

NABOKOV AND MORALITY

Symposium Overview 5-6 May, 2011

A two-day international symposium held at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow



Closing talk: Marijeta Bozovic, Jacqueline Hamrit, Michael Chapman, Marta Pellerdi, Julian Connolly, Jenefer Coates, Jonathan Hope, and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney

The ‘Nabokov and Morality’ symposium, which ran over the 5th and 6th May 2011 at the University of Strathclyde, had one broad aim – to bring about the sharing of ideas on a topic that is integral to our understanding of Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov’s works seem always to pique our moral interest; elicit personal responses; make us nod our heads in enviable agreement or shake them in disbelief. Such notions were the topic of cogent and insightful discussions from over twenty scholars who each gave a short paper and responded to questions based on their presentation. It was the latest conference to be held

in the field of Nabokov studies, following hot on the heels of those held in England, St Petersburg, France and Japan over the past few years. Not only was it the first event of its kind to explicitly address the issue of Nabokov and morality, but it was also the first time that such a symposium on Nabokov had been held in Scotland. Indeed, it may very well be that Nabokov had Scotland in mind when conceiving of that “Northern land of Zembla” in *Pale Fire* – the place that Boswell tried to convince Johnson to visit (and value) and one of the places that Pope had in mind when asking “Where’s the North?” in *Essay on Man*.

The aspect of morality in Nabokov’s works is arguably the most divisive, intriguing, and alluring aspect of his writing, something that can often make his work simultaneously captivating and all but repugnant. In *Lolita*, for example, Nabokov is keen to dismiss ‘the idiotic accusation of immorality’. Should we trust what he says? Can we? Is Nabokov the ‘laureate of cruelty’ as Martin Amis suggests or a more subtle moralist like critics such as Richard Rorty have proposed? The symposium was conceived as a way to bring together numerous critical viewpoints on a subject that has long been of intense discussion in Nabokov studies yet one that has never been addressed in such a format. It also encouraged dialogue between established academics and those just starting out and brought together scholars on opposite sides of the world in order to discuss arguably the most controversial aspect of Nabokov’s work with each other face-to-face. The symposium was a veritable feast of international and UK scholarship. Visitors as far afield as Taiwan and Iran made the journey westward to the University of Strathclyde whilst those coming from Stateside include Julian Connolly, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney and, the keynote speaker for the symposium, Professor Michael Wood. Other well-known Nabokovians to make their way to the symposium included Jacqueline Hamrit, Will Norman, Marta Pellerdi, and Jenefer Coates. It was exactly this cultural jumble, this difference of perspective, which facilitated an exciting and effervescent two days of academic debate. Indeed, implicitly asked in the symposium’s title was the question: just whose morality are we talking about?

The event started off with a drinks reception in Glasgow’s City Chambers on the evening before the symposium, situated on the cusp of the Strathclyde campus. Short speeches were given by the Lord Dean of Guild Graham Kidd, Strathclyde’s Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences Professor Tony McGrew and Michael Rodgers, with the evening allowing speakers to rub shoulders with one another and find out about some of the history of Glasgow before the event kicked off per se. The majority of the papers over the

two days focussed on particular moral caveats of Nabokov's work, from established problems (such as Richard Rorty's charge that *Lolita* does have a moral in tow) right up to the issues of problematic characterization in *The Original of Laura*. Some tried to situate Nabokov in existing philosophical frameworks or align him with philosophical figures (such as Aristotle, Derrida, Kant, Nietzsche, Løgstrup, and Kierkegaard for example) whilst others were keen to position him alongside other writers and critics who are linked, in some way, with moral thinking (such as Althusser, Jacobson, Lacan, Tolstoy, and de Rougemont). Among the charges of morality, immorality, and amorality were common trends – the issue of reader autonomy, Nabokov's own critical remarks, and cruelty. However, issues such as sex, politics, intertextual references, humour, love, death, temporality, values, autobiography, mimesis, hypertexts, and endings demonstrated the extent to which the issue of morality can be seen to permeate Nabokov's work. Similarly, although *Lolita* was undoubtedly the text with which speakers engaged the most, texts such as *Pale Fire*, *The Gift*, 'Signs and Symbols', *Pnin*, *The Original of Laura*, *Speak, Memory*, and *Bend, Sinister* were also given rigorous scrutiny. Special mention must also be given to *Lectures on Literature* as a text that repeatedly arose throughout the course of the symposium – it seems as if this piece of incendiary criticism provoked more than a few raised eyebrows from those unwilling to abide by the rules imposed inside it. The roundtables at the end of each day allowed delegates the opportunity to address questions to two or more speakers simultaneously and/or catch any questions that couldn't be contained within each speaker's initial timeframe. On day one, it was Laurence Piercy and Will Norman who were asked to respond to more than a few questions whilst, on day two, most questions were directed at Michael Wood's fascinating keynote speech on 'Modern Mimesis' although Simon Rowberry had quite a few questions to contend with also.

