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# The Horror of N. V. Gogol's "Vij"

## Abstract

Though N. V. Gogol's "Vij" is commonly recognized as a work of horror, the elements motivating this interpretation still lack sufficient, systematic research through a contemporary horror studies apparatus. This paper offers a cognitive stylistic analysis of "Vij," integrated with a biocultural perspective on horror. It aims to identify and explain the mechanisms through which "Vij" evokes fear by analyzing its language and the cognitive structures and processes underpinning it. Drawing on conceptual blending theory, the study demonstrates how horrifying entities—especially the witch—are constructed through the incremental integration of mental spaces, yielding emergent concepts grounded in cultural tradition and evolved fear circuits while remaining contextually specific. Special emphasis is placed on the role of sight, from perceptual instability to predation, demonstrating how linguistic patterns engage deep-seated fears. The paper further argues that the narrative's exploitation of the metaphor understanding is seeing positions vision as a source of existential threat: looking entails dangerous knowledge that destabilizes core world schemata. This study contributes to growing research on Gogol's horror poetics and offers a basis for empirical investigations into readers' experiential responses to literary horror.

Keywords: Nikolaj Vasil'evič Gogol', "Vij," cognitive stylistics, conceptual blending, bioculturalism, horror, fear

## 1. Introduction

There have been various attempts at deciphering "the enigma of Gogol[1] " (Peace), often yielding divergent labels, from the founder of naturalism (Belinskij, "Vzglâd" 385) to the harbinger of symbolic literary principles (Belyj 45). Despite differing approaches, most scholars acknowledge a

strain of horror in Gogol's oeuvre, especially in his early, Ukrainian stories. Thus, Fanger notes the "yoking of … the conventions of comedy with those of horror stories" (91), while Peace observes the coexistence of "both pastoral idyll and gothic horror" ("Origins and aims"). Such remarks, however, have been largely sporadic, and systematic research of Gogol as a writer of horror fiction is a relatively recent development (Makaryan et al.; Bulavina; Krys), with Lev Nikulin's Fear Obscured offering the most comprehensive study to date.

"Vij" was first published in 1835 as part of Gogol's Mirgorod collection. Although largely well received, the collection drew some criticism. Ševyrëv objected to "Vij" for a detailed description of monsters, arguing that "[t]he horrific cannot be detailed: a ghost is frightening only when there is some uncertainty in it." Belinskij agreed ("O russkoj povesti" 59). In response, Gogol revised "Vij," producing the 1842 edition that survives today. Is that version frightening? Apparently—yes. Nabokov called it a "gooseflesh story" ("Chronology"). Peace thought the monsters "unambiguously inspire fear and horror" (57). Karlinsky proposed that "Vij" "might well be the finest horror story in the Russian language" ("Vij"). According to a study of readers' response, precisely "Vij," among all of Gogol's romantic stories, appears to be "the most terrible" (Ivanova and Ryzhchenko 238). So, what makes it terrifying? Karlinsky interprets the story as a window into Gogol's subconscious, where fears are homosexual desires incarnate, and the eponymous monster becomes "a personification of Gogol's own sexual terrors" (97). Peace, being more attentive to stylistics, observes that Gogol "was probably right to increase the effect of horror by suggestion rather than detail" ("Vij"). Yet even for Peace, the supernatural horror of "Vij" presents merely a metaphor for the psychological one (albeit not the writer's)—Vij embodies "Khoma Brut's own conscience" ("Vij") burdened with the secret of an unnatural sexual encounter.

Analyzing language as the primary means of expressing and evoking fear in literary works, Ivanova and Ryzhchenko note that the title and its explanation establish the terrifying atmosphere, that Vij is mentioned sparingly, and that the gaze motif is central to conveying the terrible, while ironic episodes reinforce doom rather than develop into typical Gogolian humor (236-237). Nikulin, as part of his broader research into Gogol's contribution to horror poetics, provides the most detailed analysis of "Vij," which, he shows, plays a significant role in Gogol's development of a "set of techniques of formal negation, obscurity, and emptiness" (1). Arguing against approaches to horror

that centralize affect, Nikulin advocates a formalist perspective, considering affect only inside the text: “the affect of a character or a mood created by Gogol,” or insofar as writers and theorists integrate their own reading experiences within their theoretical frameworks (42). He thus focuses on the linguistic strategies through which obscurity is created, including the rendering of supernatural creatures as formless through linguistic ambiguity, or more specifically, the usage of verbs without noun-subjects and even the avoidance of pronouns (112), as well as on the removal of Vij’s eyes (80-87), and Homa’s internal reasoning for looking into them (114-116).

