



Lectures on Literature

Vladimir Nabokov, Fredson Bowers (Editor), John Updike (Introduction)

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For two decades, first at Wellesley and then at Cornell, Nabokov introduced undergraduates to the delights of great fiction. Here, collected for the first time, are his famous lectures, which include Mansfield Park, Bleak House, and Ulysses. Edited and with a Foreword by Fredson Bowers; Introduction by John Updike; illustrations.

Lectures on Literature Details

Date : Published December 16th 2002 by Mariner Books (first published 1980)

ISBN : 9780156027755

Author : Vladimir Nabokov , Fredson Bowers (Editor) , John Updike (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 385 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Criticism, Literary Criticism, Writing, Essays, Literature, Books About Books



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Steven Peterson says

Some time back, I reviewed "Crime and Punishment" for Amazon. One of the commentators on my review suggested that I take a look at Vladimir Nabokov's critical analysis of Dostoevsky. So, via Amazon, I purchased Vladimir Nabokov's book, "Lectures in Literature." As luck would have it, this was not the volume covering Dostoevsky! The end result? A greater appreciation for Nabokov--and also a sense that I'm not apt to invest a great deal of time reading other of his literary analysis.

The essays in this book represent lectures that he gave at Wellesley College and Cornell University. John Updike's Introduction provides some context for this work. He notes that Nabokov's lectures provide (Page xxv): ". . .a dazzling demonstration, for those lucky Cornell students in the remote, clean-cut fifties, of the irresistible artistic sensibility." He also notes, in Nabokov's words, the truth of novels, that (Pages xxv-xxvi): ". . .great novels are great fairy tales--and the novels in this series are supreme fairy tales. . ." Nabokov himself points out that a writer can be considered as (a) a storyteller, (b) a teacher, and (c) an enchanter (Page 5). And, above all, he values style and structure in authors' creations.

Maybe a couple examples will illustrate his critical approach. First, Jane Austen's "Mansfield Park." Nabokov is very pleased with her work. Given his emphasis on style and structure, he details how well she constructs this work. For instance, at one point, the characters, among whom there are a variety of tensions to begin with, select a play to perform. The decision as to which of the characters in Austen's story would play which characters in the play is well discussed by Nabokov. The play itself raises questions--it was, in fact, an actual play that scandalized some of the characters in the novel. And it exacerbated pre-existing tensions among the characters. All in all, Nabokov makes a great case that Austen's structure of this segment of the novel was well done indeed. And, in terms of style, he says of Austen that (Page 59) "she handles it with perfection." Nabokov convinced me that Austen was a terrific technical writer, who wed her genius to technique and style and structure to create something special.

Another example. . . . Kafka's "Metamorphosis," a story I read several decades ago. I recall the sense of despair I felt reading about the travails of Gregor Samsa--and a sense that, despite the awful/offal nature of the work that there was something important here. Nabokov is very positive about this piece. Much of this lecture is a simple description of the work, scene by scene, and Nabokov spends some time noting how Kafka's work is so much better than Stevenson's work discussed above. Samsa's unexplained transformation into a beetle is the event that triggers this story. Nabokov notes how this tragedy has positive elements--a family finally getting its act together even as it abandons Gregor--and illustrates Kafka's style. Of the latter, Nabokov says (Page 283): "You will mark Kafka's style. Its clarity, its precise and formal intonation in such striking contrast to the nightmare matter of his story."

I admire his emphasis on style and structure, but I also think there is an almost sanitary quality about some of his observations. But I'm a political scientist--not a literary critic. Overall, this is an intellectually exciting book, as one learns how a literary critic from one critical perspective examining a series of works--Austen, Dickens, Flaubert, Stevenson, Proust, Kafka, and Joyce. If interested in Nabokov's critical perspective, this is a good starting point!

Giulia_ says

Se fossi stata una studentessa di Nabokov mi sarei innamorata dopo due secondi

Juliana says

for a split second, this made me nostalgic for college. then i recovered my senses.

amin akbari says

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Sebastian says

I've read his lecture on 'Du côté de chez Swann' and the section on being a 'good reader', with which I already was familiar. I'll read the lecture on 'Ulysses' next.

If you are reading or have read any of the novels discussed, you may want to deepen your knowledge with the help of Nabokov's opinions, which sometimes are truly 'strong opinions'. But if you're taking his advice (with a grain of salt), it shouldn't stop you from enjoying a broader perception of one of your classics.

He cites many passages from the original text and explains connotations within the book, uncovers some hidden details. Speaks about colours. Speaks about composition. Don't expect many details about the authors itself, or the times they wrote in. It's strict fairytale-analysis!

Hadrian says

This collection of transcribed lectures and sketched marginalia shows what a really keen reader can do, and how much they have to teach us. We are transported to the vertumnal isolation of Cornell, seated in the midst of hunched shuffling sophomores who stared in silent awe of this Vladimir Vladimirovich.

