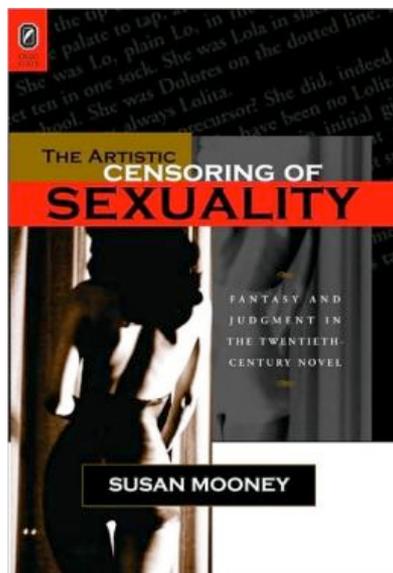


***The Artistic Censoring of Sexuality: Fantasy and Judgment in the Twentieth-Century Novel*, by Susan Mooney.** Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2008; ISBN 9780814210826. Appendix. Works Cited. Index. xviii+321 pp.



Susan Mooney's book examines sexuality, transgression and censoring in four novels that span almost the entire twentieth century: James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958), Luis Martín-Santos' *Tiempo de silencio* (1961) and Viktor Erofeev's *Russkaia krasavitsa* (1990). The scope of Mooney's analysis is ambitious, comparing not only different historical moments, but also legal systems and political contexts, with her four analytical chapters acting as a comparison of artistic censoring in liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes.

Mooney opens with an overview of her theoretical approach to censorship and censoring, which draws heavily on Lacan and Freud and, as her choice of novels also indicates, is rather universalist. The introduction immediately highlights the conditions of historical censorship under which each of these novels was published, asserting important similarities between the censorship of the texts in different contexts, which she claims to be 'rather similar across these societies' (24). However, despite initially framing censorship in political and historical terms, Mooney's principal focus is on artistic 'censoring' within the texts rather than external censorship as it is commonly understood (that is, as the manifestation of state or other power over an author or text). The hybrid term 'censoring' has been coined to refer to

the production of censorship in the literary text, and it is distinguished from the traditional categories of publication censorship and psychoanalytical censorship, although the term ‘derives some signification and strategies from these censorships’ (2). Mooney specifies that, if we follow Foucault’s thinking, legal and political power are at play in the literary text itself, stating, ‘the law’s interest in regulating sexuality is what often becomes re-enacted and reinterpreted in literary fiction involving sexual portrayal. For the author, ‘[c]ensuring’ is ‘a determining, normative function in the individual’s mental life just as it has been in our collective social existence’ (8), and so instances of screening in the novels reflect broader social norms.

The breadth of ‘censoring’ as an analytical category is well demonstrated in the chapter on Nabokov’s *Lolita*, and the case study exemplifies Mooney’s overall approach to the novels in question. Here, Mooney discusses the means by which Humbert ‘largely screens or censors the reality of his actions and his situation’ (113) in order to avoid external judgment and to jealously guard his relationship with Dolores for himself; the screening is achieved through a variety of literary devices, with mixed results.

Nabokov’s (or Humbert’s) complex style, which makes use of wordplay, intertextuality and extensive literary allusions, serves to aestheticise his desire, and his ironic, picaresque confessional mode seeks ‘to create an artistic haven for the discourse of sexuality and a discursive morality’ (144). The artistic censoring of taboo sexuality is achieved through a literary reframing of the relationship between Dolores and Humbert; avoiding vulgarity and conventionally pornographic imagery (Mooney foregrounds the poetic and clinical modes of his sexual descriptions (123)), Humbert equates his actions with fairytales and, as a result, portrays Dolores in the guise of *Lolita* as a fairytale or fantasy creature rather than a child.

The narrator uses a series of censoring techniques to justify his own desire and portray Dolores as the ‘nymphet’, hiding the reality of her child-status and, therefore, the facts of his transgression. The self-serving narrative reframes the Dolores character as *Lolita the Other*, imposing a self-serving view of her as seductress and, it is asserted, obscuring the real child. Dolores’s character is hidden by the ‘crisscrossing discursive screens’ (145) placed over her by Humbert, although the character occasionally manages to escape via her discourses of film, magazines and comics.

Mooney proposes that Humbert's writing of Dolores is intended not only to recreate the object of his fantasy, but also to control the audience's judgement of their situation, eliciting sympathy for his actions and obscuring his crimes under the veil of fantasy. Nonetheless, this extravagantly censoring narrative 'activates our sense of censoring' (131), arousing the reader's judgment. These censoring actions ironically demonstrate a 'will to be judged' that allows the reader to 'gain a critical view of the censoring patterns enacted in his narrative' (160). Humbert semi-consciously undermines his own censorial impulses, combining self-censoring and self-censure to hide his actions while ultimately exposing the moral questions at the novel's heart.

While the analysis of *Lolita* cleverly exposes the contradictory moral and psychological stance of the main character, it also demonstrates the major problem with the concept of 'censoring' as it is employed in each of these studies. Mooney's application of the term is troublingly broad, encompassing as it does all kinds of hiding, screening or deletion, whether linguistic, physical or metaphorical. Censoring is associated with, among other things, the use of sexual metaphor (157), Humbert's revisions and abbreviations to his own writing (155) and the murder of Quilty (159), creating false equivalencies between radically dissimilar kinds of power and concealment.

In addition, this analysis, through its focus on the psychoanalytical and the presentation of sexuality within the text, fails to account for real differences between different historical and political contexts. By employing a theoretical approach that blurs the boundary between censorship *of* the text and censoring *in* the text, Mooney falls into the trap of failing to appreciate the very real differences in censorial practices and, as Helen Freshwater warns, of 'flatten[ing] out the differences between "hard" and "soft" forms of control', failing to recognise and account for actual violence.¹ As an ethical and aesthetic study of sexuality in 20th-century literature, Mooney's explorations are subtle and insightful; her use of censoring as a frame, however, tends to obscure not only the political and social differences between the novels themselves, but also between different kinds of literary phenomena and, perhaps most significantly, between vastly different kinds of discursive and cultural control.

¹ Helen Freshwater, "Towards a Redefinition of Censorship," in Beate Müller (ed.), *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2004, p. 240.

Samantha Sherry,

University of Edinburgh

