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Teaching *Lolita* in a Course on Ethics and Literature  
*Marilyn Edelstein*

The late 1980s saw a resurgence of interest in ethics and literature, with the publication of new books on the subject by major scholars like J. Hillis Miller and Wayne Booth. In recent years, many critics and theorists (including some Nabokov scholars) have (re)turned to ethical questions about literature: Does literature imitate life, and will readers, in turn, imitate the actions (whether virtuous or ignoble) of characters in literary texts? How and why can literary works be ethically beneficial or harmful for their readers? Are authors responsible for any ethical effects—positive or negative—their works may produce in readers? What are the relations between aesthetics and ethics?

Vladimir Nabokov's brilliant, funny, and poignant novel *Lolita* foregrounds such questions. After years of teaching *Lolita* occasionally in courses on contemporary American literature, I decided a few years ago to make it the centerpiece of a new course I was designing as a senior seminar for English majors, Ethics and Literature. The novel might have seemed a strange choice to students and even colleagues who had heard about but not read *Lolita*, whose reputation always precedes it. After all, the novel is about and narrated by a grown man who repeatedly proclaims his lust and, finally, love for a barely pubescent girl who becomes his legal stepdaughter and with whom he has frequent and often nonconsensual sex. To put it more bluntly, this is a novel "about" pedophilia and (pseudo) incest. Yet *Lolita* may also be, in John Hollander's formulation, the "record" of its author's "love affair with the romantic novel" (559), or, as Nabokov prefers, with the English language ("On a Book" 316). Or is *Lolita* "both a love story and a parody of love stories" (Appel, Notes 395) or both a romance and a parody of romance (Frosch)? Is it a novel about the (im)possibility of love or the wages of solipsism (and sexism) or "aesthetic bliss," as Nabokov himself suggests in the afterword to *Lolita* ("On a Book" 314), or the quest for immortality through art (if not eternal youth through sex with nymphets)?

Assigning *Lolita* in a course on ethics and literature might also have seemed strange to Nabokov scholars familiar with Nabokov's many statements railing against Freudian, Marxist, and ethical analyses and advocating instead more aesthetic readings of his work. Although the fictional editor of *Lolita*, John Ray, Jr., asserts in the foreword "the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader" (5), Nabokov claims in *Lolita's* afterword that he is "neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction" and that "*Lolita* has no moral in tow" ("On a Book" 314). Proving, however, that there are not only unreliable narrators (like Humbert Humbert) but also unreliable authors, Nabokov argues, in his essay "Good Readers and Good Writers," that "a major writer combines these
three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter—and that readers “may go to the teacher for moral education” (Lectures on Literature 5).

Much early Nabokov criticism did focus on Nabokov as enchanter—as a writer in love with language, games, and artifice (see, e.g., Bader; Appel, Introduction)—rather than as storyteller, let alone as moral educator. Yet, in her 1980 book Nabokov and the Novel, Ellen Pifer argued persuasively for an ethical reading of Lolita and other works in Nabokov’s oeuvre (see also Green). Pifer argues that Nabokov is a “rigorous moralist” whose texts challenge and unsettle the reader, thus expanding perception (169, 129–30). Some later critics have followed Pifer’s lead; for example, Stephen Jan Parker states that “a strong moral vision underlies [Nabokov’s] art” (Understanding 5).

Since Lolita foregrounds and complicates ethical questions, I chose it as the central literary work for the ethics and literature course. Although all undergraduates at Santa Clara University—a Jesuit institution emphasizing values and social justice—are required to take a course in ethics (as part of our extensive core curriculum), the English department had never offered a course on ethics and literature. I designed one that linked my longstanding interest in Nabokov with my other teaching and research interests: literary theory and the history of criticism, feminist theory, contemporary American literature, as well as ethical approaches to literature.

I knew most students taking this course would have little if any background in contemporary literary and critical theory—since our department only recently added a major requirement in theory—or in the history of literary criticism. My primary goals were to enable students to understand and join a lively two-millennia-old conversation about ethics and literature and to apply the theoretical work we were reading—from Plato to the present—to their analyses of Lolita and other literary texts (without reducing the literary texts to mere test cases for the theories). In the seminar, I foregrounded three central issues: whether and how literature is mimetic; the potential ethical effects of literary texts, even those—like Lolita—that do not seem to have any explicit moral messages; and the role of affect and emotion in both ethics and the reading of literature.

