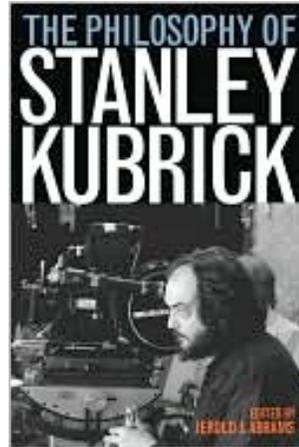
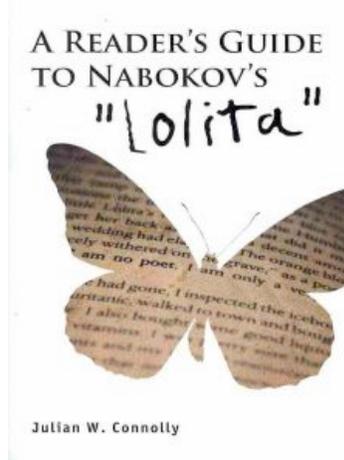


A Reader's Guide to Nabokov's 'Lolita', by Julian W. Connolly. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009; ISBN: 978-1-934843-65-9, xviii+186 pp. Notes. Index;

The Philosophy of Stanley Kubrick, by Jerold J. Abrams (ed). Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2009; ISBN 978-0-8131-9220-8, 278pp. Filmography. Index.



On the first page of his guide, Professor Connolly states that his purpose in writing the book was “to guide the reader through the intricacies of Nabokov’s novel and to facilitate an understanding of the writer’s elaborate artistic design.” In explaining the genesis of the novel, he describes its roots and thematic predecessors in earlier works of Nabokov. More significantly, he spends a great deal of his text on restoring the good character of young, innocent Dolly Haze.¹ In particular, Connolly is keen to show how Lolita, “a fanciful creation of (his) own” (*Lolita* 62), as Humbert expresses it, is just that – a fictional creation of Humbert the Terrible himself.

He guides the reader, and the *rereader*, through the text of Humbert’s first-person narrative, with the aim of showing just what a slippery, untrustworthy, “Dostoevskian”, first-person story-teller Humbert is. The notion of the “rereader” he takes from Nabokov, candidly supporting his demanding vision of the ideal reader, as expressed in his *Lectures on Literature*: “one cannot read a book: one can only *reread* it” (Connolly 1).

¹ References to the text of *Lolita* are to the Vintage International edition (New York, 1989).

While referencing Dostoevsky's novels with their unreliable narrators throughout his *Guide*, Connolly definitively relates *Lolita* to its roots in other classic Russian texts of the nineteenth century.

Able to render the reader's assistance in interpreting the many puzzles that litter Humbert's narrative, Connolly considers *Lolita* more "a work of words, a verbal performance" (Connolly 142) than a sequence of verbal and numerical conundrums. Thus he certainly strives to provide the student of *Lolita* with a subtle explication of the words and images Humbert the narrator uses in his "verbal performance", to inform and misinform the unwary reader about Dolly Haze and himself.

A good example of this occurs when Connolly shows how Humbert describes his behaviour, but more particularly Dolly's appearance, during the notorious couch scene as she sits on his lap with her "glistening underlip" and "her cheeks aflame" (*Lolita* 61). Similar suggestive phrasing is used by Humbert later in describing Dolly as she wakes up in bed with him at The Enchanted Hunters hotel when "Her cheekbones were flushed, her full underlip glistened" (*Lolita* 133).

Connolly is at pains to point out how Humbert distances himself from the action in the first episode above by dramatizing himself: "Main character: Humbert the Hummer..." (*Lolita* 57). He also believes, unlike other commentators, that "it's not clear she's orchestrating the entire episode" (Connolly 59). Certainly, through his verbal manipulation, Humbert the Narrator wishes his readers to feel Dolly was a willing participant in that first episode and probably intends them to conflate the two episodes and see his creation "Lolita" as a willing participant in both.

Reminding us that Humbert claims, "I have only words to play with!" (*Lolita* 32), Connolly, as often, shows us the importance of the power of words to Humbert, pointing out how it is "very hard for the reader to maintain an even perspective on what he or she is reading" (Connolly 30).

In an analysis of Humbert's motives in seducing Dolly, he shows how he offers three versions of a defence for his actions: the psychological, the artistic and the natural. All are bogus, of course. His psychological defence, for instance, is that only Dolly could fill the gap left by his unconsummated first love for Annabel – false, as Connolly shows, because Humbert was still interested in young girls after Dolly left him (Connolly 34).