Focusing on formal elements, particularly linguistic techniques, is indeed highly productive, crucial even, for the study of literary horror, which—ignoring illustrations—can exist as horror only through language. However, it does not seem to be equally productive to disregard the affective nature of the genre. Even the most rigorous formal analysis cannot escape affective contextualization. There is obscurity in “Vij,” which is highly effective, but to what end? Nikulin himself draws on Ševyrëv’s critique and, more broadly, on Edmund Burke’s concept of the sublime. While it seems intuitively true that uncertainty and obscurity induce fear, their writings predate empirical validation and potentially deal in vague, impressionistic notions. I would argue that contemporary research into the language of horror can benefit greatly from a biocultural approach, as developed by Mathias Clasen and grounded in the broader biocultural perspective on literature. If we acknowledge “Vij” as a story that has been experienced by readers across generations as frightening, we should take a closer look at what gives it such a persistent effect. Indeed, as a literary work, “Vij” can express and evoke fear through language, and thus its horror should be analyzed through the usage of language that causes affect. To this end, I propose a stylistic analysis informed by cognitive linguistics, which treats language as a part of general human cognition in which various cognitive mechanisms are reflected. These approaches are highly compatible: both draw on empirical data from multiple disciplines and recognize that humans, and language as a quintessentially human faculty, have evolved in specific ways, shaping the arts in turn.

## 2. On Fear and Mind

The affective account of the horror genre maintains that such works are designed to elicit negative emotions in their audiences (Carroll 193; Clasen), ranging from “terror, fear, and dread to shock,

disgust, and loathing" (Clasen "Introduction"), with fear being crucial and/or prototypical. This study considers all the subsets.

Despite being unpleasant, this cluster of emotions has served humans well. As Clasen notes in the introduction,

> *our species' evolutionary history has resulted in a species-typical psychological architecture, and … this architecture fundamentally constrains our horror stories and the types of monsters that we imagine and are captivated by. Horror fiction targets ancient and deeply conserved defense mechanisms in the brain; when it works, it works by activating supersensitive danger-detection circuits that have their roots far back in vertebrate evolution, circuits that evolved to help our ancestors survive in dangerous environments.*

Most effective horror monsters, therefore, target "domains of predation, intraspecific violence, contamination-contagion, status loss, and … dangerous nonliving environmental features" (ch. 3). Naturally, we are not mere animals, reacting instinctively to a suspicious rustle in the bushes. Rather, the most compelling horror works exploit our complex cultural frameworks, as they "reflect or respond to salient sociocultural anxieties" ("Introduction").

The analysis will also draw on theories of conceptual blending, metaphor, and metonymy. Conceptual blending, or integration, developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, builds on Fauconnier's theory of mental spaces. Mental spaces "are very partial assemblies constructed as we think and talk for purposes of local understanding and action" (Fauconnier 351). They draw partly on existing frames and cognitive models but are also shaped by immediate experiences. As thought and discourse unfold, mental spaces are dynamically adjusted to emerging needs. While they typically operate in working memory, some become entrenched in long-term memory, as is the case with frames. Fauconnier and Turner regard conceptual blending as a fundamental cognitive mechanism (vi).

Blends arise from several interacting mental spaces: at minimum, two input spaces, a generic space, and a blended space. The input spaces partially match, enabling cross-domain mapping between their counterparts. The generic space contains the schematic structure shared by the inputs and maps onto each of them. The blend develops an emergent structure that incorporates

generic and input-specific elements but also produces new meaning absent in either input alone. Emergent structure arises through three processes: composition, where elements from the inputs are combined to create novel relations absent from the inputs themselves; completion, through which background knowledge fills in a familiar frame; and elaboration, whereby the blend is imaginatively run as a simulation governed by its established principles (Fauconnier and Turner 48). Emergent blends may subsequently function as new input spaces within the broader network of ongoing integration. Blending also enables compression, allowing us to reduce complex networks to a manageable, human scale.

Unlike conceptual metaphor theory, which operates with unidirectional mappings and focuses primarily on relatively stable, conventionalized patterns, conceptual integration theory is particularly well suited for explaining how multiple domains operate simultaneously in real time to produce complex meanings. As integral components of human cognition, conceptual blending, metaphor, and metonymy should be regarded as complementary and often tightly interconnected mechanisms.