The symposium was made possible through the generosity of Strathclyde's School of Humanities and Social Sciences PGR Fund as well as through the help of colleagues from the University of Strathclyde and the University of Glasgow, especially Udith Dematagoda. Thank you to all of the speakers and attendees for making the 'Nabokov and Morality' symposium such an enjoyable and memorable experience and to Tom Furniss, Jonathan Hope, and Elspeth Jajdelska for helping to chair the sessions.

Michael Rodgers (*University of Strathclyde*)

Lyndsay Miller (*University of Nottingham*)

OVERVIEW OF PAPERS



'Nabokov and Morality' Symposium

Jacqueline Hamrit (*University of Lille*)

Giving and Loving as Moral Precepts in Nabokov's Fiction

Exploring Nabokovian fiction through the prism of Derridean philosophy, Jacqueline Hamrit's paper considered the ideas of giving and loving in Nabokov's works.

Although love can be seen as paternal and tender in *Bend Sinister* for example, it is often pathological and cruel in *Lolita* whilst more of an aesthetic phenomenon in *The Gift*. Hamrit adopted the Derridaen principle of viewing giving as an exchange economy where loving is a state of being - and 'not having' - yet the act of *giving* someone love can be a source of moral action. Hamrit also argued that the 'I' and the 'other' exist in a non-temporal relationship so that they are separate even when together, linking this quandary to notions such as duty, obligation, and ineffability.

Udith Dematagoda (*University of Glasgow*)

Towards a Hermeneutic of the Ideological Aesthetic in the Works of Vladimir Nabokov

Udith Dematagoda argued that, despite Nabokov's endless protestations and assertions to the contrary, the writer was, in fact, socially and politically engaged. Although Nabokov typically subverts realist epistemology in his fiction, Dematagoda made the case that an 'ideological aesthetic' is frequently alluded to in Nabokov's works and is an overlooked hermeneutic that can be applied to Nabokov's oeuvre. Engaging with the theories of Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, and Frederic Jameson for example, and the disparity between 'real' and 'imagined' selves, Dematagoda gave insight into the relationship between Nabokov's ideology and aesthetics; a hybridized account fostered by the concept that ideology must always be a narrative.

Elsbeth Jajdelska (*University of Strathclyde*)

Representing Sex in Lolita: When Description Might Be Too Vivid

Jajdelska's paper explored the ethics of representing sex in Nabokov, focussing mainly on *Lolita*. Touching on perceptual and cognitive problems as well as moral ones, she looked at how Nabokov often depicts sex in a convincing yet non-arousing way. Situating depictions of sex historically, Jajdelska argued that tradition has dictated our responses to sexual description and detailed how this description differs depending on cultural norms, anticipation, and high-brow rendering. Ultimately, her argument centred around Nabokov's propensity for listing sexual acts

rather than describing them holistically – something that arguably thwarts the readers’ sexual arousal and is related to vividness, ethics, and aesthetics.

Jenefer Coates

Discreet Literary Allusions in ‘Signs and Symbols’

Jenefer Coates chose to privilege the ‘random’ images and tropes in ‘Signs and Symbols’ rather than the numerological signs which have long been the focus this short story. Detailing the “persistent presence” of Tolstoy’s philosophy in the text – a “non-resistance to evil” and how it informed the story’s themes of subjectivity, passivity and moral agency - Coates argued that such hidden intertextual references not only extend the notions of both ‘symbols’ and ‘signs’ in the title, but also place the story in a new context and a fresh philosophical framework. In this respect, the hidden clues might even contain the second story that Nabokov claims to have concealed behind the first. Coates also stressed that textuality is a medium of print, a mediation between thought and the finished text, which is then read. As such, bad readers, by misreading the text, also misread the world – a notion that allowed Nabokov to address the varying tendencies for bad reading and how stylistic choices (such as free indirect speech) may reveal them.

