

Reading *Lolita* in 2024

Victor Ripp

Course Information

Wednesdays from 10:00 a.m.–noon for eight weeks beginning October 2 through November 20.

In-Person – Discussion – Maximum 20

Course Description

When *Lolita* was published in 1958, one review dismissed it as ‘highbrow pornography,’ given its narrative of a middle-aged man lusting after a 12-year-old girl. A second review praised Nabokov for creating a ‘major work of fiction.’ Complicating any judgment of the book was its tone --the ‘funniest book I remember having read,’ is how one critic had it.

Opinion about *Lolita* has become only more complicated as our social culture has evolved. We will consider the views of several contemporary critics as we try to sort out the various positions.

Nabokov was from a wealthy family in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Forced to emigrate, he never returned to his homeland. Excerpts from Nabokov’s autobiography (*Speak, Memory*) will illuminate how his personal history plays out in his fiction, including in *Lolita*.

Nabokov is a rarity among novelists: not only in switching from his native language to English, but then having his prose very highly praised. Not all critics are convinced, finding his style pretentious and needlessly abstruse. (n.b., Nabokov liked to pass the time reading Webster’s dictionary.) Close attention to selected passages should allow us to form our own judgment.

Texts

- *Lolita* (Vintage)
- *Nabokov’s Dozen* (Penguin)
- *Pnin* (Vintage)

Course Schedule

Weeks	Readings
Week One	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Mademoiselle O,” (<i>Nabokov’s Dozen</i>), sections 1 & 7 • “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” (<i>Nabokov’s Dozen</i>)
Week Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Speak, Memory</i> (excerpts – in Dropbox) • “Signs and Symbols,” (<i>Nabokov’s Dozen</i>)
Week Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Spring in Fialta,” (<i>Nabokov’s Dozen</i>) • <i>Lolita</i>, pp 3-11
Week Four	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lolita</i>, pp 11-109
Week Five	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lolita</i>, pp 109-208
Week Six	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lolita</i>, pp 208-309
Week Seven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lolita</i>, pp 311-317 (“On a book entitled <i>Lolita</i>”) • Critical views of <i>Lolita</i> (in Dropbox) • Pnin, pp 3-82
Week Eight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pnin, pp 83-190

Leader

Victor Ripp was a Professor of Russian literature at Cornell and is the author, most recently, of *Hell's Traces*.