## 3. Understanding Horror

The supernatural horror in “Vij” first emerges through Homa’s encounter with the witch. Before turning to Gogol’s specific conception of the witch and its role in generating horror, it is useful to recall that the witch is a well-tried horror monster—effective because it constitutes “a kind of category mistake” (Carroll 31), more precisely, the optimal degree of violation. Namely, successful supernatural concepts are minimally counterintuitive (MCI): they “balance meeting most non-reflective beliefs, while violating just a small number” (Barrett 84). These slight violations of intuitive category assumptions, generated by universal cognitive mechanisms, render such entities cognitively optimal. Concepts which do not radically violate plausibility are neither overly complex nor easily dismissed, while the presence of a counter-intuitive feature makes them more salient, memorable, and culturally transmissible (Barrett and Nyhof 72-73).

There is also a cognitive and neurological basis for belief in witchcraft (Boyer; Di Simplicio and Di Simplicio). Witches function as an MCI biocultural threat. Indeed, Boyer uses witches to illustrate the notion of intuitive unnaturalness (34). Belief in witches relies on our species’ natural tendency

for belief in supernatural agents. Barrett attributes this tendency to our HADD—the hypersensitive agency detection device—which evolved because "[i]n our evolutionary past our best opportunities for survival and reproduction and our biggest threats were other agents, so we had to be able to detect them" (85). Since detecting an agent when one was not actually present was far less costly than failing to detect a real threat, hypersensitivity became evolutionarily advantageous and, ultimately, part of our cognitive inheritance. However, these quick threat-assessment mechanisms also predispose humans to search for causes behind unpleasant events, "eventually personalizing the blame for negative occurrences, such as malefices" (Di Simplicio and Di Simplicio 7). The evolution of human mental modules and social structures produced social emotions and concepts of good and evil, but these took shape against the background of primal emotions: fear and anger. Driven by "a perverse mixture of envy, fear, anger, hatred and revenge" (Di Simplicio and Di Simplicio 45), communities sought causality for misfortunes and often found them in malevolent supernatural acts of other members—witches. While the cognitive basis for believing in such harm-doing agents is universally human, its specific cultural manifestations vary. Gogol's letters to his mother show that he was familiar with—and drew inspiration from—Ukrainian folk beliefs ("Gogol' M. I.").

Homa finds himself alone at night as an "old woman was walking straight toward him with outstretched arms[f2] ("старуха шла прямо к нему с распростертыми руками") (Gogol' 343). At first, he interprets her behavior as sexual advances—unsurprising both in the immediate context and given the general moral laxity of Gogol's seminarians. Yet, the action repeats five times with certain variations: she remains silent ("не говоря ни слова"; "не говорила ни слова") (343) and tries to grab him ("ловила его"; "хватала его") (343). After the third repetition, Homa rightly reinterprets her behavior as threatening. An unknown person attempting to grab you poses a threat of bodily, and potentially social, harm, even if that person is an old woman. Gogol heightens this threat by drawing attention to the old woman's eyes: "The philosopher became frightened, especially when he noticed that her eyes flashed with some unusual sparkle. … He jumped to his feet, intending to run, but the old woman stood in the doorway and fixed her flashing eyes on him, and again began to approach him" ("Философу сделалось страшно, особливо когда он заметил, что глаза ее сверкнули каким-то необыкновенным блеском. ... Он вскочил на ноги, с

намерением бежать, но старуха стала в дверях и вперила на него сверкающие глаза и снова начала подходить к нему") (343).

Sight remains a potent source of horror throughout "Vij." After all, human vision was essential not only for survival in the once-dangerous physical environment, but also for navigating the subtleties of social life, where emotions and intentions of fellow humans could be as threatening as fangs and claws, particularly because they are often less immediately visible. Eye gaze plays an important role in social cognition (Emery 581), specifically in theory of mind—the attribution of mental states to others (Baron-Cohen 4; Itier and Batty 849). Detecting the presence of eyes and identifying the direction of gaze is crucial for interpreting intentions (Baron-Cohen 105-106). "Vij" exploits this sensitivity. The woman's unwavering flashing eyes naturally signal threat by targeting our evolved responses to gaze and, in turn, evoke the focalizer's fear.