Julian Connolly (*University of Virginia*)

“Burning with Desire and Dyspepsia”: The Ethics of Humor in Lolita and Pnin

Julian Connolly explored the ways in which the dynamics of humour are deployed in *Pnin* and *Lolita*, looking particularly at the solidarity between readers and narrators. Despite Nabokov advocating himself as a “mild old gentleman who loathes cruelty”, Connolly noted that a lot of his humour flourishes in the mocking of one character by another, as well as characters who enjoy laughs at the expense of others. He suggested that humour is used by Nabokovian narrators to disarm readers which, in turn, discourages bad readings of Nabokov’s fiction. He also argued that Nabokov purposefully made himself and his public persona unlikeable in order to discourage

such loathsome literal readings of his works. Ultimately, Connolly raised the question of whether *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading* distinguish between ‘acceptable’ and ‘cruel’ humor and suggested that, when we laugh, we must think about what, and who, we are laughing at.



Coffee break: Julian Connolly and Marta Pellerdi

Ji-Ching Hsiung (*National Chung Cheng University*)

“It Was She Who Seduced Me”: *The Man of Ressentiment in Nabokov’s Lolita*

Ji-Ching Hsiung used Nietzsche’s philosophy of *ressentiment* in order to propose a new reading of *Lolita*. Given that Humbert “seems to be seeking a cause for his suffering and tends to distribute blame”, Hsiung argued that, in disobeying the customs in the text-world of *Lolita*, Humbert’s *ressentiment* turns creative and gives birth to values. Ji-Ching suggested that Humbert, constrained and controlled by society and the threat of legal punishment, devises ever more intelligent plans in order to keep away the prying hands and thoughts of others, whilst simultaneously alienating himself further from society. However, the direction of *ressentiment* begins to change when Humbert admits he has ruined Dolores’ life and considers himself a guilty sinner, something related to the priestly values found in *The Genealogy of Morality*. Hsiung argues that Humbert’s memoir is ultimately more a journey of self-discovery than justification of the crimes he has committed.

Marijeta Bozovic (*Colgate University*)

Wipe Out Love and Death: Reading the Ruins of The Original of Laura

Marijeta Bozovic's paper envisioned *The Original of Laura* as a brilliant parody of, and the beginnings of an ethical response to, our cultural fascination with Eros and Thanatos. Bozovic argued that Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* is an important source text that contextualized Nabokov's last novel with comments on *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Pnin*. She also looked at the contradictions between love and death as well as how they are inextricably linked – could it be that Nabokov is attacking the banal cruelty of viewing love as a longing to die? In this respect, Bozovic's paper had links with Jajdelska's given her idea of literature as some kind of intercourse yet, simultaneously, it also brought the topic of writing as death into relief – something that led her to suggest that *The Original of Laura* could be viewed as a kind of literary necrophilia.

Will Norman (*University of Kent*)

Reading Lolita's Futures

Norman argued that morality only occurs when a text is read – that is, within the temporality of the text. Norman asked what role the notion of futurity has both for *Lolita* and for the girl who gives her name to the novel. Humbert's crimes against Dolores Haze stem from his inability or refusal to imagine the possibility of an authentic future for her, one open to contingency and the realm of the unforeseeable. Applying the contrasting Derridean ideas of 'le future' and 'l'avenir' to the text, Norman stressed the importance of reader autonomy - what position are we left in as readers and how does this position have ethical implications? Effectively, Norman argued that Humbert's ethics cannot be ours and any attempt to rehabilitate *Lolita* as a moral novel robs it of its future.

Sophie Levie (*Radboud University, Nijmegen*)

Nabokov's Ethics Proposal

Levie gave an account of contemporary Nabokov studies in Holland. It offered a bright light of hope for the future, both in her proposal for a collection entitled *Nabokov's Ethics* and in her supervising of two students – Roy Groen and Puck Wildschut – who both gave papers. The collection is to be submitted to the NWO (Dutch Research Funding Organisation).

Roy Groen (*Radboud University, Nijmegen*)

Ethics Without Morals: Nabokov and the Mechanics of Morality

Looking at *Lolita* and *Ada*, Groen brought up the Kantian notion of the right over the good and elucidated Nabokov's procedure of making us doubt the ethical conceptions we think we commonly share by undermining their foundations. Groen effectively argued that Nabokov's prose not only incites us to think differently about particular popular questions of morality (such as paedophilia, incest, and cruelty), but also incites us to reshape our thoughts on the concept of morality in general. Echoing Nabokov's own statement that "*Lolita* has no moral in tow", Groen argued that it is exactly this lack of a concrete moral framework that makes *Lolita* an eminent lesson on morality.

