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Location: Dunton Tower 1806
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ENGL 5603: Vladimir Nabokov in Context

“Mr. Nabokov,” Jean-Paul Sartre observed in his review of Nabokov’s *Despair*, writes “on subjects of no significance.” This view, shared since by many readers of Nabokov’s work, was nurtured by Nabokov himself. His fiction and discursive writings haughtily announce his total lack of interest in socio-political matters. His unapologetic disdain for writing energized by “social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race” seem calculated to fuel the outrage of engaged writers such as Sartre. Though Nabokov scholars no longer take these pronouncements at face value (such statements, they observe, obscure his more sober accounts of the relationship between literature and the world in which it circulates), Nabokov continues to be charged with insensitivity, arrogance, and naïveté.

The seminar will seek to theorize the ways in which Nabokov’s pursuit of what he called “aesthetic bliss” can yield a poetics of political, philosophical, and moral significance. To situate his work within the contexts that fashioned him, we will begin by reading his memoir *Speak, Memory, An Autobiography Revisited* (1967). Next, we will read three early novels and two short stories, *Despair* (1934), *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), *Bend Sinister* (1947), “Signs and Symbols” (1948), and “The Vane Sisters” (1951). Three novels from his later career—*Lolita* (1955), *Pnin* (1957), and *Pale Fire* (1962)—will be considered in light of personal and historical concerns that played a critical role in Nabokov’s life. These will include Nabokov’s relationship with his homosexual brother who perished in a Nazi concentration camp, the culture and politics of the Cold War, and the history of American privacy and civil rights legislation as it relates to Nabokov’s treatment of sexual crime in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. The scholarly contributions of some of Nabokov’s most perceptive readers will also be considered, such as Steven Belletto, Brian Boyd, Steven Bruhm, Ellen Pifer, David Rampton, Richard Rorty, and Michael Wood.

Members of the seminar will be expected to participate actively in all class discussions. The end-of-term essay should integrate clear-sighted analysis with scholarly research. Work on the essay should be thoughtful, sustained, and directed towards producing a potentially publishable article. To this end, students should approach their seminar presentations and annotated bibliographies as preliminary exercises in crafting a provocative and persuasive argument.

Grade Distribution:

Participation in class discussions (20%); ten unannounced multiple-choice tests (20%); seminar presentation (20%); annotated bibliography (graded on a pass or fail basis); 16-18-page research paper (40%).

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory. Missing a full class without a doctor's note or other pertinent documentation will lead to a deduction of 1% from the final grade. Missing half of a class without a doctor's note or other pertinent documentation will lead to a deduction of 0.5% from the final grade. Members of the seminar are asked to make every effort to come to class on time. **Being consistently late is disrespectful to all members of the seminar.**

Participation: All students are expected to participate in class discussions; mere attendance does not fulfill the participation requirement. Students who do not participate in class discussions with consistency and thoughtfulness will forfeit their participation grade.

Unannounced multiple-choice tests: Nabokov began teaching his own classes on European fiction at Wellesley and Cornell with the following imperative: "In reading, one should notice and fondle the details." In order to cultivate such reading, students will write ten unannounced multiple-choice tests designed to test their detailed knowledge of the works studied in class. Each test will contain eight questions and will be worth 2% of the final grade. Those who have missed a test due to an absence **and** who have a doctor's note or other pertinent documentation will have the opportunity to rewrite **only one** of these tests at the end of the semester. The make-up test will include questions taken from the primary readings covered in the whole course. Students without such documentation will not have the opportunity to rewrite the test. Multiple-choice tests will be written at the beginning of class; those arriving late will not be able to write it and will therefore forfeit the test grade.

Seminar presentations: Seminar members will sign up for presentations on the first day of class. Presentations *must not* be longer than 20 minutes. The aim of the presentations is to give a thorough and thought-provocative introduction to the selected material. Ideally, the presentations should also include an argument that will help stimulate discussion among seminar members. To this end, presentations should end with a list of questions directed at the audience. For the presentation to earn a high grade, it must be extensively researched and effectively organized and delivered. Presenters are encouraged to choose a method of delivery that is most suited to their skills. Presenters must send an electronic copy of their presentations (including a "Works Cited" list) to each member of the seminar 24 hours prior to their scheduled presentation. Seminar members should either read these presentations in advance, or print them and bring them to class. Presenters are strongly encouraged to consult with the instructor at least one week in advance of their presentations.

Annotated Bibliography: This assignment should contain a minimum of 10 bibliographic items relevant to the student's chosen topic of research. Most items should be peer-refereed scholarly articles or books, but the bibliography may also include review

essays, encyclopedia entries, or any other materials pertinent to the topic at hand. Each entry should contain a brief annotation (i.e., a 50-150-word summary of the work in question). Annotated bibliographies will be graded on a pass or fail basis with no percentage points attached to a pass.