As the scene progresses, Homa will find himself carrying the old woman like a galloping horse out of the village and conclude, "Oh, that's a witch" ("Эге, да это ведьма") (343). Let us consider how our focalizer comes to this recognition. There is no systematic cross-domain mapping that would license this inference; there is no conceptual metaphor a witch is an old woman who deprives a man of agency and rides him. Rather, humans possess the frame witch—a culturally entrenched blend—and several key elements in the scene subtly yet cumulatively trigger its activation. The first element is the inexplicable loss of self-agency.[3] The agent Homa is pushed into the background and becomes a passive participant in the scene, as several expressions profile a relationship in which primary focal prominence is granted to his body parts (arms, legs, voice, heart). These are first denied even their middle-voice[4] meanings through repeated negation (particle не 'not') and are then endowed with agency against the focalizer's volition, creating a violation of normal embodied experience.

The philosopher wanted to push her away with his hands, but, to his astonishment, he noticed that his hands could not be raised, his legs did not move; and with horror he saw that even his voice did not sound from his lips: words moved on his lips without sound. He heard only how his heart was beating … the philosopher could barely come to his senses and grabbed himself by the knees with both hands, wishing to hold back his legs; but they, to his greatest amazement, rose against his will and made leaps faster than a Circassian runner.

Философ хотел оттолкнуть ее руками, но, к удивлению, заметил, что руки его не могут приподняться, ноги не двигались; и он с ужасом увидел, что даже голос не звучал из уст его: слова без звука шевелились на губах. Он слышал только, как билось его сердце ... философ едва мог опомниться и схватил обеими руками себя за колени, желая удержать ноги; но они, к величайшему изумлению его, подымались против воли и производили скачки быстрее черкесского бегуна. (Gogol' 343)

Moreover, the old woman jumps on his back with the speed of a cat and hits him with a broom ("он видел, как старуха … вскочила с быстротою кошки к нему на спину, ударила его метлой") (343). Both are well-established elements of the witch frame in Western cultures (Levack; Modestin). Contextually, they help the activation of a familiar, yet frightening schema.

The ride itself is a common element of the frame, typically involving witches riding brooms, forked cooking-sticks, or animals to reach the sabbat (Goodare 78). There is also, however, a culturally specific basis for Gogol's witch riding a man. Tale no. 367 in Afanas'ev's Russian folktale collection contains this motif, as well as the reverse, where the hero rides the witch ("Rasskazy" 77-78). Moreover, notes to Afanas'ev's witch folktales point to Gogol's use of various elements in creating his witches ("Primečaniâ" 382). Šenrok likewise observes parallels with a tale from Dragomanov's collection titled "The Witch and the Sorcerer" ("Видьма та видьмак"), in which the witch tries to mount a young man (74). This cultural knowledge informs one input space; the old woman constitutes the other. A new structure emerges in which Homa's witch schema blends with the input the old woman. Homa continues to refer to her as the old woman ("старухою") (Gogol' 344), which shows that the blend does not replace either input but integrates them into a single, coherent conception.

With his agency compromised, Homa's perception of reality becomes unstable as well. The night ride is narrated through extensive hedging. The verb казалось / казалась 'seemed' appears four times, twice with the comparative conjunction казалось, как будто 'as if' (344), reinforcing perceptual unreliability. The passage is also saturated with eight indefinite pronouns, which describe not only the physical environment but Homa's affective state, e.g., "[i]n the coolness of the night there was something damp-warm; he felt some kind of piercing, some kind of tormentingly-terrible pleasure" ("В ночной свежести было что-то влажно-теплое; он чувствовал какое-то

пронзающее, какое-то томительно-страшное наслаждение") (344). This chain of hedges is momentarily interrupted by an assertion of clarity, "at the very least, he saw clearly how he was reflected in it together with the old woman sitting on his back" ("по крайней мере, он видел ясно, как он отражался в нем вместе с сидевшею на спине старухою") (344), followed by a few seemingly reliable sensory experiences, e.g., "he heard … He saw" ("он слышал ... Он видел" (344). Yet stability quickly collapses: "Does he see this, or does he not see it? Is this reality, or is he dreaming? But what is that?" ("Видит ли он это, или не видит? Наяву ли это, или снится? Но там что?") (344). The introduction of the supernatural, once Homa realizes he has encountered a witch, destabilizes his entire world schema; the very framework through which he interprets experience becomes unreliable.

