

How to Read and Teach Literature: Vladimir Nabokov's Methods and Inspirations

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Abstract—The significance of Vladimir Nabokov is not only reflected in his literary creation, but also in his literary criticism. Before gaining a global reputation for *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov was a diligent writer and literary connoisseur, as well as a passionate and respected teacher. His *Lectures on Literature and Lectures on Russian Literature* have been published for over 40 years and still have wide readership around the world. Their inherent and universal significance are worthy of further exploration and interpretation. These lectures were not academic articles but lesson preparation materials which preserved classroom form. Nabokov's teaching career in the United States began in 1941 when he taught creative writing (playwriting) in a summer class at Stanford University. Later, he taught European and Russian literary classics at Wellesley College and Cornell University. His reading method was not very consistent with the Practical Criticism in the U.K. or the New Criticism in the U.S., but was closer to what later became known as creative reading in the field of creative writing. He taught students specific approaches such as structural decomposition, discussion of plot setting, fondling details, rhetorical analysis, and thematic criticism to grasp the prominent elements of author's style and the aesthetic of masterpieces. His reread method, caring for communicating with audiences, and emphasis on sharing informed experience in teaching still have enlightening significance to this day.

Keywords—Vladimir Nabokov, lectures on literature, novel reading, teaching literature

I. INTRODUCTION

From a global perspective, there is a plethora of research on Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), which has already formed a “Nabology”. That may be because of “the great diversity of the interests of Nabokov—perhaps the last Renaissance man—from poetry to prose, from original fiction to translation and to literary scholarship, from literature to visual art, and from humanities at large to natural science [1].” The academic community pays the most attention to his literary creation, such as the study of themes, narrations, ethics, and spatiotemporal view; Next is the study of his life, such as writing biography for him or his wife; There are also translation studies, such as his Russian-English translation behavior and the global translation and dissemination of works such as *Lolita*; And his literary views, including critical views on European and Russian literature, the relationship between his writings and painting, and scientific research. Overall, people placed the greatest emphasis on his literary creation, neglected his literary criticism, and paid little attention to his role as a literary educator [2]. However, he has been teaching a lot of different classes on English, French, tennis, boxing, literature, and other subjects since his exile in Western Europe in 1919. And he has been teaching in American universities for nearly 20 years. It is to say that his teaching experience, literary

creation, and butterfly research together constitute the three most important sections of his life.

The core materials used by the academic community to discuss his critical views, such as *Lectures on Literature* (1980), *Lectures on Russian Literature* (1981), and *Lectures on Don Quixote* (1983), were originally lesson preparation documents or classroom lectures rather than academic writing for publication purposes. Other pre life publications such as *Nikolai Gogol* (1944) and *Three Russian Poets: Translations of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tiutchev* (1944), *A Hero of Our Time* (1958) co-translated with his son Dmitri Vladimirovich Nabokov, *The Song of Igor's Campaign* (1960), and translations of *Eugene Onegin* (1964), either were used for teaching or inspired by completing teaching or speech tasks. Treating these texts, especially those Lectures on European and Russian Literature, as literary theories produced under the college institution does not conform to historical facts and also obscures his valuable role as an outstanding literary educator and disseminator.

Although Nabokov worked in American universities from 1941 to 1959, his identity remained unique. During his 7 years at Wellesley College, he served as a resident writer and lecturer in comparative literature, with a specialized short-term position. In 1948, he was hired by Cornell and promoted to professor in 1954. However, he remained an independent man who was nominally the “chairman of the Department of Russian Literature”, “But there were no other teachers of Russian literature, and in fact—although Nabokov did not find this out until 1950—there was no separately constituted department of Russian literature”. “With his wife to help him, and his own inherent independence, Nabokov could remain quite apart from the university's administrative structures [3].” The particularity of this identity and environment enables him to focus on teaching and researching according to his own wishes, which is an important factor determining his literary criticism appearance. In addition, before the 1940s, American universities did not attach much importance to Slavic language and culture. However, after World War II, especially during the Cold War period, there was a strong interest in Russian culture and Soviet politics among the government, academia, and the public, with a thirst for related knowledge and ideas [4]. As a highly cultured Russian immigrant, Nabokov engaged in literary teaching during this period and naturally took on the responsibility of spreading the excellent language and culture of his home country. In the process of teaching European novels for his livelihood, his comparative poetic perspective also gave him insights into universal literary aesthetics.