Humbert makes a great play of his aesthetic side, seeing himself as one of the “poets” (*Lolita* 80). But Connolly shows how deluded Humbert is in seeing himself as a “poet” in the mode of Dante and Petrarch, when he points out the real details of their higher form of love, contrasting it with Humbert’s deranged desire for his “nymphet” Lolita.

Connolly describes fully the extent of Humbert’s conflicted, deluded state of mind, proving his desire for Dolly is anything but “natural”, because, on his own admission, he would only have abandoned interfering “*with the innocence of a child... if there was the least risk of a row*” (Connolly 34; *Lolita* 20).

In fact, according to Humbert’s own account, he is both an “artist” and a “madman” (*Lolita* 71) in his pursuit of Lolita; he is also a “*doe...trembling in the forest of (his) iniquity*” (*Lolita* 129). This reference to the world of quasi-mediaeval fairy-tale is supported by other instances chosen by Connolly to point up Humbert’s deluded view of the relationship between himself and Dolly. He shows how Humbert, who has “*only words to play with*” (*Lolita* 32) can use them to cast himself as “*the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (whose) nakedness smiled at the king*” (*Lolita* 39). As Connolly points out, this fairy tale is dreadfully corrupt and there will be no happy ending for Princess Lolita, since Humbert the Self-Dramatizer, as he does here, often admits to his own “*iniquity*”.

One thing that Connolly everywhere makes abundantly clear is that Humbert does not care for the inner life of Dolly Haze. As he points out, Humbert is “*hypersensitive to (Dolly’s) physical attributes – taking careful note of her measurements, her skin colour, her bodily aromas – while trying to ignore her emotional and mental worlds*” (Connolly 38). Only after she has left him does Humbert recognize that Dolly was a real person with a genuine inner life, admitting finally that she was a real, if ordinary, princess with “*a garden and a twilight and a palace gate*” (*Lolita* 284).

Humbert pursues Dolly after her escape, eventually murdering his rival Quilty. By deft allusion, Connolly shows how similar the two men are. In one of the many references to nineteenth-century Russian fiction in his guide, he relates the pairing of Humbert and Quilty to that of Golyadkin and his *doppelganger* in Dostoevsky’s novella *The Double* (Connolly 99). He also points out that both Humbert and Quilty use in their

spoken language French phrases with an almost identical sense – “*Soyons logiques*” (Humbert – *Lolita* 238) and “*Soyons raisonnables*” (Quilty – *Lolita* 301). Most tellingly, he points up the conflation of Humbert with his rival at the murder scene where Humbert the Conjugator says, “...*he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us*” (*Lolita* 299).

Yet there is perhaps more to Humbert; he is not just another Clare Quilty. Connolly points out that if he does not feel any guilt about murdering Quilty, perhaps in the end Humbert at least “*recognized the extent of the devastation he had brought to Dolly’s life*” (Connolly 135).

Certainly, as reported from his letters by Connolly, Nabokov saw Dolly’s story as a “*tragedy*” (Connolly 6). Connolly emphasises how she was the victim of Humbert, who ignored her inner world completely until the very end: “*I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind... behind the awful juvenile clichés*” (*Lolita* 284). Connolly strongly feels that contemporary readers need to restore a balance in their reading of the text and see young “*Dolores Haze deprived of her childhood by a maniac*” (*Lolita* 283). Connolly is strongly of the view that this reading of the text was missed, or perverted, by such early (male) reviewers of the novel as Lionel Trilling and Leslie Fiedler. The latter, as Connolly reminds us, described poor young Dolly as a “*nymphomaniac, demonic rapist of the soul – such is the lithe, brown Campfire Girl*”² (Connolly 56).

Connolly describes how, if he ignores her as a victim, Dolly takes on archetypal, mythic and fairy-tale dimensions for Humbert. For example, when Dolly eats an apple, she is a second, equally tempting, Eve (Connolly 85); when drugged by Humbert, she is like a “*Sleeping Beauty*” (Connolly 98). As he pursues the same vein of classic fairy-tale references and suggests yet another link between Humbert and his nemesis, Connolly points out that Quilty lives on “*Grimm Road*” (Connolly 129).

Lolita is also a “*daemon*” (*Lolita* 139). Interestingly, Connolly early on in his study traces this mythic identification to a poem of Nabokov’s from 1928 on a similar theme – a poem called ‘Lilith’, where the hero is clearly seduced by a “*daemon*”. The sound-correspondences in *Lolita*/Lilith are suggestive, though Connolly cites Nabokov as

² Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, New York: Criterion Books, 1960, p. 327

firmly denying their significance for his later work (Connolly 9). But Humbert certainly invokes both of Adam's wives, Lilith and Eve, in "*Lolita*" (Connolly 9-10; *Lolita* 20).

