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A Close Reading Of, *Pnin*

“A squirrel under a tree had seen Pnin on the path. In one sinuous tendril-like movement, the intelligent animal climbed up to the brim of a drinkable fountain... Pnin understood and after some fumbling he found what had to be pressed for the necessary results. “She has a fever, perhaps,” thought Pnin, weeping quietly and freely, and all the time politely pressing the contraption down while trying not to meet the unpleasant eye fixed upon him. Its thirst quenched, the squirrel departed without the least sign of gratitude.” (Nabokov, 58).

This quote from Vladimir Nabokov’s, *Pnin*, establishes just how much of a blatant victim that Timofey Pnin is to not only himself, but to the society that he is a part of. Throughout the novel, there is this pattern of rejection and loss that seems to have struck Pnin all throughout his life and this squirrel passage symbolizes just how under appreciated that this character is. Although Pnin realizes his lack of appreciation throughout the novel, he still cannot resist giving into the bullies that continuously barge in and out of his life and this passage exploits his desperate desire to be loved on a much simpler scale.

When analyzing this passage, it is important to understand why the squirrel signals out Pnin in the first place. The Narrator describes the animal as, “intelligent”, inferring that it is smart enough to realize that Pnin is not a threat to them. Using a squirrel shows just how susceptible Pnin is. This animal does not know him, yet they know that they can use Pnin to get the water that they need. On a larger spectrum, this symbolizes how the people in Pnin’s life view him. Look at Liza for example, not only does she have the audacity to ask for Pnin’s help

with her son, but she is ruthless enough to insult him in the process of her request. Her rudeness shows just how little respect and regard people have for Pnin, because they know he is not going to fight back, similarly to the squirrel realizing he will not put them in danger.

It is also important to analyze Pnin's thought process while he is encountering the squirrel. When he thinks, "She has a fever, perhaps," (58), this shows just how genuine and considerate Pnin is. He cares for the squirrel, which symbolizes his natural concern for people. Because of his inability to refuse someone in need, Pnin puts himself in a position to experience being rejected continuously. Despite the constant rejection that he encounters, Pnin never stops believing in the people that he surrounds himself with. This highlights Pnin's constant hope to be accepted and to be loved, just as he has tried to do for the people and animals that he encounters throughout the novel

The ending of this quote represents Pnin's life in a nutshell. When the Narrator writes, "Its thirst quenched, the squirrel departed without the least sign of gratitude." (58), he uses the squirrel as a metaphorical reference, to show the lack of gratitude that everyone has for Pnin. Nobody actually wants Pnin for Pnin, they only want what he can offer them. Although he may be caring, his constant need to help people is not a need at all. It is due to his fear of saying no, which is conceived from his fear of being more rejected than he already is. He simply does not want to disappoint anyone any more than he already has, and he still believes that if he does what people will say, they will value him in a way that he desperately desires to be appreciated.

When studying this passage, it is important to understand Nabokov's true intent. He wants to show Pnin's life on a simpler platform, forcing the reader to realize his protagonist's true dilemma. If Pnin cannot back down to a squirrel, how could he ever back down to an actual

human being? If Pnin ever wants to find true happiness in his life, he needs to learn how to stand up for himself because no one will for him. He also needs to move on from the people in his life and accept the fact that they continuously hurt him. This squirrel passage represents Pnin's ultimate conflict with people, nature, himself and simply, the world around him.

Works Cited

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Invitation of a Beheading*. Doubleday & Co., 1957.