

Alexander Moudrov

**NABOKOV AND THE PURITANS:
ECHOES OF EARLY AMERICAN CRIME
LITERATURE IN *LOLITA***

Vladimir Nabokov claimed to be “as American as April in Arizona,” but his status as a distinctly American writer has always been debatable. He did not move to the United States until he was forty, and then permanently relocated to Switzerland two decades later. When I moved to New York from St. Petersburg in the mid-1990s, I was very surprised to find him included in an anthology of American literature for one of the first courses I took as an undergraduate. While that anthology dutifully mentioned Nabokov’s apparently weak ties to the United States, it made the case that he was indeed an American writer because of his ability to create “marvelously incisive scenes from academic life as well as the look and feel of lawns, houses, and streets of American small towns.”¹ I might have also been reminded that Nabokov influenced numerous writers in his adopted country, which justified his place in the American literary canon. But could we find parallels between his works and those of his American predecessors? Did he respond to past literary trends in America, which would allow us to discuss his work in relation to early American literature?

¹ Baym et al., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 2: 1785.

Nabokov, for his part, sought to give the impression that he was an admirer of certain familiar American literary figures, but his appreciation for them notably lacked enthusiasm. “When I was young I liked Poe,” he remarked in a 1966 interview, “and I still love Melville.... My feelings toward [Henry] James are rather complicated.... Hawthorne is a splendid writer. Emerson’s poetry is delightful.”² On another occasion, when he was again asked about his views on American literature, he expressed what appears to be a lukewarm appreciation for Salinger and Updike, called Hemingway a writer for boys, and ignored everyone else.³ Such statements stand in contrast to those in which he enthusiastically—and at length—spoke of such European writers as Joyce, Flaubert, and Tolstoy. It is not surprising that even when he explicitly characterized himself as “an American writer,” he immediately pointed out his disconnection from American literary culture by emphasizing his European roots: “I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany.”⁴ Notably, Nabokov made this statement a few years after he had already moved to Switzerland.

Lolita, Nabokov’s most famous American novel, and ironically the one that earned him enough money to allow him to relocate from the United States, does not immediately resonate with any American literary trends. The reader is stunned by the book’s unforgettable images of postwar America and its author’s literary virtuosity, but as Nabokov was actually careful to point out, its subject was not inspired by anything in American culture. He wrote on more than one occasion that the idea for *Lolita* developed “a long time ago” in Paris.⁵ It was indeed in France where Nabokov composed—but left unpublished for decades—his novella *The Enchanter* (*Volshebnik*, 1939), which he described later as “a kind of pre-*Lolita*.”⁶ The subject was on Nabokov’s mind even earlier. *The Gift* (*Dar*, 1935–37) includes a passage in which a character proposes writing a novel that bears many similarities to *Lolita*. We can also trace this subject to his poem “Lilith” (“Lilit”), composed sometime in the early 1930s. Beyond Nabokov’s own writing, the novel’s subject echoes certain controversial European works, notably the Marquis de Sade’s *Eugenie de Franval* (1788), a novella about a French aristocrat’s experiment of subjecting his daughter to his

² Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 64.

³ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ Nabokov, *The Enchanter*, 15.

radical ideas and sexual advances (while denigrating his wife). A lasting trend for how to approach the novel was set by Alfred Appel Jr.'s well-known introduction to *Lolita*, which seems to assert Nabokov's Europeanness, discussing the book almost solely in relation to European precedents (from Boccaccio to Robbe-Grillet), and only mentioning a few early American authors as if in passing.

Understandably, scholars rarely analyze *Lolita* in relation to early American literature beyond the obvious references to Poe's poem "Annabel Lee." One notable exception is Elizabeth Freeman's essay "Honeymoon with a Stranger: Pedophilic Picaresque from Poe to Nabokov," in which she uncovers what she calls an "incestuous literary kinship web" that connects Nabokov to not only Poe but also Hawthorne and Mayne Reid.⁷ In many other cases, those who study Nabokov's relation to his adopted country tend to emphasize his interest in contemporary American culture rather than its literary past. Brian Boyd's biography of the writer meticulously reconstructs Nabokov's life in the United States, but covers little of his interest in American history and literature. Alfred Appel Jr. praised Nabokov as a keen observer of postwar American culture. Marianne Sinclair, for her part, makes the case in *Hollywood Lolita: The Nymphette Syndrome in the Movies* (1986) that the novel resonated with Americans' unique concerns about the apparent exploitation of children in Hollywood, a bastion of popular culture. More recently, I have written about Nabokov's familiarity with the didactic films that became popular in the US in the 1950s.⁸ In another example, Sarah Weinman's *The Real Lolita: The Kidnapping of Sally Horner and the Novel That Scandalized the World* (2018) reminds us of Nabokov's close attention to contemporary events by investigating how a real-life crime may have influenced his novel.

