

# Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature and the Shaping of *Lolita*<sup>1</sup>

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The extent to which *Lolita*, well known as Nabokov's most "American" novel, sinks deep roots into Russian tradition frequently escapes readers' attention. Showcasing the thorough knowledge of American culture that Nabokov acquired during his years of residence in the United States, *Lolita* cemented his success as an American writer and catapulted him to international fame. In the period following its publication (first in France in 1955 and then in the US in 1958), Nabokov further emphasized a strong link to the US in interviews and autobiographical writings. He declared in 1964, for example, that "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany. I came to America in 1940 and decided to become an American citizen, and make America my home" (*Strong Opinions* 26). Certainly, Nabokov also attempted to stimulate an American audience's appreciation of Russian literary icons through translation and teaching. Less obvious are the traces of Russian tradition in his literary works, however, although even while reinventing himself as an American writer, Nabokov continued to re-elaborate elements from the Russian texts that he knew well, echoing and often parodying antecedent images, bits of plot, literary personages, and narrative structures. The densely allusive *Lolita*, which, like many other works by Nabokov, has been described as postmodern for its numerous references to and sustained parallels with prior literary texts, is a case in point.<sup>2</sup>

A number of scholars have commented on Nabokov's relationships (avowed and actual) with his literary predecessors, often following the lead of the preferences and critiques contained in his memoirs and in *Lectures on Russian Literature*. Nabokov's explicit commentary is not always particularly useful in determining which authors most strongly influenced his own writing, however,

and his *Lectures* features authors chosen largely for other reasons, namely that they were relatively readable, teachable, and also available in English translation. In these, Nabokov praises Gogol, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, gives Turgenev a mixed review, and largely lambasts Dostoevsky and Gorky—though Dostoevsky’s influence on him is arguably the greatest of the lot. What interested and influenced Nabokov as a writer must be distinguished from his deliberate pronouncements and pedagogical list making. Indeed, *Lectures on Russian Literature* omits Pushkin and Lermontov, two major nineteenth-century figures who were also significant for Nabokov’s writing and whom he translated into English himself (*Eugene Onegin*, *A Hero of Our Time*). Moreover, Nabokov enthusiastically practiced intertextual citation as an artistic method and when he turns, for example, to the “great Russian prose writers of the nineteenth century [...], he] tends to appropriate their plots, characters, [and] narrative techniques” (Dolinin, “Nabokov” 60).<sup>3</sup> A more accurate accounting of relevant Russian influences and subtexts would include a much wider array of poets and prose writers ranging over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This article aims to help readers contextualize *Lolita* in nineteenth-century Russian literary tradition by outlining some of the multiple intertextual connections between that novel and its classic predecessors, considering specifically those authors and works whose themes, paradigms, and personages are relatively well-known—over and above their resonance in *Lolita*—and are especially likely to be familiar to students. This inquiry illuminates a part of Nabokov’s own cultural heritage, while making several classic authors and texts more relevant for readers of *Lolita*, and also engaging students of nineteenth-century Russian literature with issues of that tradition’s continuity into the next century. Particular attention will be paid to how Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert reflects and refracts the narrators and protagonists in Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (1823–1831), Gogol’s “Diary of a Madman” (1835), Lermontov’s “The Demon” (1829–1839), Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866), and Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889).<sup>4</sup>

As will become clear, the dubious psychological state of *Lolita*'s protagonist, his perverse sexual desires, the techniques by which his character and crimes are revealed to the reader, and also the entanglement of identity involving author, authorial persona, and other literary personages may all be linked to Russian antecedents.

### ***Lolita and Eugene Onegin***

Since Nabokov's writing of *Lolita* overlapped for several years with his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, it is not too surprising that *Lolita*'s plot and narrative structure reflect aspects of Pushkin's. Priscilla Meyer has even convincingly argued that "*Lolita* is a free translation of *Onegin*," reworking various details from its storyline as well as Pushkin's complex interplay between literary personages and authorial persona ("Nabokov's *Lolita*" 183).

In the original narrative poem, Onegin is an arrogant young nobleman, bored with his idle Petersburg routine (the theater, carousing with friends, etc.), who manages to extricate himself when an uncle dies and leaves him a country estate. In that new setting, Onegin makes the acquaintance of Lensky, a well-meaning, though mediocre poet; Lensky's fiancée, Olga; and her sister, Tatiana. Steeped in the reading of novels, the romantically inclined Tatiana quickly falls in love with the sophisticated newcomer and pours out her heart to Onegin in an effusive letter, but he does not reciprocate, characterizing her outburst as the product of childish fancy. At Tatiana's name-day party, an irritable Onegin pointedly flirts with Olga, who responds in kind, and Lensky, spurned, challenges his traitorous friend to a duel. Onegin kills Lensky, then goes away, returning only several years later to Petersburg, where he meets at a ball the lovely young wife of an acquaintance who is none other than Tatiana herself, now a distinguished and elegant lady. This time, it is Onegin who falls in love and is rejected; while he does extract an admission from Tatiana that she still loves him, she also declares "I have been given to another and will remain faithful to him forever."