I did not read all of the lectures, but instead only those for the books I had already read. I can assume that a lot of us are familiar with Nabokov's ornate style, but here he is technical and has eased into the professorial role. His approach is meticulous, but also one focused on defining or at least describing a book's aesthetics and its details.

Nabokov plucks apart narrative threads, and neatly defines what each great author has in their 'style'. He gives plot summaries and extended quotations, but also takes care to describe the narrative trends and not suffocate the story with some hideous symbolism. He talks about Flaubert's syntax, and how Gregor Samsa transformed into a beetle (or as Nabokov insists, Coleoptera), not a cockroach.

Nabokov's lectures are a true literary pleasure. They are a persistent reminder to become enchanted with stories and the 'fairy tales' of novels again. They are stone tablets sent from the mount of Sinai which instruct you on how to savor 'the divine details' and feel what you read.

5 stars, unless the Austen and Dickens essays are duds and I don't know about it. They very likely aren't.

Jon says

Nabokov wasn't just a brilliant and playful writer--he was also an excellent reader, even in a language which he pretended not to know very well. My only objection to this collection is that three of the five chapters are on writers fairly unfamiliar to me. But for the two that I do know--Jane Austen and Charles Dickens--Nabokov is brilliant. He is precise and very fair to Jane Austen, even though her interests are not his own; but his real kinship is with Dickens. He discusses Bleak House at great length, analyzing every aspect of its construction and presentation, stoutly defending it against charges of sentimentality, and reveling in Dickens' mastery of descriptive metaphor. He compares Dicken's description of the sea with a similar passage in Mansfield Park, and Jane Austen comes off much the worse (although to be fair, describing nature was not Austen's forte.) It is wonderful to share the pleasures of careful reading with such a sensitive and witty companion.

Zebardast Zebardast says

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Guzin Tanyeri says

Benim ac? ve hayal k?r?kl?? yüklü Madame Bovary'm me?er hiciv dolu bir esermi?, bunu Nabokov'dan ö?rendim. Bu sayede kitap bamba?ka anımlarla dolup ta?t? gözümün önünde. (Sayfalar?n? bir çice?in yapraklar? gibi aç? öňüme, diyeyim de belki sevgili Flaubert'in ho?una gider =P) Önce kim bilir okudu?um di?er klasiklerde neleri kaç?r?yorumdur diye dü?ündüm. Eh, her eserin dedektifli?ini yapan bir ba?ka eser okumak da, nas?l desem, hangi yazar ister ki böyle okuru? Belki de bütün bunlar Nabokov'un a??r?yorumudur, dedim sonra, bu k?vrek zekal?y? bu kadar ciddiye almamak gerek. Ama bilirsiniz, bazen bir eser hakk?nda yaz?lan metin, eserin kendisinden de iyi olabiliyor. Nabokov da bu kitapta ad? geçen ustalarla kap??r? bence.

Jim says

If you love classic literature, there is much to be enjoyed in Nabokov's lectures. This volume covers seven novels - Mansfield Park, Bleak House, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The Walk by Swann's Place (aka "Swann's Way"), The Metamorphosis (Kafka), and Ulysses. In each case, Nabokov's erudition and unapologetic perspectives offer the reader a way to dig deeper into these classics. Time permitting, I'm looking forward to rereading these novels along with Nabokov's lectures nearby.

In a short essay at the beginning of the book, Nabokov writes:

There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three – storyteller, teacher, enchanter – but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer.

I believe he's on to something here. What is it that the greatest writers do that capture our imaginations? Of course! They enchant us, they seduce us, they carry us away into those magical, enchanted lands and lives and when we finally reach the last page, the enchantment lingers on and we contentedly sigh, "What a great book..."

Highly recommended for readers and writers alike!

Hamish says

Ok, so first thing: the lecture on Ulysses in here is the best of the bunch and a must for anyone who wants to read that novel, but is intimidated by its (alleged) impenetrability. I'll argue to my death that Ulysses isn't really that hard as long as you apply yourself, and it's way worth the effort, but I will admit it can be a bit tough to follow without the proper grounding. I think the main trick is to read a summary of each chapter BEFORE you read that chapter, and then you'll be able to easily pick up what's going on. N does just that. And not only does he offer neat summaries, he calls attention to lots of the small, neat details that provide a good chunk of the novel's joy. N has clearly read Ulysses dozens of times, he's picked up on all of the subtle little coincidences and themes and chains of events that line the novel, and he imparts this wisdom to the first-time reader.

And that's really the core of all of these lectures. N believed that great novels should be read many times, and only on repeat readings do you pick up on the little things that provide the type of joy that he feels is the true purpose of literature. These lectures provide examples of these, and in turn helps teach the reader how to look for them, how to admire the the skill that goes into creating a great work, and how to read on a deeper, more careful level than we're used to.