This essay is an attempt to recognize *Lolita*'s American literary roots by looking beyond its contemporary cultural context. I will revisit the debate about Nabokov's place in American literature by discussing some apparent structural and thematic similarities between the novel and the early American crime literature popularized in British America by the Puritans, whose writings can be—and certainly were in the 1950s—considered foundational in American culture. As I will explain, early American crime writers eagerly turned to provocative topics for ostensibly

⁷ Freeman, "Honeymoon with a Stranger," 865.

⁸ Moudrov, "The Dangerous Stranger."

legitimate purposes. As early as the seventeenth century, however, that literary trend could not but provoke a contentious and enduring debate over the question Nabokov also faced in writing and publishing *Lolita*: under what circumstances and how can one write about controversial crimes without being accused of pandering to readers' voyeuristic proclivities? This question forms a unique component of American crime literature from the colonial period to the present, and the fact that Nabokov was aware of it suggests his familiarity with distinctly American literary conventions.

Of particular interest in this respect is *Lolita's* structure, which consists of three integral parts: John Ray Jr.'s didactic foreword, Humbert Humbert's confession, and Nabokov's essay "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*." More often than not, the novel's structure is viewed as a reflection of Nabokov's habit for literary gamesmanship, which would find its apotheosis in the form of *Pale Fire*. Significantly, however, *Lolita's* arrangement mirrors the structure of early American punishment reports, execution sermons, and so-called *dying speeches* that promoted the public's interest in the subject of crime and helped establish some enduring conventions in American literature.

Colonial Puritan literature is remarkable for its appreciation of provocative topics, including sex crimes. William Bradford (1590–1657), a prolific diarist and one of the leading political figures in seventeenth-century New England, explained that colonists did not avoid talking about crime, but dutifully brought each manifestation of vice "into the light, and set it in the plain field, or rather on a hill, [and] made conspicuous to the view of all."⁹ What this meant in practical terms was that those guilty of such crimes as adultery, sodomy, "buggery," and "other things fearful to name" were punished publicly so that their cases could be "marveled at" as examples of undesirable behavior potentially fatal to the young colony.¹⁰ Many modern readers are familiar with this practice from Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), whose heroine is forced to wear a distinct sign to remind colonists of her crime. Variations of this practice were actually common in seventeenth-century New England, where routine public shaming of culprits helped promote people's interest in crime and eventually led to the proliferation of various forms of crime literature.

⁹ Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation*, 386; spelling has been modernized.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 385.

In colonial New England, the executions of people convicted of particularly despicable crimes were often accompanied by sermons. These works, which literary historian Daniel A. Cohen has characterized as one of the earliest distinctly American literary genres, inspired a lasting trend of exploiting crime cases for public edification and laid the foundation of what can be described as the didactic tradition of sensationalism. This genre is marked by the use of notably disturbing crimes as occasions for moralizing¹¹; the earliest example is Samuel Danforth's sermon *The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into; Upon Occasion of the Arraignment and Condemnation of Benjamin Goad, for His Prodigious Villany* (1674). Delivered at the execution of a young man for bestiality, the sermon exhibits key characteristics of didactic sensationalism. Most importantly, *The Cry of Sodom* was a response to what Danforth pointedly described as an "astoundingly strange" crime; colonists were aware of many cases of what they considered inappropriate sexual behavior, but bestiality had a shock value other crimes did not.¹² Like many subsequent practitioners of the literary genre Danforth helped create, the minister also argues that the culprit's crime should be treated not as an object of mere curiosity, but an alarming sign of the challenges faced by the public at large. As he carefully explains, criminals' "worst sins," even in such unusual cases as bestiality, are reminders of people's general predisposition to sinfulness; each shocking crime is "[a] figurative expression, holding forth the heinousness and notoriousness of [all colonists'] sins and wickedness."¹³ With this idea in mind, Danforth enjoins his audience to view Benjamin Goad's "astoundingly strange" crime as an occasion for introspection; they must "ransack [their] own hearts" and acknowledge their own inclination to "all manner of sins," including "murder, adultery, fornication, [and] lasciviousness."¹⁴ Danforth's sermon was typical for the period in that it effectively shifted the audience's attention away from the culprit and subsumed particulars of his crime in an elaborate, albeit formulaic tribute to what were regarded as paramount issues of the day. Authors of such execution sermons expressed their creativity by discerning religious symbolism and social significance in seemingly unrelated particulars of their subjects' lives. Readers of *Lolita* can detect echoes of this literary technique in John Ray Jr.'s