Studying Nabokov's reading method or critical theories

requires incorporating his role as a literary educator into vision in order to better reflect historical reality and the responsibility and realm of writers or critics who assume the role of teachers. From a macro perspective, Nabokov's view on literature has been extensively discussed, such as literature being a fiction, writers being enchanters, the life of works being in the details, and the use of spine for reading. However, what is the essence of his reading method? How can ordinary readers also try his method? How to achieve the goal he said, teaching students to become good readers of great books? These questions have not yet been clearly and thoroughly answered. Nabokov's reading method is not only a concept or theory, but also a practical method. This article starts from the perspective of literary education, extracts the core essence of Nabokov's literary teaching method, and elucidates its universality and transferable methodological significance.

II. "MY PLAN IS TO TEACH MY 150 STUDENTS TO READ BOOKS"

Nabokov's literature class aimed to make students good readers who can read great works, whether it was at Wellesley College (one of the top women's colleges in the United States) or Cornell or Harvard Universities. This goal was not taken for granted. "I do remember that my approach and principles irritated or puzzled such students of literature (and their professors) as were accustomed to 'serious' courses replete with 'trends,' and 'schools,' and 'myths,' and 'symbols,' and 'social comment,' and something unspeakably spooky called 'climate of thought.' Actually, those 'serious' courses were quite easy ones, with the student required to know not the books but about the books. In my classes, readers had to discuss specific details, not general ideas" [5]. Nabokov's literature class was not easy to come by, as he relied on teaching for a living and was unwilling to arrange course content according to the universities' requirements. He argued with the president of Wellesley College, Mildred McAfee Horton, about political tendencies in literature classes, "Governments come and go but the imprint of genius remains and it is this imperishable pattern that I should like my students (if any) to discern and admire [3]." Before going to teach at Cornell University, he wrote to Morris Bishop, as well as the director of the literary department, Thomas Bergin, confirmed through twenty letters for six months what courses and content to teach. He designed a personalized outline for the Introduction to Literature course, which were "consisting of two parts echoing each other: Writers (Teachers, Storytellers, Enchanters) and Readers (Seekers of Knowledge, Entertainment, Magic) [3]." But it was said that the Introduction to Literature course had a fixed outline, and he had no choice but to submit. However, his plan on literary course was finally realized in 1950s when David Daiches, the new head of Cornell's Division of Literature, suggested that he took over the European Fiction course, which later earned him the reputation of the "Literature 311-312", and told him to "choose whatever authors he liked, as many Russians as he liked, and he could teach how he liked [3]." The *Lectures* are the legacy of this course.

"My plan is to teach my 150 students to read books, not just to get away with a 'general' idea and a vague hash of 'influences,' 'background,' 'human interest' and so forth.

But this means work" [6]. He believed Flaubert's words: "Comme l'on serait savant si l'on connaissait bien seulement cinq à six livres [7]." Nabokov believed that most people read novels in an incorrect way, such as "A situation in a book is intensely felt because it reminds us of something that happened to us or to someone we know or knew. Or, again, a reader treasures a book mainly because it evokes a country, a landscape, a mode of living which he nostalgically recalls as part of his own past. Or, and this is the worst thing a reader can do, he identifies himself with a character in the book [7]." Those were not the right kind of imagination Nabokov would like readers to use. He believed that correct reading relies on the use of impersonal imagination and artistic delights. "What should be established, I think, is an artistic harmonious balance between the reader's mind and the author's mind. We ought to remain a little aloof and take pleasure in this aloofness while at the same time we keenly enjoy—passionately enjoy, enjoy with tears and shivers—the inner weave of a given masterpiece [7]." Literature has both poetic and scientific essence, so if readers want to appreciate its artistic and educational significance correctly, they must simultaneously use their emotions and rationality.