And while the lectures are generally pretty fun to read, the real utility of this book doesn't come from the actual experience of reading it, but rather from noticing how the points N harps on have invaded your mind and changed the way you look at art in general.

J. says

This took me several years to read, and I was very pleased with the way my approach to the lectures worked out. Having listened to very learned lectures on Literature as an undergraduate-- but laboring under the frequent interwoven influences of marijuana daze and 'haven't-quite-read-the-book-in-question' handicaps ...

I took Mr. Nabokov's course, in the nineties. Before starting his chapter on each book, I read that book, without the company, this time, of bong, coed, or *Tangerine Dream* Lp. Each of the classics here was worth the read, the re-read, or the first-time read, and the reward was having VN to sum it up.

Youth, as we all know, is wasted on the young, and who can read *books* when there are other distractions that are catnip to the undergraduate... ?

Take the challenge, take the course, read the books, go back to square one. Like old schooldays, but with actual learning taking place.

Then, take a break, and twist a fat one.

Erin says

First of all, I felt like it was Christmas while reading these lectures; they are gifts. I feel jealous of the students who were able to take his course. However, I found his "strong," unsubstantiated opinions frustrating, and I confess that I fit more closely with his definition of a "bad" reader than with his definition of a "good" reader. I definitely appreciate style (Nabokov is one of my favorite authors because of style!), but I am also drawn to literature that, as an old friend once put it, "makes me feel some feelings."

Another aspect of his lectures I disliked was their heavy plot focus, but I loved his drawings of city blocks and residences!

I will briefly provide my experience of each of the lectures:

Mansfield Park: I'm glad I read this lecture because it reminded me of why I dislike Jane Austen novels. Apparently, Nabokov said something about Jane Austen like, "I cannot find a single thing in *Pride and Prejudice* to enjoy," but was convinced by a friend to read *Mansfield Park*, which he thought more worthy. Based on the passages he quoted in this lecture, I disagree.

Bleak House: This book had never interested me, but I am reconsidering my decision based on Nabokov's lecture. We'll see.

Madame Bovary: It was fun to reread the plot and see some elements of Flaubert's style differently.

The Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde: Same feelings I have about Madame Bovary lecture

The Walk by Swann's Place: Reinforced my wanting to read Proust

The Metamorphosis: This was my favorite lecture. I missed a lot when I read this several years ago.

Ulysses: This lecture was instrumental in helping me get the most out of Ulysses. I read the footnotes in my copy first and during each chapter of Ulysses; then, I read the corresponding section of this lecture. I felt like Ulysses was a difficult class I had to study hard for, and I used this lecture to help with that.

Michael says

At first I was wary of this book, being a former grad student and current exile from the literary academy with no interest in rejoining those stale debates. But what a breath of fresh air it proved to be. Nabokov was, not surprisingly, a keen reader, and he brings all his technical prowess to bear on works from Dickens, Austen, Flaubert, and others. He has the gift of entering a work on its own terms and bringing it to life, not deadening it with some inane theory. I read these lectures alongside the books they describe, and I found them delightfully illuminating.

Sidharth Vardhan says

“A writer might be a good storyteller or a good moralist, but unless he be an enchanter, an artist, he is not a great writer.”

I have always wanted to know Nabokov the reader – who hates allegories (say Animal Farm), novels where characters act are just what mouth pieces for different kind of opinions (Magic Mountain - not a fan either), moral tales (can't agree more), allusions to other works and signs and symbolisms unless they are directly related (not a fan either), sentimental readings (chick-lit romances) and finds detective novels boring (because of their poor prose).

On Allegories

It is his dislike of allegories including those like Animal Farm which shocked me. I can see why it might be annoying when critics or readers are matching the elements in the allegories to real world but best of allegories can stand on their even if you didn't know the real world parallels which they originally used as supporting structures. Even people who know nothing about Russian revolution can enjoy Animal farm while people knowing nothing about Odyssey can enjoy Ulysses. Rushdi's works which began like Allegories are often capable of losing themselves to natural growth of their characters. Nabokov himself argues that Dr. Jekyll and Hyde (a minor classic according to Nabokov) is not an allegory (I agree) and would have failed if it was one. According to him, same goes for Kafka's Metamorphosis (don't agree).

Nabokov's Spine

The thing is he frowns upon readers who read to gain knowledge (I do that) or/and sentimental pleasure(I do that too). So what kind of satisfaction he seeks from reading?

“It seems to me that a good formula to test the quality of a novel is, in the long run, a merging of the precision of poetry and the intuition of science. In order to bask in that magic a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle even though we must keep a little aloof, a little detached when reading. Then with a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual, we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass.