¹¹ For extensive studies of the subject, see Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*; and Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul*. For a more succinct survey, see Moudrov, "Early American Crime Literature."

¹² Danforth, *The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into*, i.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14; spelling has been modernized.

flatfooted attempt to present Humbert Humbert's confession as a socially relevant text. Like Danforth, the editor of Humbert Humbert's story is utterly indifferent to the narrator as a person. The latter is described merely as symptom of a dangerous trend. Just as Humbert Humbert can be accused of encapsulating Dolores Haze in a fantasy he calls *Lolita*, John Ray Jr. inadvertently reduces Humbert Humbert's life to a socially pertinent message. What is more, Nabokov's familiarity with the Puritan literary conventions is apparent in John Ray Jr.'s insistence that Humbert Humbert's crime should be treated not as an isolated case but a manifestation of a disturbing trend. If we "ransack our own hearts," to use Danforth's phrase, we will realize that as many as "12% of American adult males ... enjoy yearly, in one way or the other, the special experience 'H.H.' describes with such despair."¹⁵

The eighteenth-century literary invention known as dying speeches, or confessions of doomed criminals, also bears some similarities to the structure of *Lolita*. This subgenre had a lasting impact on American literature, and its influence is apparent in the writings of many American authors of later periods, most famously Edgar Allan Poe. Eighteenth-century criminal confessions were typically recorded by ministers, who were at liberty to visit jails to interact with criminals and encourage them to contemplate their spiritual condition. Published as cheap pamphlets for easy circulation, dying speeches usually had three distinct parts. Each publication started with a didactic introduction composed by the minister who received and edited the confession for publication. The confession itself occupied the central part. It was narrated by criminals who used their confession as an occasion to express their contrition or, in some cases, conversely, to defy social and religious conventions. Remarkably, some confessions actually wavered between defiance and contrition, which added a level of complexity that became common in literature of later periods. The last part of a typical dying speech was the shortest, and briefly described a criminal's journey from jail to gallows.

Formulaic didactic introductions to dying speeches in colonial America emphasized the following key points. Their editors felt compelled to assure readers that such confessions were factually accurate. This is the origin of Americans' fondness for the phrase "based on a true story," which Nabokov entertainingly mocks in John Ray's foreword to *Lolita*. Ministers who edited

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 5.

dying speeches for publication also dutifully reminded their readers that such works were not meant to be voyeuristically enjoyed as thrilling tales, but taken as warnings against the temptation of criminal behavior. Increase Mather even includes this admonition in the title of *A Sermon, Occasioned by the Execution of a Man Found Guilty of Murder, Preached at Boston in N.E., March 11th, 1685/6. (Together with the Confession, Last Expressions, & Solemn Warning of that Murderer to All Persons; Especially to Young Men, to Beware of Those Sins which Brought him to his Miserable End.)* (1687). As Mather observes here, even though the culprit who occasioned the sermon is no more, the book his case inspired may help others become “awakened by this sad example.”¹⁶ The publication’s contents are strikingly diverse: transcripts of one minister’s interaction with the murderer, sermons, didactic digressions, and a story of how the transcript came into the publisher’s hands. Importantly, Mather’s readers are repeatedly reminded that the volume is presented for their benefit, to prevent proliferation of numerous social ills in the colony. Increase Mather’s son, Cotton Mather, was a prolific writer who continued this literary trend. In his well-known collection *Pillars of Salt: An History of Some Criminals Executed in this Land for Capital Crimes* (1699), he echoes his father’s publishing rationale: the book was to “correct and reform” the public’s morals and “to suppress growing vice.”¹⁷ In this respect, the Mathers’ strategy aligned with conventions of didactic sensationalism adopted in many contemporary and subsequent American works about crime: authors and publishers defended their interest in crime by claiming that their books were written to prevent the colony’s cultural downfall.