We began the seminar where Western philosophy and literary theory began, with Plato and Aristotle. In book 10 of the Republic, Plato claims that poetry is “thrice-removed from the truth” (that is, the Ideas or Forms) and thus incapable of being morally improving (25). Plato also argues that poetry is morally harmful because it “feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up” (28) and thus inhibits rather than encourages reason (and therefore philosophy). Aristotle shares his teacher Plato’s view that literature is essentially mimetic but, contra Plato, argues that poets (unlike historians) can imitate not only things “that are” but also “things that ought to be” (62) or that “might possibly occur” (48). The poet is thus freed from bondage to “reality” (a term Nabokov, unlike Aristotle, always uses in quotation marks).

Exploring later challenges to Plato’s narrowly mimetic view of literature, we discussed Sir Philip Sidney’s An Apology for Poetry (1595), in which Sidney
asserts that the poet is not limited to the mere imitation of nature but "doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, . . . freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit" (137). Nabokov, as I told students, has a similar view: "the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world . . . having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know"—even though readers can draw this connection once they have carefully studied the writer's newly created world (Lectures on Literature 1). Sidney argues that, contra Plato, poets should not be accused of telling lies since they do not claim to be telling the truth (149). Yet, as I asked students in the seminar, can a fictional world, "another nature," not be mistaken for or equated with "reality" or "truth" but still have some ethical relevance for real readers in their real lives?

Most readers—and especially student readers—of fictional works assume that the characters are, if not real, then relatively transparent representations of real people. I often find students speculating about what happens after the novel ends or what would have happened if the characters had made different choices. In the seminar we discussed Nabokov’s claims, echoing Sidney’s, that literary texts are independent fictional worlds and that only bad readers identify with characters in books (Lectures on Literature 4). I wanted to subvert students’ common and often unexamined assumption that characters are real yet also encourage students to examine their own human—including affective and intellectual—responses to and judgments of these characters, who seem, when we read, as if they were real.

Continuing our exploration of the relations between aesthetics and ethics (or words and world), we next read Immanuel Kant’s “First Book: Analytic of the Beautiful” from Critique of Judgment, in which Kant distinguishes the beautiful from both the good and the pleasant. He argues that the judgment of the beautiful must be completely disinterested (and, in principle, universal). Although most students—like many before them—found Kant’s aesthetic theory rather baffling, they understood at least some of his ethical theory, such as the “categorical imperative”: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Groundwork 31). Students readily discerned the similarity between this principle and one they were more familiar with—"the golden rule." Thus, following Kant, one should not choose to abuse a child or to murder unless one were willing to have all people on earth do such things—including to oneself.

Particularly helpful in our later discussion of Humbert’s treatment of Lolita was Kant’s idea that one should treat other people as “ends-in-themselves,” not as means (Groundwork 37)—for instance, not as a means to achieve one’s own pleasure or even to create immortal art, as Humbert variously admits to doing through Lolita. I reminded students that Humbert and Lolita are not “people” but rather, as Nabokov punitively calls his characters, “galley slaves” (Strong Opinions 95); so it is not the characters but the author who chooses actions for the characters within the fictional world for specific literary (and perhaps ethical) reasons.
The next two writer-critics we read, Percy Shelley and Leo Tolstoy, helped us think about whether and how a literary work might have ethical effects even if, like *Lolita*, it does not have any obviously ethical characters to emulate. In “A Defence of Poetry,” Shelley suggests that poetry can have a moral *effect* even (or especially) if it does not convey a moral *message*. He writes that “poetry awakens and enlarges the mind itself” and better allows us to imagine how others feel, thereby increasing our capacities for empathy, sympathy, and compassion. For Shelley, “the great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature,” and therefore “a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and . . . must put himself in the place of another” (344). As my students discovered, Humbert (although an imagined character rather than a man) is supremely capable of the former but not the latter. My students further developed the links I suggested between Shelley’s Romantic views of literary ethics and Nabokov’s, especially regarding the transformative (and ethical) potential of both imagination and feeling.

Selections from Tolstoy’s polemical treatise *What Is Art?*, written after his late-life religious conversion to his own version of Christianity, provided another approach to our ethical analyses of *Lolita*. Tolstoy repudiates any aesthetic definitions of art or criteria for judging it, replacing them with religious and ethical criteria. He argues that true art must unite all people by reflecting the best religious thought of its age and by shrugging simple, honest human feelings and that art should be judged by how well it does these things. For Tolstoy, there are two kinds of “religious art”: the higher one, conveying “positive feelings of love of God and one’s neighbor,” and the lower one, conveying “negative feelings of indignation and horror at the violation of love” (152). Granting a provisional reality to the characters and events in *Lolita*, we discussed in class whether readers can find in Humbert a “negative” ethical example, an example of how *not* to act: solipsistically or selfishly, using others as a means to one’s own ends.