And thus a Tolstoy (Anna Karenina gets repeated allusions even though he wasn't teaching it) or a Dickens (Bleak House) are kind of authors he admires – because of their ability to carry on several chains of a lot of characters and themes at the same time. And if the author is able to bring these chains of stories to a satisfactory end, the author is a genius. According to him the correct way to reading Metamorphosis is by looking at how Kafka maintains a balance between Gregor's insect and human behavior (!!!).

This love for juggling several characters, themes and stories need not only be for novel as whole though, it can be shown in a single scene with lots of characters and story threads going at same time- examples being

agricultural fair scene from Madame Bovary (Llosa also admired that scene) and the chapter 10 (one with several vignettes and characters) of Ulysses – with first getting a much higher praise from Nabokov.

To be honest, I think this whole juggling thing is a technical aspect which can only fascinate a writer who is trying to achieve something similar. A common reader won't have a spine sensitive to the perfection of art and is more likely to love characters from Dostoevsky's imperfect scenes who provide emotional and intellectual food. Nabokov thinks of such readers as bad readers but in this, he sounds very snobbish to me.

On Prose

Now some things we do agree on.

Nabokov also wants you to pay attention to details. He is someone who actually drew a sketch of bug Samsa turned into (he was really knowledgeable about insects and bugs) as well as the design of his house as well as twin houses of Dr. Jekyll and Hyde. He wants authors to focus on all corners, and trifles – and work them into perfect prose, there should be no weak sentences or, Devil forbid, passages. :

“Some readers may suppose that such things as these evocations are trifles not worth stopping at; but literature consists of such trifles. Literature consists, in fact, not of general ideas but of particular revelations, not of schools of thought but of individuals of genius. Literature is not about something: it is the thing itself, the quiddity. Without the masterpiece, literature does not exist.”

He uses graphs to show Jekyll wasn't a perfectly good person. He goes into depths of how those two last got their names. He can quote – the lectures are 70% quotes – whole passages, sometimes whole pages. And not quotes that stand out for themselves but descriptions, descriptions like those describing Jekyll turning into Hyde. That is what he wants you to work on as an author – on prose, to keep on writing it and rewriting it until everything is perfect. If you ask him, when it comes to descriptions, no one beats Flaubert with his Madame Bovary (which I'm willing to bet is Nabokov's favorite book along with another book on famous cheating wife of literature – Anna Karenina) and Proust with his Remembrance of things Past (“*the greatest novel of the first half of our century*”) though he only discusses Swann's Way.

On character aspects and sketches

Nabokov wants you to keep a distance from characters and so there is not a lot of time spent analyzing them (though few insights he does give are brilliant). His analysis of Emma Bovary's is disagreeable to me (but would be agreeable to Flaubert). Same with psychology, he cracks a lot of jokes at expense of Freud (“*that medieval quack*”). He doesn't spend much time commenting on the sensitivity of Proust's protagonist either (who and Freud unknowingly reflected much on each other's works).

He loves Joyce's work too but is not particularly impressed by Joyce's “*Incomplete, rapid, broken wording rendering the so-called stream of consciousness, or better say the stepping stones of consciousness*” giving reasons like

“First, the device is not more “realistic” or more “scientific” than any other. In fact if some of Molly’s thoughts were described instead of all of them being recorded, their expression would strike one as more “realistic,” more natural. The point is that the stream of consciousness is a stylistic convention because obviously we do not think continuously in words—we think also in

images; but the switch from words to images can be recorded in direct words only if description is eliminated as it is here. Another thing: some of our reflections come and go, others stay; they stop as it were, amorphous and sluggish, and it takes some time for the flowing thoughts and thoughtlets to run around those rocks of thought. The drawback of simulating a recording of thought is the blurring of the time element and too great a reliance on typography."

I agree and I agree again when he says that Molly's thoughts in last chapters of Ulysses would read just as good as they do now if Joyce's editor had introduced punctuation marks in those run-on sentences. Although I wonder what he would have said about Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway in which thoughts are described instead of being recorded as Nabokov would prefer them. The only female author that is included is Jane Austen with her Mansfield Park towards whom Nabokov takes a patronizing attitude as if to a younger artist. And oh, while we are on Joyce, he declares Finnegans Wake to be one of the greatest failures in literature.

On Reality

"Literature was not born the day when a boy crying "wolf, wolf" came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray wolf at his heels; literature was born on the day when a boy came crying "wolf, wolf" and there was no wolf behind him."

My best take from the book is his ideas on the use of words like realism and naturalism in criticism. He doesn't understand the habit of dividing books into fantasies or realist ones- according to him all novels including those like The Trial, The Overcoat and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are realist as well as fantasies.

A very long quote (– must be impact of Nabokov's company) in spoiler about how Nabokov understands novelist's reality (view spoiler)

More Quotes([view spoiler](#))