As we can easily recognize, John Ray Jr.’s satiric foreword to *Lolita* imitates elements of early American dying speeches and didactic crime pamphlets. The foreword is ostensibly designed to create the impression that the narrative is authentic; the editor starts with what at first sounds like a barrage of facts. Toward the end of the foreword, John Ray Jr. also proclaims the confession’s didactic importance:

[I]n this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac—these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. “Lolita”

¹⁶ Mather, *A Sermon, Occasioned by the Execution of a Man Found Guilty of Murder*, A2.

¹⁷ Mather, *Pillars of Salt*, 59.

should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world.¹⁸

Of course, most readers of *Lolita* are disinclined to take these lines seriously. In fact, many probably skip John Ray Jr.'s foreword altogether, but clearly, it can be read as Nabokov's comic tribute to American writers' Puritan-born habit of justifying their interest in controversial crimes in didactic terms.

Even when crime literature diversified in the eighteenth century, leading to the rise of many new popular forms of crime literature, some of which Nabokov likely knew, it preserved the didactic spirit of Puritan literature. American crime ballads, for example, were widely available as affordable broadsides and carried such titles as *Advice from the Dead to the Living: or, A Solemn Warning to the World. Occasioned by the Untimely Death of Poor Julian, Who was Executed on Boston Neck ... for the Murder of Mr. John Rogers of Pembroke.... Very Proper to be Read by all Persons, but Especially Young People, and Servants of all Sorts* (1732) and *A Mournful Poem on the Death of John Ormsby and Matthew Cushing, Who were Appointed to be Executed on Boston Neck* (1734). Such works always ended with a clear didactic message: "let this Warning loud and shrill / be heard by e'vry one, / O do no more such Wickedness."¹⁹ What is more, authors of crime ballads underscored their didactic character by disavowing any aesthetic aspirations; indeed, they attacked the very concept of art. The broadside with a ballad titled *The Dying Criminal* (1779) is a case in point. It was presumably composed by one Robert Young as he awaited his execution for raping his wife's twelve-year-old sister.²⁰ He dutifully claims that his sole purpose for composing a poetic confession is to express contrition and prevent others from repeating his mistakes. To demonstrate his faithfulness to the principles of didacticism, he goes so far as to denounce concepts at the time commonly associated with art: deception, pleasure, and beauty. He emphasizes that his crime was in part precipitated by his artistic sensibilities, which, as his mortal end draws near, he

¹⁸ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 5–6.

¹⁹ *A Mournful Poem on the Death of John Ormsby and Matthew Cushing* (one page sheet. No page numbers).

²⁰ What publishers presented as Robert Young's confession appeared in several forms, in verse and prose. Apart from *The Dying Criminal*, there also circulated a broadside titled *The Last Words, and Dying Speech of Robert Young*, which featured yet another version of the culprit's confession. The styles of the two are completely different.

now eagerly condemns. To make his point, he describes Satan as the “grand-deceiver,” a great artist who “dresses sin lovely when he baits the souls.” He explains that the error that led him “to commit [that] horrid crime” consisted of being unable to see through Satan’s artifice, being blind to “the monster in true colours,” and falling for “vain” and “guilty” pleasures.²¹

After the revolution, American writers started to drift away from didactic conventions and appealed to readers’ voyeuristic appreciation of provocative materials. The United States in the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented proliferation of crime and racy literature: criminals’ adventures, erotica, trial records, gory crime novels, and many other sensationalist publications that, in the face of their authors’ literary ingenuity, are rather hard to classify. A typical American novelist, as one journalist jokingly remarked in 1842, was “admired, appreciated and rewarded” for writing about nothing but “murder, robbery and fornication”:

He drags his heroes from the scaffold, lays the scenes of their exploits at Hell Gate, ... places them on their knees in prayer at one time, and sets them in cutting throats a few moments after—brings his heroines from brothels, and ends by making them keep assignations in witches’ huts—where they give up the ghost in the most approved melodramatic style.²²

This observation is accompanied by a cartoon, adopted from an English magazine, that caricatures popular writers as literary hacks whose works are inspired not by muses but murder victims’ ghosts and crime reports (fig. 1). American readers, of course, were hardly hostages to writers’ bad literary taste, but rather, the willing consumers of new forms of literature about crime. But even as readers could uncomplicatedly just *enjoy* crime literature, writers still felt compelled to open their works with didactic messages (however perfunctory or even tongue-in-cheek) of the kind we find in the beginning of *Lolita*.

