***Approaches to Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*,
edited by Zoran Kuzmanovich and Galya Diment.
The Modern Language Association of America,
New York, 2008; ISBN 978-0-87352-943-3, xiv+190 pp.
Prefaces to series and volume. Notes on contributors.
Bibliography. No price available.**

It is difficult to imagine a more useful handbook for teaching *Lolita* than this one. It goes a long way towards its aim of helping teachers to make “Nabokov’s chocolate mousse prose” accessible to students.¹ The first section of the book contains a usefully comprehensive chronology of Nabokov’s life, continuing with a detailed and insightful analysis of many different materials relating to the study of *Lolita*, including a full account of the complex publication history of the text. But the real meat of this book is in Part 2. The variety of stimulating strategies for teaching *Lolita* described, in some detail,

¹ Kuzmanovich and Diment, ed., *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, Preface to the volume, page unnumbered.

should comfortably achieve the book's stated aspiration of preventing "students falling into platitudes."²

The first critical essay, "Only Words to Play With: Teaching 'Lolita' in Reading and Writing Courses" certainly tackles a critical platitude. In "Is *Lolita* a dirty book?"³ Samuel Schuman explores the issue of what kind of book *Lolita* actually is. In an approach typical of many of the other essays in the collection, he describes how he explored Nabokov's text with first-term students, employing a varied complex of practical teaching techniques.

In describing her approach to the text in "Teaching *Lolita* in a Course on Ethics and Literature," Marilyn Edelstein explores Nabokov's conflicting statements on the novelist as moralist. "Since *Lolita* foregrounds and complicates ethical questions,"⁴ Edelstein goes on to describe how she exposed her students to various classic texts of literary criticism from Plato to Kant, exploring the relationship between ethics and literature. After introducing a seemingly unpromising connection between Tolstoy and Nabokov, she describes how she explored Tolstoy's famously non-aesthetic view of the purpose of art in his treatise *What is Art?* with her students. Edelstein includes a discussion of Tolstoy's view of the two types of religious art, the "lower" of which conveys "negative feelings of indignation and horror at the violation of love."⁵ Tolstoy's essay would now seem to possess an obvious, if previously unsuspected, interest for students of *Lolita* and, in her own study of the text, Edelstein includes a discussion of Humbert Humbert as a "negative" ethical example, in Tolstoy's sense.

It is clear that among the most interesting essays in this continually challenging and engaging book are those which relate *Lolita* to Russian literature and culture, firmly locating Nabokov in a Russian milieu. In the first such essay in the volume—"Teaching *Lolita* with Dostoevsky and Poe in Mind"—Dale E. Peterson, quoting Mikhail Bakhtin, relates the position of Humbert Humbert with his "supremely self-conscious narration" to "Dostoevsky's unattractive and slippery narrators."⁶ The justice of this

² Ibid., 27.

³ Samuel Schuman, "Only Words to Play With: Teaching 'Lolita' in Reading and Writing Courses," *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, 31.

⁴ Marilyn Edelstein, "Teaching *Lolita* in a Course on Ethics and Literature," *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, 44.

⁵ L. N. Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, trans. Aylmer Maude (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), 152.

⁶ Dale E. Peterson, "Teaching *Lolita* with Dostoevsky and Poe in Mind," *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, 73. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. and ed. C. Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), 233.

observation is at once obvious and certainly ironic, given Nabokov's well-documented hostility toward Dostoevsky.

In his essay "Russian Cultural Contexts for *Lolita*," Julian W. Connolly links the "demonic nymphet,"⁷ Dolores Haze, to the similarly bewitching folklore-figure of the *rusalka* in works by Pushkin and Gogol. Connolly suggests a particular link to the "drowned maiden" of Gogol's short story "A May Night, or The Drowned Maiden." He posits a further fruitful connection between Nabokov and Dostoevsky in linking Stavrogin's (suppressed) confession in "At Tikhon's" to the "Dostoevskian grin" Humbert Humbert admits to enjoying as he contemplates how marriage to Charlotte Haze would grant him ready access to Lolita—a young girl of much the same age as Stavrogin's victim in *The Devils*.⁸

In her essay "Teaching *Lolita* Through Pushkin's Eyes," Priscilla Meyer reminds us that Nabokov was working on his translation of *Eugene Onegin* (1950-57) while writing *Lolita* (1947-54), and she discovers (perhaps well-hidden) similarities between the two, including: the action of both texts spans five years; the heroine of each grows from "provincial miss to inaccessible grown woman"; the "hero" in both books returns from lengthy travels, only to be rejected by his love; Onegin kills Lensky, Humbert kills Quilty. Finally, both Pushkin and Nabokov offer the reader the possibility of creative confusion of the personae of author, hero and narrator.⁹ We might add that in Canto IV (stanza VIII) of *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin reveals that Tatiana was thirteen years of age when she first met Onegin.¹⁰

It is well known that Nabokov was a keen cinema patron when he was young.¹¹ Galya Diment explores the possible creative influences of early Russian film on Nabokov in her piece "From Bauer's Li to Nabokov's Lo: *Lolita* and Early Russian Film." She describes the influence of Poe on Nabokov, and on Evgenii Bauer—an important director in early Russian cinema, whose films dealt with themes that "brim with dark psychological twists and turns of the kind that Nabokov appreciated."¹²

⁷ Julian W. Connolly, "Russian Cultural Contexts for *Lolita*," *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, 89.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁹ Priscilla Meyer, "Teaching *Lolita* Through Pushkin's Eyes," *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, 95, 98.

¹⁰ Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, trans. Stanley Mitchell (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 79.

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 182.

¹² Galya Diment, "From Bauer's Li to Nabokov's Lo: *Lolita* and Early Russian Film," *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, 103.

Nabokov would certainly have appreciated the ironies apparent in Marianne Cartugno's "Teaching *Lolita* at a Religious College." This essay discusses the importance of the context in which a given text is read. In particular, Cartugno fruitfully juxtaposes reading and exploring *Lolita* at a Christian college in the United States with the experiences of the brave women in Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading "Lolita" in Tehran*, who explored the text in secret in what she calls "a place of transgression" somewhere in the capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹³

Nabokov would surely have seen the irony of his super-subtle text *Lolita* being dissected in the strongholds of two rival theologies, both so alien to his belief in the primacy of aesthetic values over all others, and of good writing over the merely second-rate. This book will certainly assist students of Nabokov in very practical ways, both to appreciate the good writing in *Lolita*, and perhaps to become better writers themselves. As Samuel Schuman says in his "Only Words to Play With: Teaching *Lolita* in Introductory Reading and Writing Courses," "it is impossible to read *Lolita* carefully and not recognize when one writes poorly."¹⁴

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¹³ Azar Nafisi, *Interview with Azar Nafisi, Samarkand Quarterly* 3-4 (2003-2004): <http://libstaff.library.vanderbilt.edu/LIBTECH/Stringer/samarkand.html>.

¹⁴ Schuman, "Only Words to Play With," *Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, 34.