

Tulane University  
Russian 348  
*Vladimir Nabokov (in English)*

George Cummins, Germanic and Slavic Studies

Spring, 2009

Newcomb Hall 305B

MWF 2:00-2:50

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office hour: tba, watch my website

**1. Introduction.** 2008 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Putnam edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, originally published by the infamous Olympia Press in Paris in 1955. This book secured the international fame of a writer then largely unknown in America, whose considerable Russian books of poetry, short stories and novels were read only in émigré circles. Today Nabokov is highly regarded even in a post-Soviet Russia he could not have imagined. In this course the student confronts *Lolita* fifty years after, in the context of *Pnin* and selected Russian novels, including *The Gift* and *The Defense*.

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) was born to a St. Petersburg family of wealth and political prominence who fled Russia in 1919. He studied literature at Trinity College, Cambridge, and after his father was assassinated in 1923 by a rightist fanatic, he maintained residence as a Russian émigré in Berlin, where he wrote poetry and short stories for the Russian periodical *The Rudder*. Throughout the 20's and 30's he wrote fiction and poetry in Russian while supporting himself by giving lessons in languages, tennis, and boxing. In 1937 he and his wife and son fled Berlin for Paris, where *The Gift* appeared serially, marking the apex of his Russian period.

In 1940 the Nabokovs moved to the United States, where Nabokov taught at Wellesley and then Cornell University while reinventing himself as an English-language writer and studying butterfly genitalia at Harvard's Fogg Museum. Rejected by the Harvard Slavic Department on the objection of Roman Jakobson ("Would we invite an elephant to teach zoology?"), he continued to teach literature at Cornell while publishing his most famous American works, *Lolita* (1955, 1958) and *Pnin* (1953-1955).

The astounding success of *Lolita* earned him financial independence — "I am kept by a little girl named Lolita" — and in 1960 he moved to Montreux, Switzerland, where, though by now an American citizen, he lived until his death in 1977, publishing *Pale Fire* (1962), *Commentaries to Eugene Onegin* (1964), and his last major work, *Ada* (1969).

Nabokov is the most remarkable example of bilingualism in literature, and the sole example of a Russian twentieth-century émigré writer who reached the pinnacle of success in his adopted

language. He is a master of form who, while never abandoning the valued heritage of his past, disdained to address the atrocities of the Soviet regime, as did so many of his grim compatriots. Instead he spoke against tyranny in all its political guises through the masks of literary device, as in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*.

## 2.1 Course Description.

Russian 348 presents a selection of Nabokov's Russian and American novels: *The Defense*, *Despair*, *The Gift*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Lolita*. We will study the émigré consciousness and its plight, condemned to eternal exile in a foreign land — by extension this is the theme of all his novels, the human consciousness imprisoned in time, for whom the only egress lies in the eternity of art. This extended theme is best to be read in *Lolita*, outwardly the grotesque story of a pathetic sexual deviant; the specifics of the Russian émigré situation are displayed, to varying degrees, in the other four books. We will look back at the Russian literary heritage from which Nabokov emerged (Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and the intelligentsia of the 1860's, early twentieth-century poetry and fiction).

The theme of human consciousness in Nabokov entails his unique notions of time, fate, and eternity, and his understanding of the bases of human ethical responsibility and moral choice of action in the world. The literary underpinning of these ideas is complex and very deliberately fabricated, relying on the interplay of the grotesque and the noble, of humor and pathos, replete with verbal games and suggestive, allusive, stylized imagery, with 'traps' set for the reader, 'false bottoms' and 'culs-de-sac'. Nabokov likens the experience of reading to a duel between the author and the reader. Fortunately, we need not trace all the allusions or solve all the problems; the poetic language of the novels is its own reward and the careful attention of a naive first-time reader is richly rewarded, his dignity intact. We will look at humor and parody in these works, both in language games and the play of literary forms (the narrator as personality; the confessional mode in *Lolita*, the biography form in *The Gift*). We will study two filmic versions of *Lolita* and examine cinematic elements inherent to the novel. We will study the visual components of his work.

## 2.2 Objectives

**This course will introduce students to the art of a leading twentieth-century Russian-American novelist in the context of his linguistic, historical, and cultural backgrounds, and to three prominent examples of movies based on his novels. In close readings and formal analysis of aesthetic and moral themes, narrative methodology, cultural allusion and referentiality, students will come to know the Nabokovian vision, vocabulary, and understanding of the world. In-class student presentations and group discussions will help them discover for themselves the workings of imagination in film and narrative artifice. Background introductions from the instructor will orient Nabokov in Russian and American literary and cultural tradition.**

## 2.3 Program Outcomes

**The catastrophes of the twentieth-century deflect the arc of psychological realism of**

**Tolstoy and Chekhov into a radically new spiral of conceptualization of history and multi-national experience. The student of *Nabokov* as an undergraduate Russian Studies concentrator will be able to**

