

Sasha Kukulina

READING *LOLITA* IN MOSCOW

Ed. Note: Sasha Kukulina is 12 years old, and was born and raised in the family of two philologists – Ilya Kukulina and Maria Maiotis, in Moscow. Sasha spent two years in the United States when her parents have been employed as the visiting professors of Russian at the Washington and Lee University (Lexington, Virginia). She is completely bi-lingual, and also studies French and German, plays violin, and owns a dog named Liniia Gratsii Rok in Rio (Grace Line Rock in Rio).

We have received this letter from Sasha and decided to reproduce it as a curious literary response to *Lolita* by a contemporary reader. Taking into consideration our correspondent's age and her geographic origin, this document would have certainly amused the author, Vladimir Nabokov, who had dim prospects imagining his contemporary Russian readers, let alone the future generations, admitting in a poem "Fame" (1942):

Who, some autumn night, *who*, tell us, please, in the backwoods
of Russia, by lamplight, in his overcoat,
amidst cigarette gills, miscellaneous sawdust,
and other illumed indiscernibles – who

on the table a sample of *your* prose will open,
absorbed, will read *you* to the noise of the rain,
to the noise of the birch tree that rushes up window-ward
and to its own level raises the book?

(V. Nabokov. *Selected Poems*.

Transl. by D. Nabokov. 2012, p. 108)

The manuscript's style has not been altered. The title is editorial.

-- Yuri Leving



Photo: Sasha Kukulina in Moscow, 2017.

The thought itself of reading Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* came to me when I was looking through a list of "books with a hard psychological plot" on a reading website. I was not sure if I should read this book, until I watched "Captain Fantastic." This is a movie about a widower raising his children as followers of liberal and leftist philosophies and regimes. He gives his sons and daughters a great physical and mental education, but his wife's relatives think of him as a threat to his own kids and try to take them away, no matter how much the children dislike this idea. One of his daughters (who is about my age) is reading *Lolita*, and when her father sees what she is reading, he does not get mad, but instead starts asking her what she thinks about the book. I got inspired by the fact that a person of my age is reading this book and is appreciated for doing so. I asked some of my older relatives and friends, and after getting the answer: "Well, you could try..." I happily discovered the book in the family library. It was the first book by Nabokov that I have ever read. I have read nothing about the author, so my opinion is not determined by preconceived notions. Because I am the same age as Lolita, it might seem easier for me to understand her story; but it is not. In the 2010s children are treated and viewed

differently than they were in the late 1940s to early 1950s. I was born and raised long after the sexual revolution of the 1960s (in Russia it took place in the 1990s). Now, there are not a lot of kids who would behave as Dolores, because nearly everyone knows what the consequences would be. If Dolores had been raised the same way in which children are raised now, she probably would not have been able to get seduced by Humbert. However, we can learn some lessons from *Lolita*, and they are strongly tied to our social agenda.

We are living in the time in which the word “pedophile” is associated with someone very negative, full of aggression and (for some reason) personal hatred towards children. This name is, as I said, usually given to criminals, but now people use it for swearing. Here in Russia, where people are overdramatic about everything except for the things that actually matter, “pedophile” is someone beyond evil. Children are regarded as precious, innocent creatures, and there is someone who dares to hurt them! People, especially in Russia, often try to find evil in someone else, while they actually need to kill their own “dragon”. This metaphor was introduced by a Russian playwright Evgeniy Schwarz in the 1940s, the same time that Nabokov started working on *Lolita*: “It’s much more simple to see the dragon in others, not in yourself,” he claims. People blame others for bad things that happen to them, but actually most, or at least a part, of the guilt is on them. When Nabokov wrote *Lolita*, as in any other epoch, people had that evil, that “dragon” inside of them. That is why I prefer not to use the word *pedophile* to describe Humbert.