Research essays: The essay should be approximately 16-18 pages long (double spaced, 12-point font). Longer papers will not be accepted. Research papers should be extensively researched, thoughtfully argued, and elegantly written. The research papers may be on the same topic as the presentations. All members of the seminar are strongly encouraged to discuss their research projects with the instructor well in advance of the deadline. Late papers will be penalized 5% per day, including weekends and holidays.

Required and Recommended Readings:

Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Speak, Memory*, *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita*, *Invitation of a Small Warrior*, and *Pale Fire* are collected in two volumes published by the Library of America. These editions are especially useful because they contain authoritative annotations and short chronologies of Nabokov's life and work. Though these are the editions we will be using in class, students should feel free to use others. When reading *Despair*, we will use the paperback edition published by Vintage International. These required texts will be available from Octopus Books (116 Third Avenue, the Glebe; phone #: 613-233-2589). "Signs and Symbols" and "The Vane Sisters" will be available in short story collections placed on reserve at the circulation desk on two-hour loans. Please see "reading schedule" below for a list of recommended secondary readings that students may want to consult alongside the required readings. Students are highly encouraged to begin reading the primary materials over the holidays.

It is also highly recommended that students read over the course of the semester as much as possible from the following texts: *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, Nabokov's collection of interviews and discursive writings published as *Strong Opinions*, Brian Boyd's definitive two-volume biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* and *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, the collection of Nabokov's letters published as *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977*, Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature* and *Lectures on Russian Literature*, and his correspondence with Edmund Wilson published as *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*.

The recommended secondary readings that are *not* available online have been placed on reserve at Carleton's McOdrum Library on a 2-hour loan period.

Reading Schedule

January 4	Introduction
January 11	<i>Speak, Memory</i> Recommended secondary reading:

Zoran Kuzmanovich, "Strong Opinions and Nerve Points: Nabokov's Life and Art," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian Connolly, pp. 11-30.

- January 18 *Despair*
Recommended secondary readings:
Sergej Davydov, "Despair," in *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir Alexandrov,
Brian Boyd, "Nabokov as Storyteller," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian Connolly, pp. 31-48.
- January 25 *Despair*
Recommended secondary reading:
Richard Rorty, "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty," in Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*.
- February 1 *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*
Recommended secondary readings:
Michael Wood, "Lost Souls: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," in *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, pp. 29-54.
- February 8 *Bend Sinister*
Recommended secondary reading:
Paul Benedict Grant, "Nabokov's Last Laughs," in *Nabokov's World, Vol. 1: The Shape of Nabokov's World*, ed. Jane Grayson et al., pp. 141-58.
- February 15 *Bend Sinister*
Recommended secondary readings:
Zoran Kuzmanovich, "Suffer the Little Children," in *Nabokov at Cornell*, ed. Gavriel Shapiro, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2003: 49-57.
- February 22 **Winter Break**
- March 1 "Signs and Symbols" and "The Vane Sisters," in *Nabokov's Dozen* ("Signs and Symbols") and *Nabokov's Quartet* ("The Vane Sisters"); *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (both).
Recommended secondary reading:
Michael Wood, "The Cruelty of Chance: *Bend Sinister*, 'Signs and Symbols,' 'The Vane Sisters,'" in *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, pp. 55-82.
- March 8 *Lolita*
Recommended secondary reading:
Susan Mizruchi, "Lolita in History," *American Literature* 73.3 (2003): 629-52. Available through Scholars Portal and Project Muse.

- March 15 *Lolita*
 Recommended secondary reading:
 Frederick Whiting, "The Strange Particularity of the Lover's Preference":
 Pedophilia, Pornography, and the Anatomy of Monstrosity in *Lolita*,"
American Literature 70.4 (1998): 833-862. Available through JSTOR.
- March 22 *Pnin*
 Recommended secondary readings:
 Galya Diment, "Timofey Pnin, Vladimir Nabokov, and Marc Szeftel,"
Nabokov Studies 3 (1996): 53-75. Available through Project Muse.
 Catriona Kelly, "Nabokov, *snobizm* and selfhood in *Pnin*," in *Nabokov's*
World: Volume 2: Reading Nabokov, ed. Jane Grayson *et al.* Houndsmills:
 Palgrave, 2002.
- March 29 *Pale Fire*
 Recommended secondary readings:
 1. Mary McCarthy, "A Bolt from the Blue," in *Nabokov: The Critical*
Heritage, edited by Norman Page, 124-36.
 2. Steven Bruhm, "Queer, Queer Vladimir." *American Imago* 53, no. 4
 (1996): 281-306. Available through Scholars Portal and Project Muse.
- April 5 *Pale Fire*
 Recommended secondary reading:
 1. Steven Belletto, "The Zemblan Who Came in from the Cold, or
 Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Chance, and the Cold War." *ELH* 73 (2006): 755-
 80. Available through Scholars Portal and Literature Online.