The activation of witch schema, however frightening, provides Homa with access to the entirety of knowledge constituting it: "[H]e began to recall all the prayers he knew. He was going through all the spells against spirits" ("он начал припоминать все, какие только знал, молитвы. Он перебирал все заклятия против духов") (344). This knowledge is reinforced as the prayers take effect, strengthening Homa, weakening the witch, and stabilizing his perception. He now sees nothing unusual in the grass brushing against him ("уже он не видел в ней ничего необыкновенного") (344). A reversal of role follows. Taking advantage of her weakened state, Homa jumps onto her back, rides her, and proceeds to beat her with a log. A different doubt arises—is this really an old woman ("точно ли это старуха?") (344).

When she collapses from exhaustion, he looks her in the eyes. Once again, the eyes, whose predatory gleam initially terrified him, become the locus of verification: "He stood on his feet and looked her in the eyes: dawn was kindling, and the golden domes of the distant Kyiv churches were shining" ("Он стал на ноги и посмотрел ей в очи: рассвет загорался, и блестели золотые главы вдали киевских церквей") (344). The structure of this sentence is particularly revealing. In Russian, a colon links two clauses when the second explains, clarifies, or gives reason for the first, or when it expands a perception verb such as see, look, hear, know, feel, etc. ("Dvoetočie"). Homa looks into the witch's eyes, yet the clarification does not describe her eyes. Instead, it supplies an image of dawn kindling and the domes of churches shining. The syntactic structure redirects the focal point away from the witch and toward the reassertion of a stable world. The perceptual field is

filled with daylight and religious authority. The syntax encodes the realignment. This not only marks a restored sense of order—light and sacred space providing familiar structure—but also suggests that these elements are beneficial for Homa to perceive reality completely and successfully, even when the supernatural is integrated into it. Restored perceptual stability enables the next cognitive operation: the blending of conflicting inputs: “Before him lay a beauty, with a dishevelled luxurious braid, with eyelashes long as arrows” (“Перед ним лежала красавица, с растрепанною роскошною косою, с длинными, как стрелы, ресницами”) (344-346). The understanding this old woman is a witch blends with the understanding this is a beautiful young woman, producing a new emergent space—this beautiful young woman is a witch who transformed into an old woman. While the transformation is never explicitly narrated, the blend is made possible by the culturally entrenched witch frame continuing to structure the interpretation.

As the story progresses and Homa’s knowledge of the young woman grows, this emergent space will become an input for a new blend. Homa learns that she can seemingly transform into a dog, a haystack, a form described as “she was all blue, and her eyes burned like coals” (“она была вся синяя, и глаза горели, как уголь”) (359). Her maleficence, reported by other villagers, is equally diverse. She rode the local kennelman to death, bit a baby’s throat and drank its blood, attacked its mother, drank several buckets of blood from other villagers, cut off the braids of village girls, but also simply approached a hut’s door (in her haystack form) and, at another time, stole someone’s “cap or a pipe” (“шапку или трубку”) (360). Each of these accounts provides a new input space that integrates with the previous blend, producing an increasingly richly structured emergent space in which her identity takes shape. Culturally and narratively, available elements of the witchcraft frame, such as transformation and ride, are reinforced, but their specific instances elaborate the blend. Similarly, her acts present new inputs that can be mapped back onto the generic space of malefic, allowing even apparently innocuous deeds, such as transforming into a haystack and approaching a door, to be interpreted as harmful. Homa and the reader need not be told what other impossible evils she might commit. The blend allows these possibilities to be imagined. Ultimately, the witch is no longer a generic folklore figure but a distinct young woman whose powers and maleficence are varied. Simultaneously, the blend motivates the modification of the initial input, updating Homa’s witch schema with these specific, contextually grounded elements.

That the witch is a young woman is confirmed when we learn how the daughter of a wealthy Cossack captain returned from a walk beaten and near death. Before dying, she requested that Homa read the prayers over her body for three nights. Upon hearing this, Homa "shuddered from some irrational feeling which he himself could not explain to himself" ("вздрогнул по какому-то безотчетному чувству, которого он сам не мог растолковать себе") (348). The likely candidate for this shudder is anxiety—fear's "close ally" (Öhman 709)—a state marked by apprehension about a potential, uncertain future threat, as opposed to fear, whose stimulus is more readily identifiable. This lack of understanding occupies a special place in the fearful human mind. Lovecraft's oft-quoted claim that "the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" remains accurate in many respects; fear of the unknown is one of the most fundamental fears, if not the fundamental one (Carleton 15). The struggle with the unknown, and the psychological burden of confronting it, shapes the reinterpretation of the structuring metonymy-based conceptual metaphor understanding is seeing.[5] Their interplay becomes a central mechanism in generating the tale's horror.