In order to help students intuitively understand how to become a good reader, Nabokov designed "a little quiz—ten definitions of a reader, and from these ten the students had to choose four definitions that would combine to make a good reader [7]." This is a survey conducted by the teacher on the learning situation of the students in the first class. The six unimportant points include "The reader should identify himself or herself with the hero or heroine", "The reader should concentrate on the social-economic angle", "The reader should prefer a story with action and dialogue to one with none", as well as popular practices among college students and ordinary readers at that time such as "The reader should belong to a book club", or "The reader should have seen the book in a movie." In Nabokov's view, the most important four points are: "The reader should have imagination," "The reader should have memory," "The reader should have a dictionary," and "The reader should have some artistic sense [7]." Imagination, memory, and artistic sense are the core abilities he used to appreciate works, while frequent dictionary lookup is his technical method for reading and learning.

It has been proven that his goal of positioning literature courses as teaching students how to read is correct. "This course would make Nabokov's name at Cornell. By his last years at Cornell it had become the most popular academic option on campus and was eclipsed in student numbers only by Pete Seeger's folk-song class [3]." "Nabokov was rated 'a great teacher,' 'a flamboyant, funny lecturer' whose course could attract all kinds of students. His Cornell colleague M. H. Abrams, himself one of the most influential of American teachers of literature, rated him an irresistible lecturer: 'Every body who heard him thought so.' One student spoke for many: 'He taught me how to read [3].'" The second wife of John Updike (1932-2009) was one of them. Ruth Bader Ginsburg (1933-2020) who became the second female Chief Justice in the United States Supreme Court, recalled that one of the most memorable teacher during her undergraduate years was Vladimir Nabokov, whose class sensitized her to "the importance of word choice and placement and inspired her

love of Russian novels [8].”

III. TAKING AESTHETIC EDUCATION AS THE CORE AND LADDER

Modern literary education is a result of the combined influence of literary creation, critical theories, and the transformation of higher education. The formal establishment of English language and literature education in universities can be traced back to the English language and literature course offered at King's College, London in 1831. Previously, it was a Church of England monopoly, and only male Anglican communicants were allowed to enroll in Oxford and Cambridge Universities. “The subjects available were the classics (ancient Greek and Latin literature), divinity (which was taken by those seeking ordination) and mathematics [9].” The reformation spread from society to universities. The flourishing of liberal humanistic “Practical Criticism” represented by I. A. Richards (1893–1979) and F.R. Leavis (1895–1978) in the early 20th century was precisely the result of the reformation. Before the mid-19th century, literary research in the United States was basically in line with that in Britain. From the second half of the 19th century to the early 20th century, there were various theories such as Naturalists, Symbolists, Impressionists, The New Humanists, etc. The Academic Criticism, on the other hand, mainly evolved from rhetoric and oratory, and had a strong influence in antiquarian and philology. As a result, the “New Criticism,” represented by John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974) and Cleanth Brooks (1906–1994), which emphasized literary teaching, has become a significant result of the modern transformation of literary education in American universities [10]. Although new theories continue to emerge, various tendencies coexist in teaching and research. At the beginning of Nabokov's teaching in U.S., European literature courses had a fixed outline and program. What else, the universities which offered the Russian Literature course and students who took this course were also expected to hear more about the situation in the Soviet Union, especially in line with the government and diplomatic trends. Although Nabokov knew this, he still stuck to his position in the cracks: abandoning the social economic perspective, historical political perspective, moralist and theorist perspective, and clearly declaring that the primary purpose of reading literature is to appreciate the structure and style of great works, fondle details, feel the trembling aesthetic experience of the spine, and then praise the delicacy of art. Viewing artistic and aesthetic as literary works' essential attributes is Nabokov's way of viewing literature, and it is also his consistent standard for judging the superiority of works. Teaching students to read the artistic in great works has become his core task.

Putting aesthetic education at the dominant place does not mean completely abandoning other values. Nabokov never denied the ideological and moral significance of great works, and he repeatedly emphasized that “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 [7].” From his ranking as a writer, it can also be seen that the first is Leo Tolstoy, who is