²¹ Citation for *Dying Criminal* (a broadside published in New London, Connecticut, [1779]) Examples of later crime ballads include *Verses, Written on the Trial, Confession, Execution, and Dying Words of Moses Lion* (Johnstown, NY, 1829) and *Abr’ m Prescott’s Confession, of the Murder of Mrs. Sally Cochran* (Concord, NH, 1835), which underscores that crime ballads prominently featured didactic elements well into the nineteenth century.

²² “The Literary Gentleman!” *Rake*, November 26, 1842.

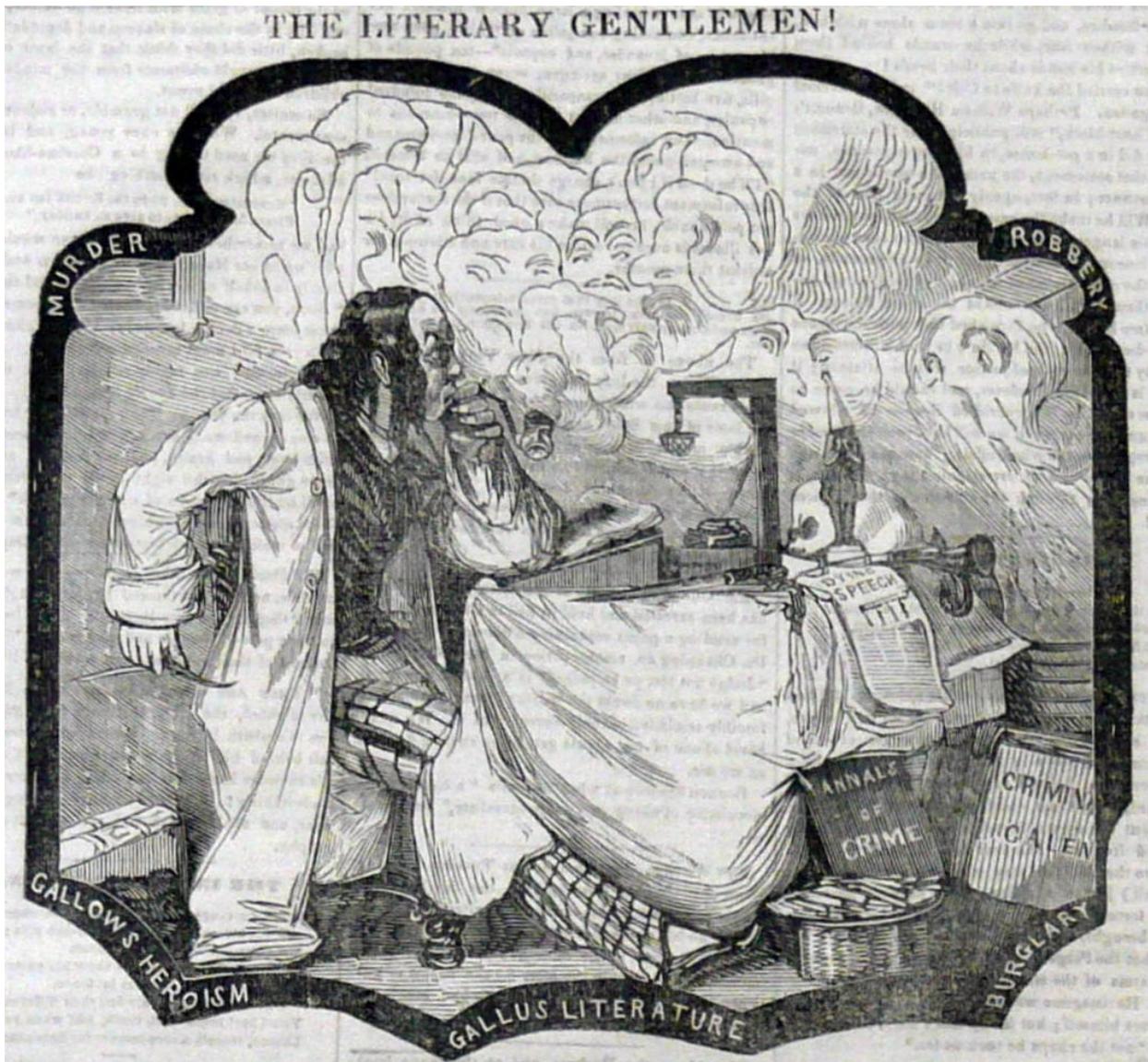


Figure 1: "The Literary Gentleman!" in *The Weekly Rake* (November 26, 1842).

Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society

Popular nineteenth-century crime publications were usually presented as thrilling stories under the guise of educational literature. The introduction to *The Lives of Felons, or American Criminal Calendar* (1846) offers a telling example of what at the time was a common literary strategy. The book clearly appealed to readers' fondness for crime stories. Its editor, however, made sure to open it with the disingenuous and amusing claim that his work was not only "an

object of curiosity and entertainment” but “a publication of real and substantial use, [intended] to guard the inexperienced from the allurements of vice, and to protect the weak from the flattering temptations that eventuate only in destruction.”²³ George Lippard’s bestselling novel *The Quaker City* (1845), a prime example of what became known as *urban gothic*, likewise attracted many readers with exciting tales of human depravity, but its introduction stated that the book’s goal was to expose “all the phases of corrupt social systems” in hopes of preventing the looming downfall of the American republic.²⁴ Another remarkable work of that period, Harrison Gray Buchanan’s eclectic collection of crime stories *Asmodeus: or Legends of New York* (1848), greeted the reader with the following statement: “We write not merely for idle talk, but for the understanding of all—from a desire to do good—to promote the ends of Truth, Justice, Equity, Humanity and Right.”²⁵ In all likelihood, most readers ignored the message in anticipation of captivating crime stories, and gave Buchanan’s introduction as much attention as readers of *Lolita* give to John Ray Jr.’s foreword.

