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Vladimir Nabokov was such a jerk

By **Alex Beam** | DECEMBER 02, 2016

To know Vladimir Nabokov is not to love him.

When Nabokov died in 1977, *The New York Times* hailed him as “a giant in the world of literature.” Two of his novels, “*Lolita*” and “*Pale Fire*,” landed on the Modern Library’s 1998 list of the best English novels of the 20th century. His legions of fans regard Nabokov’s failure to win a Nobel Prize as one of the great literary travesties of the 20th century.

Only now, 40 years after his death, are some critics daring to suggest that many of his 18 novels are mediocre at best and that his masterpiece, “*Lolita*,” is a gruesome celebration of pedophile rape. Moreover the cherubic writer known to us from famous *Life* magazine photo shoots, jauntily brandishing his butterfly net in the Tetons or the Alps,



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Vladimir Nabokov.

proves to be a nasty piece of work. Distasteful people can do wonderful work — Pablo Picasso was no walk in the park — but their art doesn't excuse their noxious behavior.

There are currently five scholarly journals devoted to Nabokov studies. His allusive style and trilingual (English, French, Russian) wordplay are catnip for academics, who endlessly parse challenging texts like “Pale Fire” — a novel in verse, followed by obscurantist commentary — finding new aperçus tailor-made for small-journal publication. Nabokov's apotheosis in academe is quite ironical, because he and his close friend, the literary critic Edmund Wilson, shared an icy disdain for the ivory tower. They viewed universities as ATMs, handy because there were so many of them, and because they were flush with cash. Nabokov, who arrived in the United States penniless in 1940, had to rely on teaching assignments at Wellesley and Cornell to feed his family for 15 years. The moment “Lolita” made him financially independent, he fled Cornell for Switzerland and never set foot in a classroom again.

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In his lifetime, Nabokov received many contrary and often puzzled reviews. The Hollywood producer Robert Evans famously flew to Switzerland in 1968 to read an advance copy of the novel “Ada” in one day. “It was torture,” he recalled. Dwight Macdonald hated “Pale Fire” on behalf of Partisan Review, calling it “unreadable . . . too clever by half . . . Philistine . . . false” — and he hadn't even finished his first paragraph!

I just spent the better part of three years with Nabokov, preparing a book about his friendship and eventual blood feud with Wilson. I would argue that the first real fissure in the adulatory critical wall hailing the “literary giant” came in 1990, in George Steiner’s erudite assessment of the first volume of Brian Boyd’s Nabokov biography, “Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years.” Writing in *The New Yorker*, Steiner perceived, a lack of generosity of spirit in Boyd’s subject: “Nabokov’s case seems to entail a deep-lying inhumanity, or, more precisely, unhumanity,” Steiner wrote. “There is compassion in Nabokov, but it is far outweighed by lofty or morose disdain.”

Last year’s 60th anniversary of the publication of “*Lolita*” prompted some serious soul-searching and critical revision, most forcefully from female writers and critics. Rebecca Solnit, for instance, wrote a cringe-inducing and hilarious essay, “Men Explain *Lolita* to Me,” including these lines: “A nice liberal man came along and explained to me this book was actually an allegory as though I hadn’t thought of that yet. It is, and it’s also a novel about a big old guy violating a spindly child over and over and over. Then she weeps.”

I’m all for a critical reappraisal. I labored mightily to hack through “*The Gift*,” which novelist Robert Roper calls “less than compelling” in his recent partial biography, “Nabokov in America.” I’m a “*Lolita*” fan, but let’s face it, Solnit is right: This is a sprightly little tale about the serial rape of an unwilling or indifferent 12-year-old, embraced and promoted by the male literary establishment.

I also welcome some reassessments of Nabokov's appalling personality, which slid deeper and deeper into solipsistic self-reverence as the "Lolita" royalties rolled in.

The constant accrual of money and fame reinforced his certainty of his own genius, which he was never shy about proclaiming. "I think like a genius" are the first five words of his 1973 collection of interviews and essay, "Strong Opinions."

To be fair, Nabokov generously supported several friends and relatives cast adrift by the 20th century European maelstroms, and there is plenty of evidence that his 52-year-long marriage to Vera Slonim was almost as "cloudless" as he claimed it was. But then there is Nabokov, the public crank.

Dostoyevsky, Nabokov told anyone who would listen, was "a third-rate writer and his fame is incomprehensible." He called Henry James "that pale porpoise." Philip Roth? "Farcical." Norman Mailer? "I detest everything that he stands for." T. S. Eliot and Thomas Mann were "fakes." When his friend Wilson suggested that he include Jane Austen in his Cornell survey course on European literature, Nabokov responded, "I dislike Jane [Austen] and am prejudiced, in fact, against all women writers."

Leo Tolstoy and Nikolai Gogol: da. Everybody else: nyet.

That kind of chaffing can be written off to showmanship; "Look at the Harlequins," if you will. But Nabokov's attacks on his fellow Russian novelist Boris Pasternak were anything but amusing. The moment that Pasternak won the Nobel Prize for "Doctor Zhivago" in 1958, Nabokov waged a bitter,

personal campaign against Pasternak, a nonstop stream of vitriol made less comprehensible because Nabokov knew full well how Pasternak was being persecuted back in the USSR.

Having won the much-coveted Nobel, and now supplanting “Lolita” on the American best-seller lists, “Zhivago” drove Nabokov bonkers. Nabokov suggested to anyone who would listen that the novel was a KGB plant and that

Pasternak’s mistress, Olga Ivinskaya, was the real author of the book. Know them by the company they keep: It was Nabokov and the Stalinist stooges inside the USSR who pushed the ugly Ivinskaya-as-author theory.

Nabokov clearly had an idee fixe about (undeserving?) Russian writers winning the Nobel Prize. He likewise harbored suspicions that Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose work he dismissed as “juicy journalese,” was a KGB cat’s paw. “How else,” Andrea Pitzer writes in “The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov,” “could his work appear in Russia and make its way to the West, while Solzhenitsyn himself remained free?” Ironically, after he won his Nobel Prize, Solzhenitsyn sent a note to the Academy, recommending Nabokov for the prize.

Plenty of monsters make great art, and many of their names emblazon lists of Nobelists, poet laureates, and so. And there is no doubt that Nabokov created great art, in two languages, like Joseph Conrad, whom he predictably disdained. (“A collection of glorified cliches.”) His achievements speak volumes. If only he hadn’t been such a jerk.

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Plenty of monsters make great art, and Vladimir Nabokov was one of them.

Alex Beam's column appears regularly in the Globe. His new book is "The Feud: Vladimir Nabokov, Edmund Wilson, and the End of a Beautiful Friendship." Follow him on Twitter [@imalexbeamyrnot](#).

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