the best model of harmony between art and ethics. Although he emphasized artistic details more than ethics when analyzing texts, he was actually concerned about whether a character in the work is good or bad. For example, he believed that there is only one good person in *Madame Bovary* and that is Charles Bovary, and the worst cruel person in *Metamorphosis* is Gregor's sister. When evaluating writers comprehensively, he also attached great importance to their moral character and spiritual realm. He was very strict with Dostoevsky and “very eager to debunk” him [11]. Although many artistic reasons are given, such as the “banal” of “the love of a noble prostitute brought to a spiritual regeneration” in *Crime and Punishment*, the potential discrimination against prostitutes without inspection, the characters being mostly mentally ill, the lack of portrayal of natural scenery and characters' appearance, the sin committed is seldom specified and “again we flounder in a generalization, in an allegory.” He also believed that Dostoevsky's sympathy is not “sensitive”, but “sentimental”. ““Greek-Catholic Church, absolute monarchy, and the cult of Russian nationalism,” these three props on which stood the reactionary political slavophilism were his political faith [11].” All above are evaluations of the thoughts in the work rather than artistic perspectives. As for the saying that Dostoevsky “had developed a tremendous literary vanity, and being very naive, unpolished, and but poorly equipped where manners were concerned, contrived to make a fool of himself in his dealings with his newly acquired friends and admirers and eventually to spoil completely his relations with them. Turgenev dubbed him a new pimple on the nose of Russian literature” [11] is completely a criticism of the writer's personality. Correspondingly, Nabokov's praise of Tolstoy is not solely due to his artistic talent. “It would seem at first glance that Tolstoy's fiction is heavily infected with his teachings. Actually, his ideology was so tame and so vague and so far from politics, and, on the other hand, his art was so powerful, so tiger bright, so original and universal that it easily transcends the sermon. In the long run what interested him as a thinker were Life and Death, and after all no artist can avoid treating these themes” [11]. Comparing the two, he believed that “Dostoevski's gloating pity for people—pity for the humble and the humiliated—this pity was purely emotional and his special lurid brand of the Christian faith by no means prevented him from leading a life extremely removed from his teachings. On the other hand, Leo Tolstoy like his representative Lyovin was organically unable to allow his conscience to strike a bargain with his animal nature—and he suffered cruelly whenever this animal nature temporarily triumphed over his better self” [11]. Whether his assertion is fair or not, it can be confirmed that Nabokov did not only read from an artistic perspective, but also used the critical methods which is similar to “knowing author's personality and thoughts then discuss his works” (知人论世 Mencius) and “The style is the man” (文如其人 Su Shi). This is an indispensable supplement to aesthetic education. Clarifying the core position of aesthetic education in the teaching process, and smoothly introducing and delving into the world of thought, morality, and truth through aesthetic analysis, is

the most attractive aspect of Nabokov's literary lectures and the strengths of his literary teaching method.

IV. EQUAL EMPHASIS ON ARTISTIC SENSE AND SCIENTIFIC ATTITUDE

It was believed in a long time and on a large scale that a sense of art is nurtured by talent, or at least by an upper-class family with economic and cultural capital. Nabokov was an example of both, but he did see every student as diamond in the rough. He believed that artistic sense can be had or developed. "The good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense—which sense I propose to develop in myself and in others whenever I have the chance [7]." Reading some knowledge from novels and seeing moral values from stories and characters' experiences is relatively easy for ordinary readers. However, it is a higher-level ability to feel, clearly distinguish, and use precise language to explain what aesthetic is in literature, where and how it arises.

Nabokov not only wrote novels but also studied butterflies, and he was able to see the connection between art and science at the bottom through the complex surface. He said, "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 [7]." The ideal state of reading a novel is also to use both sensory intuition and intellectual reflection. The technique of analyzing literary works also needs to combine aesthetics and science. "This scientific yet artistic appreciation of detail, characteristic of Nabokov himself as a writer, constitutes ultimately the heart of his teaching method [11]." Reading a novel not only requires vision, but also the soul, mind, and sensitive spine. The soul is responsible for being moved by emotions, the spine is responsible for aesthetic intuition, and the mind is responsible for rational thinking, which is the part of science. The "science" in art includes but is not limited to the laws of rhetoric, color, harmony, and so on. A scientific attitude means acknowledging the existence of cognitive universal laws in literature and art, which people can appreciate or create through learning and mastering. The latter point is particularly crucial, because only those laws that can be applied and operated by people can be considered true laws. The vague guiding principles, such as "literature, it is the study of man", "Literature, originating from life but higher than life", "Good works show true emotions and feelings", "Good works show profound thoughts", "Good works imply noble realm", etc., are almost universally applicable, but they cannot lead a person wandering outside the door of literary reading or writing into a narrow gate.

