

# Vladimir Nabokov

## *Lolita*

John Lennard

*“there are no verbal  
obscenities ... in Lolita,  
only the low moans of  
... abused pain.”*

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# Vladimir Nabokov: 'Lolita'

John Lennard

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## A Note on the Author

## Preface

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Literature Insights are designed for students, and in general things are explained rather than knowledge assumed. I have, however, presumed that my reader has read *Lolita*, for it is not possible, within limits of copyright, to give more than a faint flavour of the extraordinary prose Nabokov put at the service of his novel's mesmerising and cruel narrator. Nor can summaries of its plot, however detailed, convey the multitudinous mis/direction that makes up so much of the book's text and texture.

Moreover, Alfred Appel Jr's *Annotated Lolita* is very strongly recommended, rather than any unadorned version, and is often referred to in my text. By all means skip his critical introduction if you will, but not his more than 900 notes, which will save almost all readers from regular trips to a large English dictionary; those lacking fluent and idiomatic French from frequent visits to Larousse; those unfamiliar in precise detail with assorted works by Catullus, Dante, Petrarch, Ronsard, Shakespeare, Sterne, Flaubert, Mérimée, Poe, Carroll, Rimbaud, Proust, and Joyce (among others) from sailing gaily past telling allusions; and those who do not remember a hundred petty details of 1940s–50s popular culture—crooners, cartoons, candy, commercials—from missing the evocative density and exacting accuracy with which high- and low-brow references are seamlessly blended. When Appel's text appeared in 1970 it was the first critically annotated edition of a novel to be published during the author's lifetime, and it remains the single most important and helpful resource for readers of Nabokov's most famous book.

Even before and certainly since Appel there has been an enormous volume of critical and scholarly comment on all of Nabokov's fiction. *Lolita* is, more than most novels, entangled with its own reception, and I invoke the critics where a phrase seems helpful or an insight telling, while the bibliography picks out some highlights. But other-

wise (after the potted biography of Part 1 and overview of Part 2) I have tried to come to *Lolita* afresh in four thematic essays, and to make as best I now can contemporary sense, aesthetic or moral, of its tingling pleasures and bitter pains.

John Lennard  
Gordon Town, Jamaica, WI  
August 2008

## Part 1. Vladimir Nabokov, 1899–1977

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Vladimir Nabokov—whose name is properly pronounced ‘Vluh-DEEM-ear Nah-BAWK-off’—lived a life at once fiercely peculiar and emblematic of the twentieth century. Born in pre-revolutionary Russia to aristocratic privilege, he became a millionaire by inheritance at 17, but less than two years later had to flee what would become the Soviet Union. After taking a degree at Cambridge he lived for 15 years in Berlin, staying there even after the accidental assassination of his father in 1922, until the threat of Nazism forced him with his Jewish wife first to France, in 1937, and then to the US, in 1940. He had, as ‘V. Sirin’, become one of the great Russian-language writers of the century, with nine novels and what would later constitute several volumes of short stories written and (mostly) published—but after his third forced emigration had to abandon his ‘untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue’ for what he called, only half-jokingly, ‘a second-rate brand of English’.<sup>1</sup> In that expedient English he produced another eight novels, volumes of stories both new and in his own translation (assisted by his wife and son), as well as an exceptional autobiography in several versions, a wildly irregular study of Gogol, poems, chess problems, scientific papers (including one of astonishing percipience), and translations from the Russian of others, including his great, four-volume *Eugene Onegin*. After two decades of university teaching to support himself and his family, one of those novels—*Lolita*—made him sufficient money to quit academia and return to Europe, where he settled in Montreux, living for the last 16 years of his life in the faded grandeur of a Swiss hotel.