Faint echoes of *Onegin* reverberate in various details of *Lolita*'s plot, such as Humbert's departure from Europe for America at the invitation of a rich uncle in order to become his associate and heir,

or Tatiana's romantic longings, which recall those of the less literate Lolita: her reverence for the celebrities of stage and screen, her readiness to fall for Humbert because of his physical resemblance to a movie star, and her adoption with him of the pseudo-amorous behaviors that she has seen in the theater. In Nabokov's novel, of course, unrequited passion belongs not to Lolita, but to the Oneginish Humbert—and he is not simply rejected by Lolita, but has never been loved by her. Unreciprocated affection also belongs to Lolita's mother Charlotte, whose comically inappropriate missive to Humbert parodies Tatiana's letter to Onegin.<sup>5</sup> Charlotte's rivalry with her own daughter for Humbert's affections loosely parallels the relationship between Tatiana and Olga, while elements of Humbert's rivalry with Quilty suggest Onegin's ambivalent literary and affective relationship with Lensky. If the supercilious and well-read Onegin makes quite clear that his own artistic standards exceed what Lensky's scant poetic abilities can satisfy, Humbert, a literary scholar, exhibits parallel disdain for Quilty, ignoring his existence for much of the novel, together with the proliferation of tawdry commercial dramas that have made Quilty famous.

Both Pushkin and Nabokov play with a resemblance between the narratorial voice and their own, drawing parallels and contrasts between the finite, textual existence of the narrator and the scope of the widely ranging omniscient author. The complicated relationship in Pushkin between Onegin and “the poet” who tells his tale is projected in *Lolita* onto the internal split that characterizes Nabokov's bifurcated and possibly even schizophrenic protagonist, divided as he is between a self that narrates (the author of his confession) and a self that is narrated (its hero). *Lolita* even suggests that Humbert invents many of the personages with whom he claims to interact. As Martin Green puts it, “Humbert first invents Quilty to take on the worst of his own guilt, and then kills him, to purge himself symbolically” (17); he also invents John Ray, the ostensible author of the book's foreword, and others so that by the end of the book, Humbert's identity has been dispersed, his “original entity [...] split up, and the parts distributed among different actors” (17). Thus, though both Onegin and Humbert ultimately “kill” their

rivals, neither thereby overcomes the sense of dissatisfaction that permeates his own empty life. Their duels “are farcical because of the parodic purpose of the victims,” Meyer notes, Lensky and Quilty “represent the Bad Writer” and serve as alter egos for protagonists and authorial personae, aspects of selves “that they want to cast off” (“Teaching *Lolita*” 95).

### ***Lolita* and “Diary of a Madman”**

Gogol, to whom Nabokov dedicated an entire critical monograph (*Nikolai Gogol*), shares several general stylistic features with Nabokov: both writers delight in digressions, for example, and in the use of detail for its own sake. Indeed, not all of the seeming clues that lace Nabokov’s novels are importantly related to the plot and many would-be hints lead nowhere, reminding us that the text is, in fact, an intricate game created by a clever, omniscient author. Nabokov also shares with Gogol an interest in writing from the perspective of narrators who are unreliable and possibly insane and in thereby probing the limits of narrative credibility and of narrative’s very significance.

One of *Lolita*’s more obvious predecessors in this vein is Gogol’s well-known “Diary of a Madman,” similarly styled as the first-person account of a narrator who is mentally disturbed.<sup>6</sup> Apart from being referenced in the title, the narrator’s lunacy is not obvious at the beginning of Gogol’s tale, but becomes evident gradually until, in the last diary entries, the Madman has been carted off to a mental asylum. Although the sources and character of his malaise differ from Humbert’s, he, too, is impassioned, driven to communicate, and clearly doomed. The narrative technique of the diary—like that of the confession—helps to render the protagonist to some degree sympathetic by offering a look “inside his head” and involving the reader in his gradual psychological disintegration. Gogol’s Madman would appear to be more sincere than Humbert, which is to say that his attempts to manipulate his text to make a particular impression on his audience are less extensive and more transparent, but we do perceive the obsessive and clearly deluded quality of his testimony and that his narration of events defensively