Puck Wildschut (*Radboud University, Nijmegen*)

On Vladimir Nabokov and Literary Interpretation

Wildschut delivered a reading of *Lolita* through the theoretical veil of cognitive poetics. She argued that our manner of assigning meaning is intrinsically linked to the way(s) in which we experience, and have experienced, the world. Engaging with Richard Rorty's essay 'The barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on cruelty' (1989), Wildschut explored the incommensurability of Rorty's reading strategy with his views on literary interpretation. Such a reading, centered around Nabokov's (im)morality, asks us to consider the sources, textual *and* extra-textual, that we are allowed to use as material for our interpretation of literary works. Wildschut argued that we derive the morality of *Lolita* through meaning – meaning determined by such

things as linguistic indicators, the projection of parables, and different spheres of the text-world.



Roundtable participants: Jacqueline Hamrit, Udith Dematagoda, Jenefer Coates, Julian Connolly, and Ji-Ching Hsiung.

Marta Pellerdi (*Pazmany Peter Catholic University*)

The Morality of Life and the Immorality of Art in Nabokov's Lolita and Pale Fire

Pellerdi's paper focused on a particular dichotomy in Nabokov's work where some characters cannot distinguish between what is possible in art and what must not be attempted in life. She argued that, if *Lolita* is a literary historical overview of aestheticism, then *Pale Fire* is a dead poets' society, constituted by a literary conversation not only between Shade and Kinbote, but other historical writers and poets too. As a result, Shade and Kinbote are decidedly literary characters, constructed from a cacophony of literary voices. If the ecstasy of literature is found by reading the poetic and literary constituent parts of these two fictional writers, then it leads the reader to morality in real life. Pellerdi argued that, in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, just as in all of his fiction, Nabokov celebrates the joy of moral and mortal reality in life as opposed to the fascinating and mesmerizing dream-world of what may be immoral and immortal in art.

Gholamreza Shafiee-Sabet (*Islamic Azad University*)

The East of Nabokov's Morality: Nabokov and 1001 Nights

Gholamreza Shafiee-Sabet argued that Nabokov's allusions to *1001 Nights* in *Lolita* allow it to operate as a moral mirror to that controversial text. Besides the aesthetic reasons, there are ethical repercussions that explain Nabokov's elaborate engagement with the Oriental text. Humbert's and Van's various acts of immorality, Shafiee-Sabet argued, can be interpreted as Nabokov repeatedly calling attention to the consequences of such an engagement with Scheherazadian aesthetics devoid of ethical considerations. The contrast between the narrator and the implied author reveals Nabokov's ethical interpretation of the incidents and character relationships in the *Nights* and acts to shed a new light on the way in which he realizes his moral art.

Michael Rodgers (*University of Strathclyde*)

"Propagandist, moralist, prophet": Nabokov and Nietzsche

Looking at the ways in which Nabokov has engaged with Nietzsche throughout his oeuvre, Rodgers situated this curious relationship with respect to *The Original of Laura* and *Lectures on Literature*, arguing that Nabokov's conception of the 'enchanter' is a rewriting of Nietzsche's Übermensch – something related to both writers' aestheticization of morality and concerns with conventional values. Using the Bloomian notion of 'anxiety of influence' to argue that Nabokov seems to have agreed with Nietzsche up to a certain point and then swerved, Rodgers sought to add Nietzsche to other troublesome presences in Nabokov's works.

Miles Leeson (*University of Portsmouth*)

Beyond Morality or Love's Knowledge? Lolita and Virtue Ethics

Leeson's paper analysed *Lolita* through the lens of Aristotelian virtue ethics, harnessing the theories of Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre in order to uncover the underlying morality, and moral value, of the novel. Leeson argued that, as

we relate these narratives to ourselves through the process of reading, we take on the major role of narrative signifier – something which is integral if we are to apply virtue ethics to the novel. Leeson echoed MacIntyre in that, as readers, we are on a narrative quest that leads toward a better understanding of humanity. As such, notions such as the interplay between literary forms and ideal forms, moral imperatives, and Plato's shadow play allow the central strands of Nabokov's ethical vision to coalesce.

