

LOLITA IN AMERICA

Conference Overview

A day-long public symposium hosted by the Department of Humanities,
The New School, 27 September 2008



Ron Rosenbaum, Robert Polito, Leland de la Durantaye, Nina Khrushcheva

2008 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in the United States. *Lolita in America*, a day-long symposium at The New School in New York City, reflected on the enormous impact this novel has had on American culture and, indeed, on cultures worldwide. Panelists discussed *Lolita* in the context of U.S. publishing, American literature, world literature, and popular culture in the 1950's. Testifying to the enduring impact of Nabokov's 50-year-old novel, over 500 people attended the event, which featured fourteen speakers ranging from American and Russian

literature specialists to well-known writers and cultural critics, experts in international affairs and film studies, and Nabokov's editor at McGraw-Hill. Featured speakers included the seminal Nabokov scholar Alfred Appel, Jr., the prolific Nabokov scholar Ellen Pifer, and Nina Khrushcheva, a political theorist and literary critic who made news in the past year with her new work, *Imagining Nabokov: Russia Between Art and Politics*.

In her plenary lecture, Ellen Pifer shed light on the controversies and the remarkable achievement of Nabokov's American masterpiece. Alfred Appel, Jr. regaled us with a discussion of the cultural context of the "fabulous 1940's and 1950's" with a "call for revisionism" with regard to this "much-scorned" period in American history. Nina Khrushcheva shared her first reactions to *Lolita* as a Russian twelve-year-old and her experiences teaching *Lolita* in Russia after her own emigration to the United States.

Three moderated panels delved further into *Lolita*'s passage from a controversial novel both in Europe and the United States to an American cultural icon with global influence. Neil Gordon moderated "*Lolita* in American literature," with presentations by Russian literature specialist Tony Anemone, Americanist Elizabeth Boyle Machlan, and Nabokov's editor at McGraw-Hill, Fred Hills. Hills described his first encounter with *Lolita* and his eventual collaborations with its author, "whose art could not be encapsulated." In a panel on "*Lolita* in world literature," chaired by Val Vinokur, Inessa Medzhibovskaya and Tanya Mairs discussed the literary roots of Nabokov's groundbreaking work in Russian literature as well as European intellectual history. Dominic Pettman, the author of *Love and Other Technologies*, added a new dimension to Alfred Appel's exploration of popular culture in *Lolita* by discussing the old-media novel's obsession with the nubile technologies of film. Finally, two students from the New School community served as panel respondents. The symposium

concluded with a screening of Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of *Lolita*, thoughtfully introduced by Sam Ishii-Gonzales.

Nabokov is still making news in 2008, with the announced publication of *The Original of Laura*, his final unfinished, unpublished, and, in line with the author's wishes, almost-burned novel. The decision to publish this unfinished work—which has only been seen in full by a handful of Nabokov family members and insiders since its existence was confirmed in the final years of the author's life—became a focal point of the symposium, as speakers weighed in and evoked comparisons with the fate of the almost-burned *Lolita*.

Robert Polito moderated a panel on “*Lolita, Laura, and the Burning of Books*,” in which Leland de la Durantaye, Laura Frost, Ron Rosenbaum, and Lila Azam Zanganeh set out—as requested—to discuss the controversy over the pending publication and the possible relationship between *Lolita* and *Laura*. Following Leland de la Durantaye's talk, which provided an overview of what is publicly known about *Laura*, however, the conversation irresistibly turned to the role of the Nabokov estate in laying the groundwork for a final literary sensation in Nabokov's name. Ron Rosenbaum called for the estate to reverse course on the publication of *Laura*. Nabokov, Rosenbaum said, would want *Laura* “to be a final draft, not a funhouse mirror reflection, not anything less than the irreducible complexity of a Nabokovian final draft.” Laura Frost surveyed what she dubbed the Nabokov Estate's “dance of the seven veils,” i.e., the teasing revelation of small excerpts from the manuscript to date. In her view, the circumstances surrounding the revelation of the manuscript—and the selection of the excerpts themselves—call to mind a Nabokovian hoax. Lila Azam Zanganeh, paraphrasing remarks given to her by Dmitri Nabokov, Nabokov's son and the executor of the Nabokov estate, said that based on Nabokov's urgent effort to complete *Laura* and comments he made on his deathbed, he, Dmitri, had always intended to publish the manuscript: “That is why I decided early on not to consign *Laura* to the funeral pyre.”