Homa denies knowing why the Cossack captain's daughter chose him, and within the limits of what his mind allows, he is indeed telling the truth. Yet he enters the room where her body lies with "some unaccountable fear" ("с каким-то безотчетным страхом") (Gogol' 354). Once again, there is both an inability and unwillingness to see. The woman's face is physically covered from Homa's sight by her father ("[л]ицо умершей было заслонено от него неутешным отцом") (354), but Homa also avoids looking: "He came closer and … began to read, not paying any attention to the side and not deciding to glance at the face of the dead woman" ("Он приблизился и ... принялся читать, не обращая никакого внимания на сторону и не решаясь взглянуть в лицо умершей") (356). When he finally decides to look, the recognition shakes him. The moment of understanding is aptly narrated through a thematically oriented expression containing the middle verb показалось 'showed itself': "Suddenly something terribly familiar showed itself in her face" ("Вдруг что-то страшно знакомое показалось в лице ее.") (356). Crucially, it is not Homa who is construed as perceiving, instead, something—vague, conventionally non-agentive—reveals itself. His self-agency and ownership again fracture: "Witch! – he cried out not in his own voice, turned his eyes to the side, turned completely pale, and began to read his prayers" ("Ведьма! – вскрикнул он не

своим голосом, отвел глаза в сторону, побледнел весь и стал читать свои молитвы") (356). He instinctively turns his eyes away and, terrified, returns to the one reliable resource—prayers.

In the evening, the dead woman is transferred to the church where Homa is to hold vigil. The church itself is emblematic of God's absence. Literally and figuratively, the house of God has been abandoned. Its first description notes, "[i]t was evident that no service had been conducted there for a long time" (Заметно было, что в ней давно уже не отправлялось никакого служения) (356). Its dilapidation is reiterated through a cluster of expression: the "dilapidated church fence" ("ветхую церковную ограду"), the iconostasis that "already showed deep dilapidation" ("иконостас уже показывал глубокую ветхость"), and the "dilapidated wooden vaults" ("ветхие деревянные своды") (360, 360, 369). By the final night, it is explicitly stated that its dilapidation reveals "how little the owner of the estate cared about God and about his own soul" ("как мало заботился владетель поместья о Боге и о душе своей") (369)—but this merely confirms what has already been made apparent. The condition of the church maps on the condition of the father's and daughter's souls. It is a dark place, "blackened" ("почерневшая") (356) both literally and metaphorically. With its "dark icons" ("темными образами"; "мрачные образа"), corners "shrouded in darkness" ("закутаны мраком"), an iconostasis that "shined only with a few sparks" ("еще блестела одними только искрами"), gilding that has "completely blackened" in places ("[п]озолота ... в другом [месте] вовсе почернела"), and "faces of the saints, utterly darkened, looked out somewhat darkly" ("лики святых, совершенно потемневшие, глядели как-то мрачно") (360). Even when Homa lights all the candles, filling the church with brightness, this darkness cannot be expelled; it merely retreats upward, where "it seemed to have made itself stronger" ("мрак сделался как будто сильнее") (360). The place itself thus functions as a source of horror.

Underlying all these descriptions, and motivating the emblematic significance of the church, is the conceptual metaphor bad is dark. For contemporary Russian speakers, the opposition light–dark correlates with the opposition good–bad, i.e. they associate dark with sinful (Martinek 286). This conception appears to be widespread across cultures![6] The reason likely lies in its metonymic motivation, which Barcelona postulates as metonymy dark for negative states, subsequently conventionalized into the metaphor negative is dark (44). dark, indeed, functions as an image

schema, as it is primarily experienced physically through the absence of light stimuli, yet such perceptual experiences are inseparable from our emotional responses to them. In this respect, fear reigns. Darkness increases the magnitude of the human acoustic startle reflex (Grillon et al. 453). It also evokes fear by providing potential attackers with concealment (Nasar and Jones). Fear of darkness is a prepared fear; one we are genetically predisposed to learn when appropriate environmental stimuli are present (Seligman 580; Dozier 103), as humans are particularly susceptible to fearing what was evolutionary threatening. Nocturnal darkness, in particular, appears to make fear more potent, with circadian rhythm playing an important role in fear processing (Li et al. 46). For diurnal species with poor night vision, night is teeming with dangers of predation (Packer et al. 1). It is these ancient metonymies, consequently conventionalized metaphorically in thought and language, that "Vij" draws upon so powerfully.