Maria Alhambra (*University of East Anglia*)

The Anthemion and the Spiral: Narrative Design and Morality in Speak, Memory (1951/66)

Alhambra examined the intricate macro and micro designs in Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*. She argued that its structure has two patterns, that of the spiral and that of the anthemion (in fact a discarded title), with the latter morphing into the former as the book progresses. Through this structural analysis of *Speak, Memory*, Alhambra examined the shifting temporal nature of Nabokov's autobiography as well as the narrative form of confession itself – a medium where selfhood, nostalgia, and the basis of one's moral fabric are located. Alhambra also examined the motif of farewell in relation to concepts such as love, guilt and responsibility.

Michael Wood (*Princeton University*)

Modern Mimesis

Michael Wood's keynote paper argued for a reengagement with, and resetting of, the parameters of modernity. He argued that, although Nabokov, as a writer, is remote from what he termed 'modern modernity', his characters are intrinsically and anxiously modern. Wood argued that writing is a matter of making transfers possible and that reading is the activation of such transfers. Such movement is activated in Nabokov's texts by shifting temporal and literal references. Morality does not exist in Nabokov's fiction – it is the reader's role to find it through projection. Nabokov ultimately teaches readers to read not only his texts, but also the world, thus creating 'good', independent, and moral readers.



Elspeht Jajdelska, Gholamreza Shafiee-Sabet, Michael Wood, Jenefer Coates, and Will Norman.

Laurence Piercy (*University of Sheffield*)

Nabokov and the Ethical Demand

Piercy's paper concerned those elements of Nabokov's fiction that many readers instinctively react against; not only the physically violent and taboo elements of his work, but the insidious sense of cruelty that pervades much of his fiction. Using the writings of Knud Ejler Løgstrup as his theoretical framework, Piercy applied the notion of the 'Ethical Demand' to texts such as *Pale Fire* and *Ada* and related this to intersubjective concepts such as familial ties, neighbourly bonding, and love. In doing so, Piercy explored the correlation of the imaginative and the ethical in Nabokov's work.

Heidi C Craig (*University of St Andrews*)

Aesthetic Nihilism or Art for Art's Sake: Nabokov's Critical Dodging

Craig's paper examined Nabokov's playful dodging of critical interpretations. Stating that Nabokov's "flippant eloquence [often] bullies some critics into

interpretative surrender”, Craig argued that we shouldn’t always take Nabokov at face value. Using *Lectures on Literature* as a hermeneutical tool, Craig attempted to answer the question, ‘why is it so hard to write criticism on Nabokov’? She tracked Nabokov’s engagement, both willing and unwilling, playful and cold, with critics and criticism, probing what it means to be a moral or immoral reader and revealing several notable points regarding Nabokov’s performative contradictions.

Simon Rowberry (*University of Winchester*)

Nabokov’s Do-It-Yourself Didacticism: Hypertextuality in Lolita and Pale Fire

Simon Rowberry’s paper examined *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, arguing that Nabokov’s use of hypertext is the catalyst for the expansion of each text. For example, in exploring the discourse between Shade’s poem and Kinbote’s commentary, Rowberry argued that *Pale Fire*, as a text with marginalia or paratext(s), is an implicit hypertext whilst the framing device of John Ray Jr.’s foreword and Nabokov’s afterword are examples of hypertextual layering in *Lolita*. Multiple dimensions of the text are achieved through the temporal linearity of the hypertext while the multiple contexts that are thus created inform reading. Rowberry effectively argued that Nabokov subverts the usual cause-and-effect model that influences one’s idea of morality, thereby complicating the issue of morality in the text and bypassing a straightforward didactic reading, empowering the reader to choose his or her own moral position.

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (*College of the Holy Cross*)

Judgment, Sentence, Satisfaction: Morality in Nabokov’s Endings

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney’s paper was also concerned with reader empowerment but, here, in relation to how judgement is passed in Nabokov’s fiction. Looking at texts such as *Ada*, *Bend Sinister*, and *Pnin*, Sweeney argued that Nabokov rarely depicts actual scenes of judgement or punishment – if referred to, they are mostly rhetorical scenes that are left, instead, to the reader to morally indict or resolve. This implicitly places the moral onus on the reader who, Sweeney argued, is

the protagonist's peer. Nabokov thus defers to the individual a moral sense of the reader who, in order to achieve literary satisfaction, must consider aesthetics *and* ethics.



Michael Rodgers, Michael Wood, and Gholamreza Shafiee-Sabet