Lolita in America was made possible through a collaboration between The New School for General Studies and Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts, with contributions from The New School Writing Program, The New School Bachelor's Program, the Department of Foreign Languages, the Graduate Program in International Affairs, the Department of Media Studies and Film, and the Eugene Lang College Department of Writing and Literature. We sincerely appreciate the participation of those who attended the symposium as speakers and audience members. Podcasts from the conference will soon be available on iTunes U. The complete symposium program, including participants' bios, is available at: <http://www.newschool.edu/lolitaconference/>.

Carolyn Vellenga Berman,
Meghan Roe
The New School

Natalia Kuznetsova
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OVERVIEW OF PANELS



Fred Hills, Nina Khrushcheva, Anthony Anemone

Ellen Pifer (English and Comparative Literature, *University of Delaware*)

Lolita's Wild Ride

From her conception along the highways and byways of America, to her near-extinction in a garden incinerator, to her initial appearance between the covers of the dubious Olympia Press in Paris, to the controversy sparked by her American debut—*Lolita* has had a wild ride through the annals of literary history. Launched by a publishing *succès de scandale* in 1958, the novel garnered, within the short span of a dozen years, the distinction of a scholarly annotated edition. Now, half a century later, *Lolita's* status as an American classic remains unquestioned. At the same time, her checkered history and bizarre relationship to mass culture continue to provoke debate. Scrutinizing the novel's textual and thematic intricacies, Ellen Pifer shed light on both the controversies and the remarkable achievement signaled by Nabokov's American masterpiece.

Alfred Appel, Jr. (*Northwestern University*)

Lolita and the Fabulous Forties and Fifties

Alfred Appel gave a long view of Nabokov's *Lolita* in the context of popular culture, connecting the comical and satirical elements of the novel with the way our popular culture has unfolded since then. Amplifying his annotations to *Lolita*, he illustrated the kinds of popular culture adored by Lolita in the novel with magazine images and music. Nabokov captured the teen spirit just as it unfolded, in Appel's view, and his novel anticipated the culture of mayhem that we have had in the movies ever since. (The killing of Quilty, for example, sets the tone for a turning-point in movie violence, the 1962 Bond film *Dr. No.*)



Alfred Appel, Jr.

Nina Khrushcheva (International Affairs, *The New School*)

Reading Lolita in Russia

Nina Khrushcheva argued that while “reading *Lolita* is complex in all countries, it’s quadruply complicated in Russia.” For many readers during the Soviet times, Nabokov was a “traitor” to his Russianness, notorious for claiming to be “as American as April in Arizona.” Spurning the communal and the typical character, he stood outside the Russian tradition; as Isaac Babel, the Soviet writer, concluded, “A talented writer, but he has nothing to write about.” Khrushcheva herself, as a 12-year-old girl belonging to the Russian intelligentsia, read a xeroxed used copy of the novel bound in pale green cardboard, in order to share the dissident intellectual experience, but “I hated *Lolita* too.” Yet all this changed in Russia in 1991. Nabokov, she noted, would have been “delighted” at his reception in post-communist Russia, where he had become “a textbook, a road map for the transitional period from a closed and communal terrain to its Western alternative, open and competitive.” Nabokov “described our different states of being in freedom,” both good (as in *Ada*) and bad (as in *Lolita*). Unfortunately,

however, “Nabokov’s message has not survived Putinism” – but this, Khrushcheva concluded, is “Russia’s loss, not Nabokov’s.”

Fred Hills (Former Editor-in-Chief, McGraw-Hill)

The Editor’s Role

As the last of Nabokov's editors to work directly with him, Hills thought it best to share his impressions of the author and convey what it was like to work with him. Thus much of his presentation was, as he put it, “anecdotal rather than analytical.” His encounters with *Lolita* were three-fold: as a student, reading the American edition when it first appeared; as editor-in-chief at McGraw-Hill, where he inherited Alfred Appel's *Annotated Lolita* and was charged with looking after its fortunes; and finally as an editor working directly with “VN” on *Lolita: A Screenplay*. Altogether, Hills published a half dozen of Nabokov’s works, including three of his four definitive short story collections, his nonfiction book, *Strong Opinions*, and his final completed novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*. This brought him in close contact with Nabokov on a number of occasions. Hills commented in particular on a week-long visit with the author in Zermatt, Switzerland in late June, 1974, during which — along with butterfly hunting in the foothills of the Matterhorn — the two discussed a variety of topics, including intimations of mortality and Nabokov’s battles with his biographer, Andrew Field (especially concerning Field's assertion of homosexuality in the Nabokov bloodlines, a suggestion which VN considered utterly reprehensible). In the discussion following the panel, Hills introduced a heretofore unrecognized connection between *Lolita* and a particular work by Henry James.