The literary trend of juxtaposing didactic and voyeuristic forms of sensationalism is particularly apparent in the works of the popular sensationalist author George Thompson (1823 – ca. 1873), who wrote more than sixty novels that included elements of erotica, cross-dressing, interracial sexual encounters, voyeurism, and pedophilia. While it would no doubt have irked Nabokov to be compared to the likes of Thompson, it seems incontrovertible that in *Lolita* he both employed and satirized literary techniques Thompson had popularized a century earlier. Like other practitioners of the urban gothic, Thompson echoed many Americans’ belief that their compatriots’ outward virtue masked a penchant for what Bradford had in the seventeenth century called “things fearful to name.” But this hardly meant that one could not enjoy writing about such proclivities. Thompson’s novels read like an amusing parade of scandalous revelations about Americans’ behavior, with specific attention to corruption among authority figures: teachers, clergy, lawyers, and politicians. He wrote with open zest about his fellow citizens’ kinkiness, providing himself the “cover” of occasional moralizing of the sort probably no reader has ever taken seriously. A case in point is his novel *The Magic Cup: A Story for Husbands and Wives* (1855). It describes at

²³ *The Lives of the Felons, or American Criminal Calendar*, iv.

²⁴ Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 2.

²⁵ Buchanan, *Asmodeus: or Legends of New York*, 6.

length the debauchery that takes place in a decadent club called the “Palace of Voluptuous Delights.” In one episode, club members watch a group of scantily-dressed teenagers reenact the story of Cupid and Psyche, after which they are “kissed and caressed” by men from the audience with “an unrestricted indulgence.”²⁶ While clearly aiming to satisfy his readers’ voyeuristic appetite for details of this kind, Thompson also feigns faithfulness to the neo-Puritan tradition of didactic sensationalism. His narrator denounces the corruption of the upper classes and their betrayal of American ideals, and claims to dwell on scandalous topics solely to promote republican values supposedly imperiled by the corrupting influence of Europe. Thompson makes no such claim, however, in his novel *Venus in Boston* (1850), another colorful work about sex and crime in American cities, although this book’s preface does express the similar aim of offering readers “a perfect insight into human nature, and a knowledge of the many secret springs of human action.”²⁷