Every class of Nabokov was dedicated to revealing how scientific laws are reflected in great texts, "In this course I have tried to reveal the mechanism of those wonderful toys—literary masterpieces... I have tried to teach you to read books for the sake of their form, their visions, their art. I have tried to teach you to feel a shiver of artistic satisfaction, to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author—the joys and difficulties of creation [7]." At the same time, he was also wise to know that not all

students are passionate about studying literature and art. However, no matter what, people can always experience passion and cherish beautiful things, which is also the ultimate significance of literary education. He said to the students at the end of the course, "Some of you will go on reading great books, others will stop reading great books after graduation; and if a person thinks he cannot evolve the capacity of pleasure in reading the great artists, then he should not read them at all. After all, there are other thrills in other domains: the thrill of pure science is just as pleasurable as the pleasure of pure art. The main thing is to experience that tingle in any department of thought or emotion. We are liable to miss the best of life if we do not know how to tingle, if we do not learn to hoist ourselves just a little higher than we generally are in order to sample the rarest and ripest fruit of art which human thought has to offer [7]." This educational mindset also possesses artistic and scientific qualities.

V. NABOKOV'S METHODS FOR SAVORING DETAILS AND GRASPING STYLE

"Detail" and "style" are the two most frequently used terms in Nabokov's criticism. Throughout his approach to interpreting texts, it was found that the details he valued included time and space settings, plot structures, the "citations and references" in the novel, the daily life of the characters in their time and region, and the paragraphs in which the author meticulously described the realism of objects and people. His practical methods include: making a chronology for the protagonist, restoring the plot to a story and seeing how the author rearranges the plot, reading books that the characters have read in the novel, learning accurate knowledge of the characters' living times and regions, and visualizing the text. The most distinctive feature is the last point.

In the textbook version of *Anna Karenin*, which he planned to publish but was unable to finalize, he sketched of the sleeping car in which Anna rode from Moscow to St. Petersburg based on Tolstoy's writing. He also depicted a costume such as Kitty wore when she skated with Lyovin, as well as a tennis costume such as Anna wore in her game with Vronski. He advocated that when teaching *Ulysses*, professors should not boast about the chapter titles of the novel, but should instead find a map of Dublin to show students the route of Bloom and Stephen walking in the city. The most famous one is "*Metamorphosis*". This lesson was even made into a short film called "*Nabokov on Kafka*" (1989). Nabokov drew the exact appearance of the insect that Gregor had transformed into, and used entomological knowledge to determine that he was not a cockroach or a dung beetle (*Mistkafer* in German), but a big beetle with hidden wings. He naturally provided emotional education to his students during this gap: "Curiously enough, Gregor the beetle never found out that he had wings under the hard covering of his back. (This is a very nice observation on my part to be treasured all your lives. Some Gregors, some Joes and Janes, do not know that they have wings.) [7]." This seemingly casual reminder to students is full of encouragement and expectations from teachers: no matter how harsh the living environment may be, one must believe in their ability to resist. You have wings, you can fly. "My best reward comes from those former students of mine who

ten or fifteen years later write to me to say that they now understand what I wanted of them when I taught them to visualize Emma Bovary's mistranslated hairdo or the arrangement of rooms in the Samsa household or the two homosexuals in *Anna Karenin* [5]." The truly effective humanistic education is often condensed in such a warm and moving moment.