Throughout his guide Connolly remarks upon the clear links between Nabokov's novel and classic texts from nineteenth-century Russian literature, revisiting some of the material from his 2008 essay "Russian Cultural Contexts for *Lolita*".³ For example, he notes the likely influence on Nabokov of Pushkin's unfinished play *Rusalka*, specifically noting that Charlotte Haze, Dolly's mother, may be a sort of avenging spirit influencing events after her daughter's death, as does the *rusalka*-mother figure in Pushkin's play (Connolly 20-21).

Much more frequently, Connolly guides the reader to reflections of Dostoevsky's books in Nabokov's novel. The connection between Humbert and Golyadkin from 'The Double' has already been alluded to. Interestingly in this regard, in his *Lectures on Russian Literature*⁴ (Connolly 104) Nabokov himself wrote: "*I have to my regret no ear for Dostoevsky the Prophet. The very best thing he ever wrote seems to me to be 'The Double' "*

Despite Nabokov's deep-seated distaste for Dostoevsky, Connolly feels that as a narrator Humbert Humbert is a close cousin to the narrator of *Notes from Underground*, particularly in respect of their common possession of a voice which combines pleading with defiance. Dostoevsky's narrator can certainly remind readers of Humbert at his most conflicted: "*I can assure you, gentlemen, I suffered terribly...I don't care a damn what you might think about it*"⁵ (Connolly 18).

Most strikingly, Connolly finds many thematic connections between *The Devils* and *Lolita*. He notes the prominence in the latter novel of what he calls the "*pig motif*" (Connolly 95), citing the common occurrence of pigs in the imagery of *Lolita*. For example, cars are lined up in the parking lot of The Enchanted Hunters hotel '*like pigs at a trough*' (*Lolita* 117). He firmly relates the deliberate frequency of such imagery to the prominence of swine imagery in the Russian folk tradition generally, and more

³ See Zoran Kuzmanovich and Galya Diment (eds.), *Approaches to Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2008, pp. 89-93.

⁴ Harcourt Inc, 1981.

⁵ F. M. Dostoevsky, *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky*, New York: Perennial Library, 1968, pp. 271, 276.

specifically in Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, citing the significance for that novel of the story of the Gadarene swine found in Luke's gospel (Connolly 95; note 13 on 139).

In another link with the figurative language of Dostoyevsky, Connolly examines more than once Nabokov's use of spider-imagery. Humbert calls himself '*Humbert the Wounded Spider*' (*Lolita* 54). He also describes himself as one day trying to find out where Dolly is by putting out '*mental feelers*', like a spider (*Lolita* 49-50). It is perhaps most significant that Connolly relates Humbert's behaviour in these spider episodes to that of Stavrogin in *The Devils*. Thus, after he injures the little girl, Stavrogin imagines his remorse to be a tiny spider (Connolly 84). In a similar vein, Connolly notes that Svidrigailov, another of Dostoevsky's child-abusers, imagines the after-life to be '*a small room, like a village bathhouse, with spiders in all the corners*' (Connolly 84).

Connolly also believes Humbert harks back to Ivan Karamazov's frequent speeches of complaint about divine justice and the suffering of children. He finds a typically indirect and egotistical example of this where Humbert refers to his own deceptive narratives and says that '*genuine art... reflects and transmutes the pains of life*' (Connolly 127). In the first place, of course, Humbert the Selfish means his own pains – and only latterly the sufferings of young Dolly.

Finally, it must be said that this monograph is much more than a mere guide through the text of the novel itself. Among many other interesting features it includes a most useful section on what Connolly calls "*Lolita's Afterlife*", where he discusses responses to Nabokov's text from both critics and creative artists, filmmaker Stanley Kubrick among them.

Professor Abrams writes about Kubrick's film of Nabokov's *Lolita* too, but he does so as a philosopher. In his introduction to the edited volume (which contains his essay on *Lolita*, discussed below) he makes a point of describing how existentialism features in many of Kubrick's films, where '*one finds the subject (the self) existing in opposition to a hard and uncaring external world*' (Abrams 2). Yet, perhaps surprisingly, he does not take up this existentialist theme in his analysis of *Lolita*, though it would have been interesting to see him present the deluded Humbert as a person who was not an "authentic" individual in the existentialist sense meant by Sartre. Perhaps Professor Abrams was put off by Nabokov's well-advertised hostility to Sartre and his

philosophy, tartly exemplified by his review in 1949 of an English translation of the latter's *La Nausée*:

*“When an author inflicts his idle and arbitrary philosophic fancy on a helpless person whom he has invented for that purpose, a lot of talent is needed to have the trick work... But the task to make the world exist as a work of art was beyond Sartre's powers.”*⁶

Instead of discussing Humbert's activities in Sartrean terms, Abrams bases his philosophical examination of *Lolita* on Charles S. Peirce's ideas on “abduction”, a method of logic he very clearly and precisely distinguishes from “induction” and “deduction”. He goes on in his essay to discuss logical methods in terms of their place in the history of detective fiction, simultaneously demonstrating the influence of such fiction and its methods on major themes in *Lolita*.