Classroom Etiquette

All cell phones must be turned off when the seminar is in session. If awaiting an emergency phone call, please notify the instructor at the beginning of class. Though laptops are allowed in class, students must avoid the temptation to text-message and browse the Internet while the seminar is in session. Doing so is not only distracting but also disrespectful towards all members of the class.

Grading System

Letter grades assigned in this course will have the following percentage equivalents:

A+ = 90-100	B+ = 77-79	C+ = 67-69
A = 85-89	B = 73-76	C = 63-66
A - = 80-84	B - = 70-72	C - = 60-62
D+ = 57-59	D = 53-56	D - = 50-52
F	Failure. No academic credit.	

Student Resources and Persons with Disabilities

Students with disabilities requiring any kind of academic accommodation are encouraged to contact the instructor prior to the beginning of classes to discuss any needs and special arrangements. Students are also encouraged to contact a coordinator at the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (500 Unicentre; 613-520-6608). Every effort will be made to ensure the successful completion of the course by students with disabilities.

Religious and Pregnancy Accommodations

Students requesting academic accommodation on the basis of religious obligations should make a formal written request to their instructors for alternate dates and/or means of satisfying academic requirements. Such requests should be made during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist, but no later than two weeks before the compulsory event. Accommodation is to be worked out directly and on an individual basis between the student and the instructor. The instructor will make accommodations in a way that avoids academic disadvantage to the student. Students who want to confirm accommodation eligibility of a religious event or practice may refer to the Equity Services' website for a list of holy days and Carleton's Academic Accommodation policies, or may contact an Equity-Services Advisor for assistance (613-520-2600, ext. 5622, www.carleton.ca/equity).

Pregnant students requiring academic accommodations are encouraged to contact an Equity Advisor in Equity Services to complete a *Letter of Accommodation* (613-520-2600, ext. 5622, www.carleton.ca/equity). Students must then make an appointment to discuss their needs with the instructor at least two weeks prior to the first academic event in which it is anticipated the accommodation will be required.

All Students

Students are strongly encouraged to make optimal use of the instructor's office hours. Office hours are set aside for students to discuss with the instructor all aspects of the course and to seek assistance with any problems they might encounter in fulfilling the assigned tasks.

All students are also strongly encouraged to take advantage of the services offered at Carleton University, such as the following:

Learning Support Services (LSS): LSS offers students a variety of free services, including academic-skills workshops and information sessions, bookable study rooms, a Tutor Referral Service, and a supportive staff of Peer Helpers. To learn more about these services, visit LSS on the fourth floor of the MacOdrum Library, contact them by phone at 613-520-2600, ext. 1125, or visit them online at www.carleton.ca/lss.

Career Development and Co-operative Education (CDCE): CDCE is an on-campus centre for career development, employment preparation, and experiential learning opportunities

for Carleton students. Students are encouraged to use the various services provided by CDCE throughout their time at Carleton by visiting its two service locations. The Career and Resource Centre is located at 401 Tory (613-520-6611); the Co-op and Employer Centre is located at 1400 CTTC (613-520-4331).

International Student Services Office (ISSO): ISSO is at the heart of Carleton's international student community. It supports international students, including incoming and outgoing exchange students, and promotes cross-cultural understanding within the Carleton community. For more information, visit ISSO at 128 University Centre or contact by phone 613-520-6600. For general email inquiries, write to isso@carleton.ca; for exchange-program inquiries, write to exchange@carleton.ca. Website: www.carleton.ca/isso.

Plagiarism and Other Instructional Offences

The University's policy concerning plagiarism and other instructional offences is outlined in the Undergraduate Calendar (see particularly regulation 14 – Instructional Offences). The Undergraduate Calendar defines an act of plagiarism as an attempt “to use and pass off as one's own idea or product the work of another without expressly giving credit” to the original author. Any act of plagiarism will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the guidelines set out in the Undergraduate Calendar.

The Undergraduate Calendar further specifies that the act of submitting “substantially the same piece of work to two or more courses without the prior written permission of the instructors from all courses involved” constitutes an Instructional Offence. Please note: “Minor modifications and amendments, such as changes of phraseology in an essay or paper, do not constitute a significant and acceptable reworking of an assignment.” No piece of work written for another course will be accepted for credit in this course.