In that ironically godless place, Homa holds vigil and faces the witch. As the woman rises from the dead, the witch blend is further elaborated; it becomes an input for a new emergent space, the second input being derived from the frame of death. In this new blended space, the witch becomes undead. Because the witch schema contains the ability to violate natural laws, her ability to transgress death can be understood as originating in that space, both in her preservation of a disturbingly lifelike beauty and in her rising from the dead. The witch schema also contributes her supernatural abilities, such as flying (in a coffin) and summoning demonic creatures, as well as her maleficence, since her primary goal remains to harm Homa. However, death imposes certain constraints. From this space come the signs of bodily decay, her true condition revealed under the influence of prayers: "she turned entirely blue, like a person dead several days"; "dead eyes"; "the corpse again rose from the coffin, blue and greenish"; "dead, greenish eyes" ("вся посинела, как человек, уже несколько дней умерший"; "мертвые глаза"; "[т]руп опять поднялся из него, синий, позеленевший"; "мертвые, позеленевшие глаза") (Gogol' 361-364). The narrative insisted on focusing on the corpse's deterioration, clattering of her/its teeth ("[о]на ударила зубами в зубы; труп опять ударил зубами; [з]убы его страшно ударялись ряд о ряд") (361-369), and repeated attempts to grab Homa over the course of three nights all function as techniques that engage evolved fears of predation and contagion. Yet another, more potent fear underlies the narrative—the fear of sight.

Homa understands that being looked at is dangerous. On the first night, before the witch rises from the dead, it seemed to Homa “as if she watched him with closed eyes” (“как будто бы она глядит на него закрытыми глазами”) (356). The fear intensifies once “she opened her dead eyes” (“открыла мертвые глаза свои”) (361) and when the corpse “fixed its … eyes on him” (“вперил на него … глаза”) (364). Homa’s witch schema, however, particularly his experience of once effective prayers, offers safety, shielding him from the undead witch and the summoned monsters whose sight cannot penetrate the protective circle: “All were looking at him, searching, and could not see him, surrounded by the mysterious circle” (“Все глядели на него, искали и не могли увидеть его, окруженного таинственным кругом”) (370). Certainly, the fear of being seen by a predator is pragmatic, but Homa is also profoundly afraid to look. That looking is scary can likewise be reasonably accounted for if what you are looking at is vile, threatening, and profoundly violating your world schema.

Only the witch and monsters are allowed prolonged looking, marked linguistically by the imperfective unprefixed verb глядеть ‘to look’ (“глядит” / “глядели” in the examples above). Another instance appears in a brief description of a monster: “across the whole wall stood some huge monster, in its tangled hair, as if in a forest; through the web of hair two eyes looked terribly, with the brows slightly raised upward” (“во всю стену стояло какое-то огромное чудовище в своих перепутанных волосах, как в лесу; сквозь сеть волос глядели страшно два глаза, подняв немного вверх брови”) (369). Homa’s relationship with looking is extremely tentative. Each night, he negates it: “Homa did not have the spirit to glance at her” (“Хома не имел духа взглянуть на нее”); “resolving not to lift his eyes from the book and not to pay attention to anything” (“решаясь не подымать с книги своих глаз и не обращать внимания ни на что”) (361, 364). Despite invariable failure, his conflict is manifested through a range of either perfective verbs, e.g. взглянул ‘glanced’, or verbs with a delimitative prefix, e.g. посматривал (искоса) ‘was glancing sideways’ and (со страхом) поглядывал ‘was glancing (with fear)’, sometimes both, e.g. (с робостию) посмотрел ‘looked (with timidness)’; (робко) повел глазами ‘(timidly) moved his eyes’; покосивши (слегка) одним глазом ‘having (slightly) glanced sideways with one eye’ (360–364), standing in stark contrast to the unwavering monstruous gaze. Upon seeing what frightens him, he tends to close his eyes: “somewhat shuddering, he couldn’t help but close his

eyes" ("не мог не зажмурить, несколько вздрогнувши, своих глаз") (360); "[h]is heart was pounding hard the whole time; closing his eyes shut" ("[c]ильно у него билось во все время сердце; зажмурив глаза") (364). Yet the urge to glance remains irresistible.

