of foregrounding in this story explains why readers experience a paradoxical sense of both distance and intimacy towards the story. We propose that this analysis of the thematic and affective interpretation of ‘Signs and Symbols’ must be seen as an addition to the existing body of scholarly work on this story, which pays much attention to mysterious ‘clues’ the writer has put

into it. In laying bare the cohesive chains of reference in the story, we believe to have found some clues adding to our understanding of the story's stylistic workings and its effects on readers.

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## Appendix A. The cohesive chains of the main characters in 'Signs and Symbols'

Woman	Man	Son
<u>part 1</u>	<u>part 1</u>	<u>part 1</u>
they	they	his mind
<u>his parents</u>	<u>his parents</u>	he
they	they	he
they	they	his abstract world
her drab gray hair	<u>her husband</u>	his birth
she	his brother Isaac	<u>their boy</u>
her age	they	he
she	they	his poor face
they	they	he
they	they	he
they	they	his method
they	<u>her husband</u>	he
they	his umbrella	he
she	his arm	he
they	he	his world
she (and her husband) •	his throat	his delusions
she	he	
she	he	<u>part 2</u>
she	they	
her mind	he	he
	(she and) <u>her</u>	he

she (and her  
husband)••

part 2

they  
she  
she  
she  
her head  
her silliness  
they  
their two-room flat  
she  
she  
she  
her pack of soiled  
cards  
her old albums  
she  
they  
his parents  
she  
she  
she (and her  
husband)•••

part 3

she  
she  
she  
she  
their telephone  
his wife  
she  
her hand  
her old tired heart  
she

husband•  
his old hands  
his umbrella  
(she and) her  
husband••

part 2

they  
he  
he  
his keys  
he  
they  
their two-room flat  
he  
his mouth  
his thumbs  
he  
his new hopelessly  
uncomfortable  
dental plate  
he  
his Russian-language  
newspaper  
he  
his moods  
he  
they  
his parents  
(she and) her  
husband•••

part 3

her husband  
he  
his nightgown  
he

he  
he  
he  
his life  
those little phobias of  
his  
her boy

part 3

he