- (1) identify the artistic strategies for expression of this émigré artist in the wider cultural and global context of the twentieth century**
- (2) describe and critically analyze Nabokov's theory of time and human experience in the larger Russian literary and philosophical context**
- (3) conceptualize his development of the art of narrative, of representation of character and the realities of nature**
- (4) evaluate his ethical stance in relation to those of other Russian artists**
- (5) demonstrate with apt examples the "filmic feel" in his fiction, to discuss the "vision" of film art that attracted directors Kubrick, Lyne, and Fassbinder, and to evaluate and critically analyze their approaches to adaptation of fiction in movies.**

#### **2.4 Mission Statement**

**The humanities at Tulane are dedicated to the study of**

- (1) human development and self-expression in culture, art, language, history and modes of thought**
- (2) modes of human self-realization and self-reflection. *Nabokov* guides the student to a confrontation with these two central issues.**

#### **3.1.0 Methodology and Assignments.**

**3.2** Weekly reading assignments (see **Work Schedule** below) average 100-150 pages, to be completed by the first meeting of the week. I will begin discussion with a short background lecture to each work, to be followed by class discussion. The second and third meetings of each week will be devoted to seminar-style presentation and discussion of assigned topics, with brief (five- to ten-minute) presentations followed by questions and open discussion. Each student will make three or four prepared individual presentations in the course of our study. At the conclusion of our work on each book we will write a brief (30-minute) essay-style quiz. We will also have complete in-class viewing of both movie versions of *Lolita*, and also of Fassbinder's *Despair*.

#### **3.3 Outcome**

**Active reading is always followed by critical analysis of a problem, supported by textual evidence and analysis. The student learns to read reactively, critically, and imaginatively, and to present effective oral arguments. Work may be done in collaboration or individually; each short report is followed by questions from the class which have been assigned and considered beforehand at home. Students seek to describe and define Nabokov's poetics, his fictional vocabulary and devices. Topics extend beyond the narrowly**

**aesthetic and include ethics, treatment of women, national and racial groups by Nabokovian narrators, his views of history and philosophy as revealed in his texts.**

**3.4** Students are asked to develop one of the in-class presentations described above into a paper (5-7 pages) due at mid-term, and to write a second paper (5-7 pages) for submission at the end of the course. Detailed directions on topic and content will be discussed in class. There will be no final examination in this course.

Papers should be typed and submitted in hard copy by the due date. They need not incorporate secondary critical sources, but if they do, references to internet encyclopedias and reviews should be excluded. (Further details follow in class.) Please double-space, with page numbers on each sheet and with appropriate 1-inch margins and 12-point font. Do not use a cover sheet; include your name and email address on your first page. Cultivate careful re-reading and revision; if you wish, you may submit a re-write incorporating my suggestions to your first draft on either or both of your papers.

### **3.5 Outcome**

**This exercise allows the student to develop an idea already *in nuce* in a previous oral presentation into a short academic essay involving (1) comparative research (2) critical analysis (3) development and evaluation of data, and (4) practice in the art of revision and rewriting. The student will learn to value writing persuasively, coherently and gracefully. We will review the conventions governing the citation and the commentary of scholars and strategies for making a compelling argument.**

#### **Tools of the Course.**

The following will be available at the Tulane bookstore:

*Lolita*, Penguin Putnam (Everyman Library).

*The Gift*, Vintage International.

*Pnin*, Borzoi Books, Knopf, or Vintage.

*The Defense*, Vintage International (or other).

*Despair*, Vintage International (or other).

“Spring in Fialta,” to be sent to you by email pdf

We will view the following films, in class and complete:

*Lolita*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, 1962.

*Lolita*, directed by Adrian Lyne, 1997.

*Despair*, directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

#### **Supplementary Readings.**

Recommended other books by Nabokov include *Nikolai Gogol*, *Pale Fire*, *Ada*, *Strong Opinions*,

*Poems and Problems, Speak, Memory, A Screenplay for Lolita, Commentaries to Eugene Onegin, Collected Short Stories.* These as well as critical secondary sources may be consulted for papers or presentations.

**Attendance.** Regular and punctual attendance is required; attendance will be taken at the beginning of class. If you have more than four unexplained absences over the term, your grade will be lowered by one point (A to A-, B+ to B) for each additional class you miss. Excessive absence is grounds for failing the course. If you are absent from class with or without an excuse, you are responsible for material discussed during your absence.

### **Honor Code.**

All Tulane students are required to behave according to the rules of the Code, which states: “In all work submitted for academic credit, students are expected to represent themselves honestly. The presence of a student’s name on any work submitted in completion of an academic assignment is considered to be an assurance [better: *pledge*] that the work and ideas are the result of the student’s own intellectual effort, stated in her or his [better than *their*, but the order ‘her or his’ is too deep and sycophantic a bow to p.c.; nothing is as good as *his*] own words, and produced independently, unless clear and explicit acknowledgment of the sources of the work and ideas is included. This principle applies to papers, tests, homework assignments, artistic productions, laboratory assignments, computer programs, and other assignments. [This sounds too much like a poorly worded legal contract or warning on prescription medications; contrast the following glorious phrasing, from my childhood: “*This broadcast is the property of the Chicago National League Ball Club, and any reproduction, retransmission or other use of the pictures, descriptions, and [can’t recall the third term here — can anyone help me? events?]*...without the express written consent of the Chicago National League Ball Club is prohibited.” That text, though incompletely resurrected from fifty years in past memory, has an inherent nobility. Note *express*, which might well stand in place of the weak *clear* above; in that case, delete *explicit* and insert *unambiguous*.] Students are expected [?] to report to the instructor or associate dean any observed violations of the Honor Code.” For complete citation, see [www.tulane.edu/~jrusher/dept/Honor.Code.html](http://www.tulane.edu/~jrusher/dept/Honor.Code.html).