Converting text into images is Nabokov's main means of testing the excellence of detail description in novels, which is directly related to his early experience in learning painting. The painter Valerianovich Dobuzhinsky (1875–1957), who often designed stage scenery for Stanislavski (1863–1938), trained him in his ability to observe, remember, and reproduce things meticulously while teaching him painting. "He made me depict from memory, in the greatest possible detail, objects I had certainly seen thousands of times without visualizing them properly: a street lamp, a postbox, the tulip design on the stained glass of our own front door. He tried to teach me to find the geometrical coordinations between the slender twigs of a leafless boulevard tree, a system of visual give-and-takes, requiring a precision of linear expression, which I failed to achieve in my youth, but applied gratefully, in my adult instar, not only to the drawing of butterfly genitalia during my seven years at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, when immersing myself in the bright well hole of a microscope to record in India ink this or that new structure; but also, perhaps, to certain camera-lucida needs of literary composition [12]." In terms of artistic sense, painting and literature have many similarities. The essence of vivid depiction is to reproduce the world more clearly, accurately, and sensitively, including but not limited to the perception and processing of colors, light and shadow, and shape. Aleksandr Blok (Александр Блок, 1880–1921) once said: "Живопись учит смотреть и видеть (это вещи разные и редко совпадающие). Благодаря этому живопись сохраняет живым и нетронутым то чувство, которым отличаются дети" [13]. ("Painting teaches us to look and to perceive. (These are two different things, rarely identical.) And that is why painting helps to keep alive that unadulterated sense of perceiving things which is possessed by children.") Nabokov appreciated Impressionist painting because Impressionism had innovative breakthroughs in expressing light, shadow, and color compared to its predecessors, allowing things that people had not seen before to be seen. He said that "The following description of Plyushkin's garden in *Dead Souls* shocked Russian readers in much the same way as Manet did the bewhiskered philistines of his day [11]." Perhaps it can be understood that in classic literature, the most artistic details are not in the story, plot, or action, but in the depiction of the color, shape, and texture of scenery, objects, and people. The most crucial point in savoring details is also to use multiple senses such as visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory senses for synesthesia association. This is what Nabokov said, "In my academic days I endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead [5]." "In high art and pure science detail is everything [5]."

Another key point is style. "Style is the manner of the author, his special intonations, his special intonations, his

vocabulary, and that something which when confronted with a passage makes a reader cry out that's by Austen, not by Dickens [7]." Nabokov believed that form consists of two aspects: structure and style. "Another aspect of form is style, which means how does the structure work; it means the manner of the author, his mannerisms, various special tricks; and if his style is vivid what kind of imagery, of description, does he use, how does he proceed; and if he uses comparisons, how does he employ and vary the rhetorical devices of metaphor and simile and their combinations. The effect of style is the key to literature, a magic key to Dickens, Gogol, Flaubert, Tolstoy, to all great masters [7]." Great works share some characteristics, such as touching stories, vivid characters, and full of various metaphors and similes. However, the personality style of each outstanding writer needs to be compared to see. Only by grasping the unique style characteristics of different writers can one understand the art in the novel. Nabokov's methods of capturing the style of writers mainly include:

A. Pay Attention to the Personalized Rhetorical Techniques

As a witty satire, Dickens stands out for his innovative use of adjectives, epithets, homophonic implications of character names, as well as various alliterations, homophones, assonance and puns. While "Prominent among the elements of Austen's style is what I like to call the *special dimple* achieved by furtively introducing into the sentence a bit of delicate irony between the components of a plain informative statement [7]." This constitutes the essence of British humor. In the writing style of metaphor, Proust is "A wealth of metaphorical imagery, layer upon layer of comparisons. It is through this prism that we view the beauty of Proust's work [7]." However, Tolstoy's metaphors were referred to by Nabokov as *The Functional Ethical Comparison*, "A peculiar feature of Tolstoy's style is that whatever comparisons, whatever similes, or metaphors, he uses, most of them are used not for an esthetical purpose but for an ethical one. In other words his comparisons are utilitarian, are functional. They are employed not to enhance the imagery, to give a new slant to our artistic perception of this or that scene; they are employed to bring out a moral point. I call them, therefore, Tolstoy's moral metaphors or similes—ethical ideas expressed by means of comparisons [11]." Through the prism of metaphorical sentences, we can glimpse the inherent differences between French modernist Proust and the pinnacle of Russian realism, Tolstoy. Gogol is even more unique, his comparison is not simply comparing one thing to another, but using one scene to compare another. If the former is like repeated horizontal jumps, the latter is like somersaults. Through this comparison the Gogol's humor were achieved. Nabokov referred to it as *a typical Gogolian pleonasm*: "The peripheral characters of his novel are engendered by the subordinate clauses of its various metaphors, comparisons and lyrical outbursts [11]." Describing a party at the Governor's house, under the brilliant light, a group of gentlemen dressed in black surrounded a group of powdered ladies, Gogol likened this scene to a scene of a group of buzzing flies surrounding an old housekeeper smashing sugar on a hot July day. When Chichikov went to the Madame Korobochka's house, a group

of dogs barked at him incessantly. He likened the scene of these dogs barking to a scene of a church choir singing, which was hilarious and unforgettable.