Nabokov meant both main characters to be shown having those “dragons”. Children are always regarded as victims of pedophilia, but Lolita is not as innocent as it first seems. Lolita claims that Humbert ruined her life and there is no guilt on her, but actually it was partly her fault, because she had been constantly thinking of seducing her mother’s husband. Humbert Humbert has the dragon deep inside of him. If Charlotte Haze had not died, the romance with Lolita would not have happened, and Humbert would have been seen as a casual man. Humbert refuses to see that there is actually something wrong with him and covers up his psychological “disease” with a title of an artist. He says that it is all the fault of society that views him as a criminal.

I will move on from the theme of the dragon and continue forward with a different one — the fate of a romantic artist in the 20th century and in the contemporary society. I know that in essays, people rarely talk about a character with the same character’s words, but I have no choice. Humbert Humbert views himself as an esthete, so I will call him a “special artist,”

special because none of the artists that I know have crushes on 12-year-old girls, although there could be other artists in world history with such a crush.

Humbert is very intelligent and has an ability to see beauty. He has the mindset of a romantic artist. But he was not able to see beauty in women, just in little girls. He was a “special artist,” and society would have considered him crazy if he had opened up his real self. We can understand Humbert better if we compare him to Quilty, Lolita’s new lover, with whom she escaped. Quilty was a lot like Humbert, but he turned his aestheticism into something really pop-cultured. Humbert felt that Quilty is kind of his mental twin who turned into something really mainstream, and it was hard for him to handle the reality of a person with an almost identical mindset, but less original and more pop cultured, getting the love of his life.

Nabokov showed that people with the spirit of a romantic artist in modern world could lead to either something that would be taken by others as a psychiatric disease or be changed into something more popular. Nabokov was not threatening, but telling a fact — there will not be that romantic aestheticism in the growing generation that seeks beauty, and if there were to be, it would be hidden by something more accepted in that time.

This is how Nabokov provokes us to look at the destinies of modern day “romantic artists.” I think that if Humbert lived today, he would not be considered “normal” even among people who have not learned about his “problem.” He would have either to hide his vision of things even more than in Nabokov’s novel or go to an asylum.

The figure of Lolita makes us think more about the cultural and generational conflicts in both the 20th century and now. Lolita was a dumped child. Her mother did not care about her; she just sent her to good schools and camps and did not pay attention to her cultural development. Nabokov shows that Lolita was left by her mother, and because of this, she was herself giving up things, activities, even people. Dolores was born before WWII, so she was not a child of baby boom times. The baby boom started a couple years after the war, and that made attitudes towards children change. Children grew up more open-minded, and soon the age conflict occurred. On the other hand, in the years of the baby boom, there were a lot of kids and not many adults to take care of them; Nabokov saw that all too well.

If Dolores had not died, she would have been in her late twenties in the beginning of the 1960s, so she probably would have joined one of the growing protest youth subcultures. I can suggest that even in 1948, when Nabokov started writing *Lolita*, he saw this conflict coming. I

consider this novel both as a threat and as a cry. It was a threat to adults: if they do not take care of their children's cultural development, the conflict may go too far. And it was also a cry, because you already could not save Lolita in her teens by giving her good books to read. It was a sign that parents need to take care of their children as early as possible. If Dolores had been more educated, it would have been barely possible for Humbert to seduce her, because she would understand the consequences of what she was doing.

As a teenager I read a lot of teenage books and not a lot of adult ones. I would refer to *Lolita* as one of young adults books, because initially it was made for adults, but now a lot of teenagers read it. Probably because the book is not made for my age, it seems so unusual to me. It is so peculiar because all of the characters are intimidating. You feel sorry for the main characters, because all of them got a really unpleasant fate. If the book had been written from the third[-person] point of view, the characters would not have been so uncovered. From this perspective, you would not see people as Humbert shows them to us: because of his embarrassment of what he has done, he does not point to any disgusting features of people that he has noticed. That is why some of the characters might seem completely oppressive, and here, in *Lolita*, their personalities are significantly softened. This proves that Nabokov chose a unique point of view on the story he tells and people he describes. Some people even believe that Humbert bears some traits of his creator, Nabokov. I cannot argue with readers with such opinion — there are a lot of things matching between the author and his character. But if Nabokov is not Humbert, then he is a magnificent writer. I am amazed by his style and talent.