After surveying centuries of Western thought about ethics and literature, we began our extended discussion of *Lolita* (and then of both the Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne films of the novel) about midquarter. We also read several essays by Nabokov, John Gardner’s *On Moral Fiction*, and substantial sections of Booth’s *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. After *Lolita*, we read several short stories that foreground ethical issues, including Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk away from Omelas.” This self-reflexive, quasi-science fiction story was, as Le Guin tells us, inspired by a philosophical question posed by Fyodor Dostoevsky and William James: Would we be content to live in an idyllic society whose citizens’ complete happiness was assured by the absolute suffering of one—and only one—small child? The story provoked lively classroom debate; the story’s explicit focus on a central ethical question—and the nature of this question—also provided some interesting comparisons with *Lolita*.

I began our discussion of *Lolita* with an approach I often use—one that draws on reader-response theory as well as an ethics and literature perspective—asking students to share their initial intellectual and emotional responses to the text. The most problematic aspect of *Lolita* for many students—especially women
students—was their enthralment with Humbert’s language and literariness and their identification through much of the novel with his point of view. Many students thought the novel’s subject matter—pedophilia—was shocking but were surprised that they were not shocked by Humbert’s confessions; some found their own lack of shock rather shocking.

Of course, as Nomi Tamir-Ghez has ably shown, Humbert’s skilled rhetoric as narrator persuades most readers to share his way of seeing Lolita and everything else. Yet my students engaged in a great deal of self-questioning when they found themselves liking Humbert despite their varying degrees of repulsion for his use and objectification of Lolita. In fact, as I told students, many Nabokov scholars have also been persuaded by Humbert’s (and Nabokov’s) brilliant rhetoric to see Humbert as the only relevant subject or “person” in the text, disregarding or denigrating Lolita (cf. Linda Kauffman’s and Gladys Clifton’s feminist analyses of these trends in Lolita criticism). An important added complexity in Lolita is that even the facts of the novel (e.g., that Lolita first seduced Humbert) are given to us by a narrator who admits to being hospitalized more than once for mental illness and to reconstructing events from a not always infallible memory; clearly Humbert qualifies as an unreliable narrator as well as a pedophile.

Many of my students, like other readers of Lolita, eventually agreed with Nabokov that “Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear ‘touching’” and that only Lolita herself, Nabokov’s “poor little girl,” is truly touching, even though Nabokov also believes that each character is merely an “eidolon” (Strong Opinions 94). We discussed whether, by the end of his narrative, Humbert was sincerely penitent for his treatment of Lolita and whether he really loved her (long after her nymphethood had faded), as he states. Even students who believed one or both of these claims also felt that Humbert had destroyed Lolita’s youth, if not her life. Yet most students wound up feeling at least some pity or compassion for Humbert, even if they felt much more for Lolita.

The difficulty my students had in arriving at moral judgments of Humbert and of their own sympathy for him may itself serve a larger ethical purpose. In addition to expanding our awareness of the possibilities of language and of art and enlarging our imaginations and thus our capacities for compassion, Lolita encourages its readers to examine their own ethical responses to the text and its relation to our world.

Can a literary text be ethical if it is not explicitly didactic and does not have a clear moral lesson (since “thou shalt not commit pedophilia” is hardly a lesson worth writing a complex, sad, and funny novel about or that needs to be taught to most readers)? Even Gardner, an outspoken advocate of “moral fiction,” argues that “didacticism and true art are immiscible” (19) and defines morality as “nothing more than doing what is unselfish, helpful, kind, and noble-hearted” (23). This definition is not so different from Nabokov’s “aesthetic bliss” (a term often taken out of context from Lolita’s afterword), “a sense of being somehow,
somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (“On a Book” 314–15).

In a 1945 letter I shared with students, Nabokov explains his position on the relations between ethics and aesthetics:

> I never meant to deny the moral impact of art which is certainly inherent in every genuine work of art. What I do deny and am prepared to fight to the last drop of my ink is the deliberate moralizing which to me kills every vestige of art in a work however skillfully written. (Vladimir Nabokov 56)

We also considered Nabokov’s statement, in a 1956 letter, that *Lolita* “is a highly moral affair” (*Dear Bunny* 331). Such statements provoked fruitful class discussions—drawing together much of what we had read during the quarter—about the diverse ways in which literary texts can be ethical or have ethical effects (and about authors’ relations to their texts).

My students seemed to agree that *Lolita* raises important ethical questions even if it does not provide any clear ethical messages or answers. I teach *Lolita* in part because I think education is more about asking good questions than arriving at clear answers, although I know that many students prefer the latter. I also teach *Lolita* because I think it is one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century. Perhaps we do our best work as teachers of literature when we help students develop the skills to analyze not only literature but also themselves—including their own ethical and aesthetic responses to literary texts like *Lolita*. 