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# **Nabokov's Humor: The Play of Consciousness**

Matthew Brillinger

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## Abstract

As it develops, Nabokov's fiction becomes increasingly amusing, with more humor used to greater effect. Why is Nabokov so fond of humor?

One school of thought accounts for Nabokov's humor with reference to a perceived inability to take anything seriously. Although misguided, this explanation is by no means absurd, for Nabokov is more lighthearted than grave, and he certainly prefers play to ceremony. Nabokov's buoyancy and playfulness, however, reflect not a sense that nothing matters, but a belief that humor, as it counters one or another expectation, underscores the extent to which reality outstrips *all* expectations.

This thesis, drawing on formal humor theory when appropriate, explores in turn Nabokov's humor, Nabokov's theory of humor, and the metaphysics from which Nabokov's theory of humor emerges, ultimately presenting Nabokov as a purposeful humorist intent upon nurturing in readers an appreciation of life's generosity. Experiencing the world as enchantingly humorous, and discerning in the world's humor evidence of a playful designing force, Nabokov, it is argued, emulates as a writer playful "life," deploying particular kinds of humor as a means of developing the reader's capacity to perceive and appreciate the types of humor Nabokov most enjoys in his own life.

Following an introductory discussion of Nabokov's humor, Chapter One reviews attempts to explain Nabokov's joking. Chapter Two treats Nabokov's development as a humorist, crediting the increasing risibility of his fiction to mounting use of certain devices. Analyzing one scene in Lolita, Chapter Three identifies the effects of Nabokov's humor. Chapter Four, the first of two explanatory chapters, describes Nabokov's theory of humor, and Chapter Five, developing points made in Chapter Four, explores the relationship between Nabokov's theory of humor and metaphysics.

## **Acknowledgments**

Many aspects of this work, not just its title, reflect the influence of Brian Boyd, my supervisor. My use of unpublished material, important in the bolstering of my argument, owes everything to Dr. Boyd's sharing of materials he uncovered while studying Nabokov's life. And many of my examples—of concealed jokes and subtle patterns in particular—were first called to my notice by Professor Boyd, one of Nabokov's most attentive readers. Finally, my argument incorporates a number of points made by Dr. Boyd in conversation I wish now to thank Brian Boyd for his patience and generosity.

This thesis is dedicated to Carol and to my parents, Lorie and David.

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## Abbreviations for Works by Nabokov

A	<u>Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle</u>
BS	<u>Bend Sinister</u>
C	<u>Carrousel</u>
Df	<u>The Defense</u>
D	<u>Despair</u>
EO (I, II, III)	<u>Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse</u>
Eye	<u>The Eye</u>
G	<u>The Gift</u>
Gl	<u>Glory</u>
IB	<u>Invitation to a Beheading</u>
KQK	<u>King, Queen, Knave</u>
LiD	<u>Laughter in the Dark</u>
LoDQ	<u>Lectures on Don Quixote</u>
LoL	<u>Lectures on Literature</u>
LoRL	<u>Lectures on Russian Literature</u>
LO	<u>Lolita</u>
LOSP	<u>Lolita: A Screenplay</u>
LaTH	<u>Look at the Harlequins!</u>
USSR	<u>The Man from the USSR and Other Plays</u>
M	<u>Mary</u>
NB	<u>Nabokov's Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings</u>
NG	<u>Nikolai Gogol</u>
PF	<u>Pale Fire</u>
RLSK	<u>The Real Life of Sebastian Knight</u>
SM	<u>Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited</u>
SoVN	<u>The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov</u>
SO	<u>Strong Opinions</u>
TT	<u>Transparent Things</u>