B. Pay Attention to the Personality Techniques to Shape Characters

Whether to use dialogue, action, or direct description is a characteristic that is easy to distinguish intuitively. Nabokov went further by teaching students to see where the differences between different writers are when using dialogue or direct description to express character personalities or inner states. Flaubert's *counterpoint method* in the inn and agricultural exhibition scenes of *Madame Bovary* blends irony and pathos in a subtle way, while the emphasis on "the sense of repetition, of dreariness in Emma's life" is directly related to Flaubert's frequent use of the "French imperfect form of the past tense," the *imparfait* to express flowing time. Austen also uses dialogue to shape characters, but her characteristics include quoting character conversations, using indirect quotes to depict characters, and *knight's move*, "a term from chess to describe a sudden swerve to one or the other side on the board of Fanny's chequered emotions [7]."

C. Gain Insight into the Deeper Meaning of Works by Exploring Small Themes

Nabokov's search for "themes" in the text has several clues: a) An object appears multiple times, such as the *door* in *Metamorphosis*, the *horse* in *Madame Bovary*, and the *fog* and *bird* in *Mansfield Park*, which can form interesting small themes. b) These frequently occurring things such as animals, plants, and everyday objects have symbolic significance, that is to say, they are a form of imagery. *The layers or layer cake theme* in *Madame Bovary* is a metaphor for life, while in *Bleak House*, mud sticks to people's feet, getting thicker and thicker, to symbolize the characteristics of that inheritance case. Through thematic criticism, the internal referential relationship between things, images, and realms can be outlined. c) The main objects of concern and emotional tendencies in the text are condensed into themes. Such themes as Dickens' *children* themes, *nightmares* in *Anna Karenin*, and *fate* in *Ulysses* include the hopeless past, the ridiculous and tragic present, and the pathetic future. These types of thematic comments are highly condensed and reach the essence.

VI. CONCLUSION

"Next to the right to create, the right to criticize is the richest gift that liberty of thought and speech can offer [11]." "I have never belonged to any club or group. No creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever [5]." "I am not interested in groups, movements, schools of writing and so forth. I am interested only in the individual artist [5]." In Nabokov's method of analyzing texts, one can glimpse the shadows of liberal humanism, practical criticism, stylistics, and narratology. However, it is not objective to assert that his views were influenced by the above theories. He is similar in age and aesthetic to Edmund Wilson (1895–1972), and their identities is also similar: they wrote both commentary and novels, both keeping a distance from the academic system. René Wellek's evaluation of Wilson also applies to Nabokov: "Clearly he precedes the New Criticism, even though his

career overlaps its heyday [10]." Some people attribute the brilliance of Nabokov's lectures to the criticism of a *master*, but the identity of a scholar or writer does not naturally guarantee that he is a *master*. Nabokov worked hard to create, delved into knowledge, and with his confident and humorous speech skills, his lectures were able to remain timeless. The spirit of independence and diligent research are the sources of his confidence. Rereading a book five or six times at different stages of life, and rereading the work to be taught before each lecture, is an admirable skill in lesson preparation. However, when drawing on his literary criticism and teaching methods, attention should be paid to the following points:

A. Avoid Blindly Following and Going Astray

The method of analyzing details is just a tool, not the endpoint of evaluation. Focusing on details is ultimately aimed at understanding style and aesthetic traits. Overemphasizing details while neglecting the whole will make the work lifeless and scattered. The pedant's style could not only fails to satisfy the aesthetic pleasure of ordinary readers, but may also ruin their aesthetic sense. "Enlarging every detail will create a heavy burden on memory; focusing on each point will actually lead to a lack of attention [14]." There are priorities, virtual and real, blank spaces, divine strokes, and even resemblance in form and spirit, which are the commonalities of masterpieces. Appreciation should also follow those rules. Nabokov's reading method is a powerful supplement to shallow reading for the general public, but rational readers should know how to choose tools to serve their ultimate goal: why is this work considered good? What's good about it? What lessons can I gain from it? Readers are vast and diverse in their needs. Every human need is a torrent, bringing works that can meet these needs to the forefront. Great works have different styles, and the taste should not be monotonous or absolute. If a reader wants to have a deeper understanding of Dostoevsky or Gorky, reading Nabokov's lectures is not the best choice.