He turned away and wanted to leave; but out of a strange curiosity, a strange feeling that goes against oneself and never leaves a person, especially in moments of fear, he could not resist, as he was going, taking a look at her and then, feeling the same shudder, looked once more.

Он отворотился и хотел отойти; но по странному любопытству, по странному поперечивающему себе чувству, не оставляющему человека особенно во время страха, он не утерпел, уходя, не взглянуть на нее и потом, ощутивши тот же трепет, взглянул еще раз. (360)

However, there also seems to exist a conception that looking is dangerous, one that is inherently structured so that transgressions are almost inevitable. All characters look in one way or another. Homa's fear and hesitation throughout the vigil demonstrate his intuitive awareness of these constraints, yet by the final night, he performs the ultimate act. Only here does he fully look, as evidenced by the verb глянул 'looked,' enacting a deliberate, committed perception, with incessant negation preceding even the final failure: "Don't look!" whispered some inner voice to the philosopher. He could not resist and looked" ("'Не гляди!' – шепнул какой-то внутренний голос философу. Не вытерпел он и глянул") (370). Rendering himself vulnerable, Homa dies of fear.

It is ultimately the gaze that kills him, both his and Vij's. Vij's subterranean nature, emphasized by a cluster of expressions, is hardly accidental. Vij is described as "some sort of squat, sturdy, knock-kneed man. He was entirely [covered] in black earth. Like sinewy, strong roots, his legs and arms jutted out, buried in earth. … His long eyelids were lowered all the way to the ground" ("какого-то приземистого[7] , дюжего, косолапого человека. Весь был он в черной земле. Как жилистые, крепкие корни, выдавались его засыпанные землею ноги и руки. … Длинные веки опущены были до самой земли") (370; emphasis added). Although successfully revolting, Vij, even the exposure to his gaze, proves to be less of a physical threat than a cognitive one, the peril of insight itself. Namely, extreme, anomalous events can shatter our fundamental world schemata, our beliefs in the benevolence and meaningfulness of the world, self-worth, and relative invulnerability (Janoff-Bulman ch. 1). Homa's experience with the supernatural thus highlights the terror not of

ignorance but of knowledge that destroys one's core assumptions about the world, and his disillusionment is irreparable. His schemata begin to crack upon first contact with the supernatural. Although the comforting frivolity of everyday life offers momentary escape and his religious background affords some protection against evil forces, Homa can hardly evade his doom in a world where churches stand abandoned and dark, and where "the devil is constantly on [his own] lips" (Peace "Viy"). Refusing to confront the horrors of the night merely prolongs the demise. The final verb "looked" underlines the structuring role of conceptual metaphor understanding is seeing, or rather how "Vij" exploits the darker implications of equating seeing with understanding to create horror—one should only look if willing to bear the burden of understanding.

## 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for a cognitive stylistic analysis of a literary work of horror, combined with a biocultural approach. My aim was to explain how fear, as the key emotion of successful horror, is evoked through the usage of language. I have primarily applied conceptual blending theory to the analysis of the novella's language in order to explain how terrifying concepts are constructed—from the witch schema and its elaborations to the revaluation of the understanding is seeing metaphor—while their effectiveness in inducing fear was supported by evidence from various disciplines and sciences concerned with human belief in the supernatural, prepared fears, and the biological and social importance of gaze. I hope to have demonstrated the mechanisms that make "Vij" unambiguously horrifying. Identifying such mechanisms in the text also lays the groundwork for future empirical studies that measure readers' reported or physiological responses.

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[1] Transliteration of Russian follows the ISO 9:1995 standard; quotations from English-language sources retain the form used by the authors.

[2] The analysis focuses on the original Russian work; all translations provided, kept as literal as possible, are my own.

[3] Self-agency is “the sense that I am the initiator or source of the action” (Gallagher 16).

[4] “A verb is middle if it expresses the construal of an event as involving only one participant and is accordingly ‘subject-focused;’ that is, the verb signals that the action is relevant for the subject and focuses on that relevance, to the exclusion of other possible participants” (Moulton 46).

[5] See Deignan and Cameron.

[6] See Yu.

[7] The adjective приземистый contains the root -зем- derived from the noun земля ‘ground/earth’.



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