### **Grading.**

Participation, attendance, workshops, oral presentations: 25%

Quizzes: 25%

Paper one: 25%

Paper two: 25%

**Grading will be based on *content* (development and power of ideas, originality), *structure* (focus, cohesion, summation), *faithfulness and attention to the Nabokovian text* (more in class), and *style* (grace, power and tone of your personal voice, felicity of expression).**

Scale:

100-93	A	76-72	C
92-89	A-	71-69	C-
88-86	B+	68-67	D+
85-82	B	66-62	D
81-79	B-	61-58	D-
78-77	C+	57-x	F

**Disabilities.** If you have a disability, please bring documentation to the instructor the first week of the course and we will discuss how to accommodate you.

### **Schedule of Work.**

Reading and writing assignments are to be completed by the beginning of class. This schedule is subject to change. Please check my website when so advised.

Regular oral presentations and seminar-style discussion will be scheduled each week, with detailed topics to be discussed in class.

Topics and notations for the work are only adumbrations and suggestions; more will follow.

### **Week One.**

Introduction to Nabokov. Close study of the pdf text of the short story “Spring in Fialta” (available also in *The Short Stories of Nabokov*, Knopf, 1995). Nabokov’s narrators, their styles, mannerisms, self-understanding and apologies of their own personal pasts. The notion of ‘style’ and ‘motif’ in Nabokov. The figure of the Russian émigré. Our first study of the problem of art and the artist.

### **Week Two.**

*Despair*. This is a Berlin-period Russian novel (1934), with another sort of ‘unreliable’ narrator. The notion of the ‘madman’ narrator-artist, his personality (Gogol; Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* and *The Double*; Raskolnikov as an artist.). Viewing of Fassbinder’s film *Despair* and discussion of cinematic technique. Humor and grotesque. Read the book through at one sitting.

No quiz this week, or ever, on *Despair*; the reading is rather longer than will be usual (160-pp.); read rapidly, marking points you want to discuss later.

### **Week Three.**

*Lolita*. Part 1, Foreword and Chapters 1-22. The apotheosis of the Nabokovian narrator. *This is it*, and I am places this early on so that you can savor it before you are tired with the semester. Love, death, and matters of style. Consciousness and solipsism. Parody. Game theory, plot theory. The theater. Freudian analysis. Humor and desperation. Read carefully (about 100 pp.)

### **Quiz I.**

**Week Four.**

*Lolita*, Part I, Chapters 23-33, and Part II, Chapters 1-18. Travel; Beardsley College, Lolita lost, Lolita found. The morality of *Lolita*.

**Week Five.**

*Lolita*. Part II, Chapters 19-36 and “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*.” Conclusion. Viewing of Stanley Kubrick’s *Lolita* and discussion.

**Quiz II.**

**Week Six.**

*The Defense*, chapters 1-8. This is another Berlin-period Russian novel, but this time without an ‘I’-narrator. Escape into aesthetics; art and chess. Luzhin’s humanity and pathos. The metonymic detail; time sequences. Emblems of transcendency, emblems of the past.

**Week Seven.**

*The Defense*, chapters 9-14.

**Quiz III.**

**Week Eight.**

In the next two weeks we focus on the figure of the Russian émigré, one presented by a remote narrator in *Pnin*, the other by an omniscient sympathetic artistic consciousness, *The Gift*.

*Pnin*. The Russian intellectual in America. Struggle with language and with physical objects. The pain and glories of the past; love lost, talismans of art. The power of humor. College life in upstate New York, 1950’s.

**First Paper due (see above).**

**Week Nine.**

*Pnin* (completion).

**Quiz IV.**

**Week Ten.**

*The Gift*, Chapters 1-3. A Russian novel of the mid-1930’s, written mostly in Berlin and published serially in Paris. Tribute to Gogol (*Dead Souls*, “The Overcoat”) and Pushkin (especially *Eugene Onegin*). The ‘fatidic event’ motif we recognized in *Lolita*. The story within a story: Jasha Chernyshevsky’s suicide. Godunov’s book *Poems*. Chapter two: Godunov’s ‘biography’ of his father.

**Week Eleven.**

*The Gift*, Chapters 3-5. Zina appears. The idea for the biography of Chernyshevsky (4). Parody, biography, autobiography, history, theory of art and genre.

**Quiz V.**

**Week Twelve.**

*Lolita* revisited. Final themes of the course revisited. Viewing of Lyne's *Lolita*.

**Second Paper due on the day of the scheduled final examination.**