B. Aesthetic Should be Harmonious with Truth and Goodness

Wilson and Nabokov were close friends and had been discussing art for many years, but they had deep differences in their views on the relationship between literature, history, and politics. Wilson criticized Nabokov for wasting his talent in choosing words and sentences, and Nabokov regretted Wilson's lack of genuine understanding of Russian social history and literary conditions. "I was rather disappointed in *Bend Sinister*,...though it is crammed with good things—brilliant writing and amusing satire—it is not one of your greatest successes...You aren't good at this kind of subject, which involves questions of politics and social change, because you are totally uninterested in these matters and have never taken the trouble to understand them...Now don't tell me that the real artist has nothing to do with the issues of politics. An artist may not take politics seriously, but, if he deals with such matters at all, he ought to know what it is all about [15]." Wilson also did not appreciate *Lolita*: "I like it less than anything else of yours I have read. The short story that it grew out of was interesting, but I don't think the subject can stand this very extended treatment. Nasty subjects may make fine books; but I don't feel you have got away with this. It isn't merely that the characters and

the situation are repulsive in themselves, but that, presented on this scale, they seem quite unreal. The various goings-on and the climax at the end have, for me, the same fault as the climaxes of *Bend Sinister* and *Laughter in the Dark*: they become too absurd to be horrible or tragic, yet remain too unpleasant to be funny [15].” The moral values in Nabokov’s novels are buried too deeply by rhetoric and narrative trickery, which is a great challenge for readers. He always emphasized avoiding ethical, historical or political perspectives when interpreting works which is unbelievable. When he wrote, he chose to deal with some unusual subjects, mainly driven by the anxiety of innovation. He strongly rejected preaching in literature, but in real life, he was a rational, self disciplined, and morally person. This has also formed an interesting phenomenon in the publication, reading, and reception history of Nabokov’s works: because people saw the author’s moral life, the public was willing to believe that *Lolita* was a moral book. “She(Véra) served as her husband’s badge of honor, his moral camouflage, his walking virtue signal [16].” If the writer’s life were not like this, it is believed that the fate of *Lolita* would not be like it is today.

C. The Mission of Scholars and Teachers

“[H]e was such a superb actor,’ Ross Wetzsteon writes in his recollection of Nabokov’s teaching practice, ‘that no one knew he wrote out his lectures, word for word, down to the wryest ‘asides.’ ” [2]. “Those of us who took [Nabokov’s] courses in the early ‘50s didn’t have the vaguest notion that he’d written a single word of fiction [2].” Before 1958, the publication of *Lolita* in America earned him a prominent reputation, he was seen by students as an ordinary teacher with a distinct personality and excellent teaching skills. In order to provide students with a better translation, he translated *Igor’s Expedition*. In preparation for classroom discussions, he made slow progress while reading *Bleak House*. It was only in preparation for his lecture that he began to study *Ulysses* seriously. Preparing for lectures was difficult and tiring for him, and his income was not high, but he also experienced the joy of teaching. “Every lecture I delivered had been carefully, lovingly handwritten and typed out, and I leisurely read it out in class...On the other hand, I deeply enjoyed the chuckle of appreciation in this or that warm spot of the lecture hall at this or that point of my lecture... I do not know if I learned anything from teaching but I know I amassed an invaluable amount of exciting information in analyzing a dozen novels for my students. My salary as you happen to know was not exactly a princely one [5].” The difference in content structure between European literature and Russian literature courses is not due to the use of different theories, but due to the full consideration of the audience, that is, the student group, which reflected Nabokov’s cultivation as a responsible teacher. “This is the teaching method, but the result is a warm sense of shared experience between Nabokov and the hearer-reader [11].” The soul of literary education lies in the flow and intersection

of emotions, thoughts, and life experiences between teachers and students.

Literary education is essentially a form of liberal education. The good circulation of knowledge, ideas, emotions, and experiences between teachers and students in university literature classrooms is a key link in establishing a close relationship between the college and society, experts and the general public. An era is coming when everyone can develop according to their own interests and needs. The development of Internet technology has accelerated the arrival of this day. The liberal arts education courses in universities are not only proven to be meaningful by cultivating Great People or Celebrities, but their greatest significance lies in providing fertile ground for ordinary people to live and develop. Restoring Vladimir Nabokov as a teacher allows us to read more.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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