Anthony Anemone (Foreign Languages, *The New School*)

Vladimir Nabokov: The Enigmas of Arrival

The themes of artistic freedom and its converse, censorship, occupy a central place in the life and works of Vladimir Nabokov. Censored first by the Soviets and then by the émigré community, Nabokov may be seen as coming to America in search of a place that would grant him the unconditional right to write what he pleased. In his presentation, Tony Anemone stressed the scandal of *Dar* – the refusal by the liberal editors of the leading émigré “fat journal,” *Contemporary Annals*, to publish the satirical biography of Chernyshevsky – which revealed hitherto unknown authoritarian aspects of émigré society and left a deep imprint on Nabokov. Nabokov’s willingness to give up his “nature idiom, [his] untrammled, rich and infinitely docile tongue for a second-rate brand of English” (Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 490) suggests how deeply he was affronted by the émigré community’s rejection of his greatest novel, in Anemone’s view. Nevertheless, once in America, Nabokov appears to have gone out of his way to find the one theme that could provoke and scandalize Americans as much as he had previously scandalized Russians. What would *Lolita*’s depiction of the suave European pedophile taking advantage of an American girl-child reveal about provincial and puritanical America? Happily, despite much faintheartedness on the part of potential publishers, *Lolita* was eventually published in America and its merits recognized by both critics and readers. While the runaway success of *Lolita* resulted in Nabokov’s triumphant return to Europe, his emergence as an American classic and international literary star might never have occurred if the Russian émigré intelligentsia had recognized the merits of *The Gift*.

Inessa Medzhibovskaya (Literary Studies, *The New School*)

Literary Roots of Deviance in Lolita

Inessa Medzhibovskaya's paper suggested that one of the underappreciated routes for uncovering new secrets in Nabokov's book may be through Humbert rather than Lolita. She posed three questions: Who is Humbert? What are his literary and artistic roots? And what is the genre in which he acts, lives, loves, commits crimes, and dies? Her paper connected Nabokov's character to the literary lineage of the Russian and Central-East European male predator, an aberration symptomatic of the historical age in which the action of *Lolita* the novel takes place as much as of the rich diachronic kinships of this artistic type. By addressing the form of *récit* and the framing elements used in the novel, she questioned the relationship of the "artist and madman" on several levels of analysis in order to cast light on the play of avowals and denials concerning Nabokov's agreements and disagreements with his literary creation. Finally, she considered the possibility of several competing conclusions to the story, in light of its multiple authors and voices.

Dominic Pettman (Media Studies and Film, *The New School*)

That Complex Ghost: Passion, Recognition, and Resemblance in Lolita

Dominic Pettman explored the character of Lolita as a "quilting point" for a cluster of rhetorical experiments concerning the relationship of *Being* to desire. His initial conceit was to approach the novel from a radical new angle, that is to say, to read it as if it were science fiction. He was interested in the possibility that *Lolita* is essentially about time-travel. (For as Humbert himself says, "[T]he idea of time plays such a magic part in the matter.") Pettman thus spent his twenty

minutes sketching the outlines of the relationship between temporality and memory in the book, especially as it crystallizes around Dolores Haze – a girl who is at once utterly singular, and yet also a human echo of others. Overall, Pettman made two key claims: the first was that *Lolita* is not only about an older man leering after a young girl, nor is it only allegorical of Old Europe lusting after the New World, but that it also concerns the long-in-the-tooth novel, chasing the rustling celluloid skirts of that new pubescent technology on the block: cinema. The second claim was that Humbert’s fetishization of Lolita as absolutely unique and exceptional (and thus worthy of his obsession) is paradoxically sustained by a sly acknowledgement that she could in fact be any number of nymphets and, indeed, embodies a kind of amalgam or composite of several different – potentially infinite – girls. These two claims intersect, claimed Pettman, in Humbert’s melancholic desire to affix Lolita forever to a velvet board, like a pinned butterfly; to arrest her in time with his words; to be frustrated by the impossibility of such a feat, and thus to frame his prize with other butterflies.

Ron Rosenbaum (Cultural Columnist for *Slate*)