To conclude this essay, I would also observe that Nabokov’s awareness of Puritan and neo-Puritan literary conventions is apparent not only in structural similarities between *Lolita* and early American crime literature, but also in how certain elements of Humbert Humbert’s confession resonate specifically with American readers. Unlike *Despair* (*Otchaianie*), Nabokov’s well-known crime novel from his Russian period, *Lolita* is infused with religious references. Underlying the novel’s apparent plot is a story that mimics the kind of spiritual struggle often described in early American dying speeches. Humbert Humbert interchangeably expresses remorse and defiance about his crimes. He appears to be unsure whether writing his confession will somehow liberate him, offer solace, or incriminate him. He is occasionally burdened by religious thoughts, while at the same time giving us clues that he is only *imitating* a criminal crushed by a sense of guilt.

Religious references in the novel evolve from at first satirical to profoundly serious at the end. The beginning of *Lolita* may strike readers as comically irreverent, as it parodies episodes from the Bible and jokes about Americans’ religiosity. Humbert Humbert first encounters Dolores Haze in a garden and later subtly compares himself to Satan in the Garden of Eden as he attempts

²⁶ *The Magic Cup: A Story for Husbands and Wives* was published serially in *The Broadway Belle* in early 1855. This particular excerpt is found in the January 29 issue.

²⁷ Thompson, *Venus in Boston*, 3. This edition (University of Massachusetts Press, 2002) includes an extensive scholarly survey of Thompson’s works. For a study of Thompson in trans-Atlantic context, see Moudrov, “The Scourge of ‘Foreign Vagabonds.’”

to seduce the Eve-like Lolita. He is amused by Charlotte's rigid Christianity and frequently mocks what he sees as Americans' obsessive but disingenuous religiosity. Other, more subtle religious references, however, pertain specifically to early American culture. Humbert Humbert's apprehensive jokes about fate were likely meant to echo the Protestant concept of predestination, which was emphasized in the teachings of John Calvin, a revered figure among the first colonists. Protestantism was considered a bedrock of American culture not only in the colonial period but through much of the nation's history. Non-Protestant religious denominations, particularly Catholicism, were regarded with either suspicion or hostility. One of the key episodes in the novel takes place in (Catholic) Quebec, an inveterate enemy of Protestant New England during the colonial period. It is here that Humbert Humbert begins to either genuinely entertain some religious thoughts or skillfully mimic a person doing so. He recalls his interactions with "an intelligent French-speaking confessor," a Catholic priest, whom he consulted in an ostensible effort to shed what he calls his "Protestant's drab atheism" and "deduce from [his] sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being" who could forgive him.²⁸ On one level, this passage parodies the perennial tensions between Catholics and Protestants in North America, which repeatedly turned violent in the past and still haunted America in the 1950s. But in other respects, the chapter is remarkable for its apparent seriousness, of the sort that also characterizes the conclusions of dying speeches. The chapter that details Humbert Humbert's religious experimentation is devoid of the narrator's condescending humor that keeps many readers entertained throughout the novel. Even though Humbert Humbert ultimately rejects religion, and many readers may quickly forget the episode entirely, it is likely that Nabokov included this description of a spiritual struggle as a sign of his familiarity with conventions of American crime literature, particularly dying speeches, and the country's troubled religious past.

Humbert Humbert's stereotyping and rejection of both a "Protestant's drab atheism" and a Catholic "sense of sin" in favor of the "palliative of articulate art" gives his dying speech a sense of rebelliousness that goes along with Nabokov's appreciation of non-didactic art.²⁹ Overall, the novel simultaneously rebels against American literary trends and demonstrates Nabokov's awareness of them. While *Lolita*'s fictitious foreword replicates some elements of early American

²⁸ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 282.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

crime literature, if only to satirize them, Nabokov's "Essay on a Book Entitled *Lolita*" expressly rejects the kind of didacticism that burdened American crime literature. He writes:

I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. There are not many such books. All the rest is either topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster that are carefully transmitted from age to age until somebody comes along with a hammer and takes a good crack at Balzac, at Gorki, at Mann.³⁰

This passage is typically read as an expression of Nabokov's aesthetic creed. His other writings are consistent in his appreciation of "aesthetic bliss" untouched by political, religious, or social concerns. But it is also important to recognize the importance of this passage in the context of American crime literature. By exposing John Ray Jr. as a fraud and trashing "the Literature of Ideas," Nabokov takes a crack at the didactic tradition of American crime literature. This, in my view, was what made the novel particularly provocative. It infuriated many people not only because of its subject matter, which in itself would not be scandalous had Nabokov followed didactic conventions, but also because he specifically made it a point to satirize these conventions.