Professor Abrams, in fact, expands upon the view of Carl Proffer that “*like some of Nabokov's other novels 'Lolita' is in part a detective story.*”⁷ He notes that Kubrick, when making his film, skilfully preserved from the novel itself this theme of detection: “*Kubrick also does well with the detective element of the story*” (Abrams 111).

Perhaps it would be going too far to say that this essay on Kubrick's film is actually best read with the text of the novel close at hand, though it must be said that throughout his interesting discussion Abrams himself makes extensive use of Alfred J. Appel's *The Annotated 'Lolita'*. To cite one significant example, he calls both novel and film to the reader's mind when he says: “*In the novel more than the film, the Haze house is a labyrinthine spider web*” (Abrams 122).

The importance for the novel itself of detection and labyrinths, as distinct from their role in Kubrick's film, is most evident when Abrams is discussing at length his idea of the “*Detective Labyrinth of 'Lolita'*” (Abrams 122), what Carl Proffer in his *Keys to 'Lolita'* called “*the crystal labyrinth of possible deductions.*”⁸

⁶ *The New York Times*, April 24, 1949.

⁷ Carl Proffer, *Keys to 'Lolita'*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968, p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Abrams shows how literary detection itself has its roots in Poe and Conan Doyle. In describing the dual nature of the detective's personality, he locates this phenomenon in Poe's Dupin and in Conan Doyle's Holmes, both celebrated fictional detectives and solvers of puzzles, dual characters who unite in themselves what Abrams terms an obsessive/creative side and a logical/resolvent side (Abrams 112-13).

He sees this duality of the detective also in Humbert Humbert – a man with a double name to match his dual nature. Thus, Humbert is a resolvent detective who is simultaneously an obsessive/creative criminal (Abrams 113). Abrams takes this idea to a further degree of subtlety in describing how Humbert finds both his opposite and his double in Clare Quilty: Humbert is the resolvent detective, solving the crime that is creative writer Quilty's kidnapping of Dolly. But, using an idea he takes from Poe's detective Dupin, Abrams actually suggests that Humbert is too good at chess to be an adequate detective because he cannot anticipate, only calculate, since he lacks what Poe's Dupin terms "acumen". Abrams posits this lack of acumen as the reason why Humbert so often fails in his pursuit of Dolly and Quilty (Abrams 118).

But if Quilty the successful criminal kidnapper is possessed by a 'creative madness' (Abrams 113), Humbert his detective double is no less possessed by a single-minded madness of his own, a madness he calls "nympholepsy" (Abrams 113).

Abrams pursues this idea of doubles and duality into his discussion of the character of young Dolly Haze, whom he sees as combining in herself both 'sweet childish innocence' and 'erotic darkness' (Abrams 114). But it is perhaps difficult to imagine that Nabokov would have countenanced this ambivalent idea of Dolly's character, since he saw her story as a 'tragedy', and Humbert Humbert, her abuser, as being like Hermann in 'Despair' - another of his "neurotic scoundrels" (Connolly 6; 17).

It is also perhaps a misreading of Nabokov's intentions to suggest that he would have approved of the identification of the author himself and Quilty, his manipulative creature. This, though, seems to be what Professor Abrams intends when he says Quilty is someone who "plays with the other characters solely for his own aesthetic bliss, just as Nabokov claims to do in the famous afterword to 'Lolita'" (Abrams 124). It is maybe more likely, as Julian W. Connolly points out, that Humbert Humbert is the one who plays with other characters and "is guilty of a major crime in Nabokov's world: he

regards those around him – and especially Dolly – as constituent elements of his own designs, designs he believes to be artistic” (Connolly 39).

Is it not also possible that, in the part of the afterword cited by Professor Abrams, Nabokov is referring to the pleasures he finds in reading works of literary art, and not to the pleasures he finds in writing them? Thus he mentions experiencing “*curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy*”, and directly after says “*There are not many such books*” in which these can be found.⁹

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⁹ In Alfred Appel Jr, *The Annotated 'Lolita'*, London: Penguin Books, 2000, p. 315.