The fierce peculiarity is plain. Few writers become outstanding masters of one language, let alone two, and especially two as dis-

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1 Vladimir Nabokov, ‘On a Book Entitled *Lolita*’, in *The Annotated Lolita* (1970; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1991; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. 316–17.

tinct in vocabulary, grammar, idiom, and alphabet as Russian and English; yet at least two of the Russian novels—*Zashchita Lutzhina* (*The [Lutzhin] Defence*), 1930, and *Dar* (*The Gift*), written in 1937–8, published in 1952—are by most accounts masterpieces, as are three of the English ones, *Lolita* (1955), *Pale Fire* (1962), and *Ada* (1969). Fewer still can claim major contributions to art and science; yet beyond (and behind) Nabokov's extraordinary literature are his papers on Lepidoptera, above all 'Notes on Neotropical Plebejinae' (1945), which have led to the naming of a section, an infratribe, several genera, and many species of butterflies after him or characters in his art. And very few indeed, having inherited and lost one fortune, make another for themselves, or, having done so, use it largely to enable long-term hotel residence in a small sub-alpine town.

But the emblematicism is also apparent, for Nabokov fled both Lenin's Bolsheviks and Hitler's Nazis, and from the age of 18 lived in unremitting exile. A largely apolitical writer, he suffered lifelong Soviet censorship of all his work, depriving him of a principal audience. Blissfully married to Véra Elseevna for more than 50 years (despite at least one torrid affair), he received worldwide legal and critical attention regarding *Lolita*, a novel about what would now be called paedophilia, that places him with Joyce and Lawrence as a silence-breaking pioneer of the hitherto unspeakable among bodily desires and functions. His life describes great circles, from wealth to wealth via extended, emaciating poverty, and from European exile to European exile, via a hospitable, enriching, but often uncomprehending United States. He wrote with persistent, pervasive nostalgia of a world he had known only intermittently in childhood, the summer birch forests of north-western Russia, and almost always about himself, but his two most influential works concern subjects of which he had no personal experience whatever—the merciless debauchment by a sick adult of a girl well under legally marriageable age and Blue butterflies of the tropical New World.

Whether one considers him as exile, litterateur, scientist, nostalgic, or self-reflexive and highly paradoxical artist, Nabokov induces delight, puzzlement, and indignation in equal measure. As Humbert Humbert would have it, having warned his readers that 'You can

always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style’:

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Russia, 1899–1919

Until 1918, when Lenin changed things, Russia used the old Julian calendar, which before 1900 was 12 days behind the Gregorian calendar used elsewhere, and after 1900 13 days behind—so Nabokov was born on the 10<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, or 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, 1899, depending, but in any case in what was then (as it now is again) St Petersburg.<sup>2</sup> His father, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov (1870–1922), was an aristocratic politician and jurist, a founder of the Constitutional Democrats, briefly a Minister of Justice, a notable opponent of Russia’s pervasive anti-semitism, and a liberal polymath with a personal library of more than 10,000 volumes who also caught and collected butterflies. His mother, Elena Ivanovna, née Rukavishnikov (1876–1939), who married V. D. Nabokov in 1897, was a well-born heiress to a mercantile fortune, equally liberal and polylingual though far less political, and a knowledgeable natural historian who collected mushrooms. Vladimir was their eldest and favourite child, and adored them both, but was less close to his four younger siblings, with whom his contact in later life was limited by more than physical distance.<sup>3</sup>

Nabokov, like most children of his class at that time, was educated at home by tutors until he was almost a teenager; the quality of his mind is perhaps best indicated by the datum that well before turning 16 he had ‘read or re-read all Tolstoy in Russian, all Shakespeare in English, and all Flaubert in French’. He also ‘relished especially the works of Wells, Poe, Browning, Keats, [...] Verlaine, Rimbaud,

1 *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 9 (Pt 1, ch. 1).

2 The true date was the 10<sup>th</sup> (Old Style) or the 22<sup>nd</sup> (New Style), but confusion about the change in 1900 generated the 23<sup>rd</sup>, which Nabokov preferred as it was also Shakespeare’s birthday.

3 His siblings were Sergey (1900–45), Olga (1903–78), Elena (1906–2000), and Kiril (1911–64).