WORKS CITED

Abr'm Prescott's Confession, of the Murder of Mrs. Sally Cochran. Concord, NH, 1835.

³⁰ Ibid., 314–15.

- Advice from the Dead to the Living: or, A Solemn Warning to the World. Occasioned by the Untimely Death of Poor Julian, Who was Executed on Boston Neck ... for the Murder of Mr. John Rogers of Pembroke.... Very Proper to be Read by all Persons, but Especially Young People, and Servants of all Sorts* (Boston, 1732).
- Baym, Nina, et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1994).
- Bradford, William. *History of Plymouth Plantation*. Boston: [Privately printed], 1856.
- Buchanan, Harrison Gray. *Asmodeus: or Legends of New York. Being a Complete Exposé of the Mysteries, Vices and Doings, As Exhibited by the Fashionable Circles of New York*. New York: John D. Munson & Co., 1848.
- Cohen, Daniel A. *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674–1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Danforth, Samuel. *The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into; Upon Occasion of the Arraignment and Condemnation of Benjamin Goad, for His Prodigious Villany*. Cambridge: Marmaduke Johnson, 1674.
- The Dying Criminal*. [A broadside in New London, Connecticut, c. 1779].
- Freeman, Elizabeth. “Honeymoon with a Stranger: Pedophilic Picaresque from Poe to Nabokov.” *American Literature* 70, no. 4 (1988): 863-897.
- Halttunen, Karen. *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Lippard, George. *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall*. Edited by David S. Reynolds. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.
- The Lives of the Felons, or American Criminal Calendar, Compiled in Part from the New-York “National Police Gazette,” and Corrected, Enlarged and Revised on Careful Comparison with the Criminal Records of the Various States*. New York: George F. Nesbitt, 1846.
- Mather, Cotton. *Pillars of Salt. An History of some Criminals Executed in this Land, for Capital Crimes. With some of their Dying Speeches; Collected and Published, for the Warning of such as Live in Destructive Courses of Ungodliness. Whereto is Added, for the better Improvement of this History, a Brief Discourse about the Dreadful Justice of God, in Punishing of Sin, with Sin*. Boston, 1699.
- Mather, Increase. *A Sermon, Occasioned by the Execution of a Man Found Guilty of Murder, Preached at Boston in N.E., March 11th, 1685/6. (Together with the Confession, Last Expressions, & Solemn*

Warning of that Murderer to All Persons; Especially to Young Men, to Beware of Those Sins which Brought him to his Miserable End.) Boston, 1687.

Moudrov, Alexander. "The Dangerous Stranger: American Social Guidance Films in the Age of *Lolita*." *The Nabokovian* 70 (2013): 15–20.

_____. "Early American Crime Literature: Origins to Urban Gothic." In *A Companion to Crime Literature*, edited by Eds. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell: 2010: 128 -139.

_____. "The Scourge of 'Foreign Vagabonds': George Thompson and the Influence of European Sensationalism in Popular American Literature." In *Transatlantic Sensations*, edited by Jennifer Phegley, John Cyril Barton, and Kristin N. Huston. London: Ashgate, 2012: 97-118.

A Mournful Poem on the Death of John Ormsby and Matthew Cushing, Who were Appointed to be Executed on Boston Neck, the 17th of October, 1734. Boston, 1734.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Enchanter*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1986.

_____. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

_____. *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage International, 1990.

Sinclair, Marianne. *Hollywood Lolita: The Nymphette Syndrome in the Movies*. London: Plexus, 1988.

Thompson, George. *Venus in Boston and Other Tales of Nineteenth-Century City Life*. Edited by David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.

Verses, Written on the Trial, Confession, Execution, and Dying Words of Moses Lion. Johnstown, NY, 1829.

Weinman, Sarah. *The Real Lolita: The Kidnapping of Sally Horner and the Novel That Scandalized the World*. New York, NY: Ecco [an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers], 2018.