Second Thoughts About the Fate of Laura

As a columnist who had pressed Dmitri Nabokov to make a decision about the fate of *The Original of Laura*, “before, perforce, it was left to the lawyers,” Ron Rosenbaum discussed his second thoughts about Mr. Nabokov’s recent decision to publish the unfinished manuscript. He had long sympathized with Dmitri Nabokov’s tormenting dilemma—torn between his father’s wish to burn the unfinished manuscript and literary “posterity’s” demand to preserve it. Once Dmitri had made the decision to publish, however, Rosenbaum “began suffering doubts about the nature of the decision.” First, he felt that the wishes of the dead

should be respected: “they don't deserve less respect, or outright disrespect because they are celebrated writers. Perhaps even more respect.” He considered how Shakespeare would have felt about being saddled with the authorship of *A Lover's Complaint*, “the long, wretched follow-on to the Sonnets in the 1609 Quarto.” Second, he stressed Nabokov's notorious perfectionism: “anything short of the perfected final draft might cause the reader to miss the point entirely,” a “mortifying” fate for such a writer. Third, he pointed to the inevitable *Lolita* lens through which *Laura* will be seen (if the available excerpts are any indication): “For all we know, VN might have been undecided about whether to include the inevitably controversial—and likely misread—man/child bathing scene as it now exists on note cards.” Rosenbaum concluded that “there is something wrong about making that decision for him, or rather against him, or to deceive ourselves and make the decision all too easy by saying—for one imagined reason or another—VN didn't really mean what he said.”

Laura Frost (Literary Studies, *The New School*)
The Scandal of “Lolita,” the Secrets of “Laura”

Laura Frost argued that the book-burning debate surrounding *The Original of Laura* is a red herring that has kept us from noticing the Nabokov Estate's slow, teasing, and very strategic “dance of the seven veils” with regard to the novel. Looking at the nature of the excerpts that the Estate has allowed to be published in *The Nabokovian* and *Die Zeit* in conjunction with Dmitri Nabokov's stated concerns about his father's last work, Frost questioned the Estate's motivations and speculated about whose reputation is really at stake: the father's or the son's. Frost concluded that we need to see all of this fragmentary novel before we can judge it; to date, all we can judge is the Nabokov Estate.

Lila Azam Zanganeh (Literary Correspondent, *Le Monde*)

Destroy and Forget: The Secret of Durable Pigments

The title of Lila Azam Zanganeh's talk draws from both *Ada* and *Lolita* ("Destroy and forget. But we still have an hour before tea"; "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments"). Zanganeh explored the paradox which, she believes, "lies at the heart of the memory process." There are, as she argued, several kinds of memory. One form of memory, for instance, is habit; another is "souvenir" (see Bergson). Both are passive forms of memory, thus easily obliterated. But there is also "a creative form of memory, which first needs to disappear in order to freely reemerge." She pointed to the tale of Abu Nuwas, the brilliant figure of classical Arabic tradition who, in the 8th century, turned to his Master Khalaf for help in becoming a poet. Khalaf told him he should learn all classical poetry, and then forget it, to at last be able to create. Zanganeh suggested that like Nuwas, in order to best remember, we first have to forget. In this view, memory, like imagination, is a figure of absence (see Ricoeur). It needs a place of emptiness, so that it might reemerge against a backdrop of translucence. Zanganeh argued that *The Original of Laura* should be published, read, and then "forgotten" in the larger context of the Nabokovian oeuvre, so that we may resume the process of writing and thinking creatively about Vladimir Nabokov.



Carolyn Vellenga Berman, Lila Azam Zanganeh, Ellen Pifer

Tanya Mairs (Humanities, *The New School*)

Dostoyevski, Freud, and Lolita

Nabokov's disdain for Dostoyevski and Freud is well known. He called Dostoyevski a mediocre writer and dismissed the "literature of ideas." And he disparaged Freudian theory, calling Freud "the Viennese Quack." Yet Tanya Mairs argued that Freudian psychology is in some ways pitted against Dostoyevski's moral view of the world in *Lolita*. The actions of Humbert Humbert, in her view, exemplify Freudian theory taken to a logical – though disturbing – extreme, realizing what Nabokov considered to be the corrupting effects of Freud's beliefs. Ironically, in so doing, Nabokov's novel comes to stand alongside Dostoyevski's works, employing moral and religious principles to counteract Freud.

Sam Ishii-Gonzales (Media Studies and Film, *The New School*)
Stanley Kubrick's Lolita

In his introduction to the screening of Stanley Kubrick's 1962 adaptation of *Lolita*, Sam Ishii-Gonzales argued that the film is flawed but fascinating, providing insight into the work of both Nabokov and Kubrick. The various drafts of Nabokov's screenplay (from the original 400-page submission to the 1972 published version) give us a glimpse into the author's creative process at the peak of his career and show his willingness to "reinvent" the novel by devising endless new situations or predicaments for his characters. Kubrick, for his part, demonstrated his growing maturity as a new filmmaker with this work, precisely in his decision to use the script as a starting point rather than an end goal, allowing the film to develop in unexpected directions in both the production and post-production stages. The lessons that Kubrick learned while making *Lolita* would pay dividends in the films to follow, making evident the importance of Nabokov and his novel to Kubrick's development as a film auteur.

