

**Title:** Nabokov's Artful Criminals  
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Why does wrongdoing have such a timeless allure, both for those who cross over into the realm of transgression and for the law-abiding citizens who are fascinated by crime in fact and fiction? One way to approach this question is to consider the possibility of crime as a work of art. In his lecture "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov bluntly states that crime stems from a failure of the imagination, and that art and crime are mutually exclusive; however, I would suggest that Nabokov's fictional work paints a more complex portrait. My paper engages with existing approaches to Nabokov's depiction of crime (in particular, the scholarly treatments of *Despair*), and in this way joins the debate about the relationship between Nabokovian aesthetics and ethics. Taking into account the critical discussion of Nabokov's dialogue with Dostoevsky, I propose a heretofore overlooked source for Nabokov's juxtaposition of art and crime: I argue that the protagonist of *Despair*, who views the murder that he commits in aesthetic terms, has a prototype in the hero of Chekhov's stylistically transgressive novel *The Shooting Party*. I draw upon theoretical perspectives from De Quincey and Wilde and consider the broader context of Nabokov's exploration of the interplay between artistic creation and criminality, particularly in *Lolita* (Humbert quipping that "you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" but later insisting that "poets do not kill") and *Pale Fire* (Kinbote's argument that John Shade's verse creation generates a kind of golem who comes to destroy the poet). In the conclusion, I use Lanchester's novel *The Debt to Pleasure* to show how the "artful criminal" paradigm has developed in recent fiction and to articulate what Nabokov can teach us about the artistic aspect of crime.

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