A Guide to Berlin Study Guide

A Guide to Berlin by Vladimir Nabokov

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Introduction

Published in a Russian emigre newspaper in Berlin on Christmas Eve, 1925, "A Guide to Berlin" is among Vladimir Nabokov's earliest literary works and an unusual demonstration of his mastery of the storyteller's craft. Modeled loosely on a tourist's guide book to a foreign city, the story shows an unnamed narrator briefly observing and commenting on everyday aspects of Berlin life. Unburied utility pipes, an antiquated streetcar and its nimble conductor, glimpses of Berliners at work, a tour of the city's zoo, and an illuminating moment in a pub become a rumination on the power of memory and art to preserve and transform everyday life.

Although in 1930 Nabokov claimed that "A Guide to Berlin" was the best story in his collection *The Return of Chorb* (1929), it was not until he had established his reputation with such novels as *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1962)—and had translated, with his son, "A Guide to Berlin" into English (1976)—that the story began to receive critical attention. Since then critics have consistently found it among the best of Nabokov's early literary attempts and have praised, among other aspects, its "prose poem" style; its unusual and intricate structure; and its sophisticated integration of language and theme. Critics have also praised in particular Nabokov's handling of the theme of time, of the self's relationship to others, and of the literary artist's obligation to memorialize for future readers the details of ordinary life through acts of "proactive nostalgia." Some critics have argued that "A Guide to Berlin" resembles Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev's "careless sketch" style in his *A Sportsman's Sketches*, and others have pointed to the general influence of major Russian writers like Nikolai Gogol, Leo Tolstoy, Aleksander Pushkin, and Fedor Dostoevsky on Nabokov's early development. After Nabokov's statement in the mid-1970s that "A Guide to Berlin" was "one of my trickiest pieces," critics have paid closer attention to the story, and its reputation as perhaps the best of Nabokov's early Russian-language tales has grown.

Author Biography

Born to an aristocratic Russian family in St. Peter-sburg in 1899, Nabokov was raised in an environment of worldly achievement and educated liberal thought. In 1919, following Russia's Bolshevik Revolution, Nabokov's father, a leading democrat, was forced to flee to England, and, after enrolling Vladimir in Cambridge University in 1920, he joined the Russian emigre community in Berlin. In March, 1922, Nabokov's father was killed during an assassination attempt on a Russian political figure, and after taking his diploma in French and Russian literature, Nabokov himself moved to Berlin to work on the Russian-language newspaper his father had helped found. Nabokov married a fellow Rus-sian exile in 1925 but because of his wife's Jewish ancestry was forced to flee Germany in 1937. In 1940 he moved to the United States, became a lecturer at Wellesley College, and was awarded U.S. citizenship in 1945. From 1948 to 1958 Nabokov was a professor of Russian literature at Cornell University, where he wrote his first widely popular work, *Lolita* (1955). In 1960, Nabokov moved to Switzerland, where he lived and wrote until his death in 1977.

Among Nabokov's major works, *Lolita, Pale Fire* (1962), and *Ada or Ardor* (1969) have received the warmest critical praise. One of the most controversial novels of the century, *Lolita* tells the story of a middle-aged European professor's sexual infatuation with a twelve-year-old American girl. Because of its treatment of the subject of pedophilia, the novel was the object of outrage and censorship, but critics then and since have consistently praised its literary quality and humor, as well as Nabokov's sympathetic though unsentimental depiction of Humbert Humbert, the novel's murderous antihero. In *Pale Fire,* Nabokov lampooned the tradition of scholarly annotation of literary works by presenting the 999-line poem of a fictitious poet alongside the off-kilter commentary of a disturbed professor. Nabokov's longest and last major work, *Ada or Ardor,* is a widely praised exploration of the themes of time and memory in the story of a lifelong love affair between a brother and sister.

In a prolific and celebrated literary career, Nabokov published seventeen novels, around sixty short stories, seven plays, several books of poetry, a critical biography of Nikolai Gogol, an autobiography, numerous translations to and from Russian, and several volumes of essays, lectures, and correspondence. Throughout his life, he was also an avid lepidopterist, or butterfly specialist, and in his first years in the United States he worked as a research fellow in entomology at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology. In 1961 filmmaker Stanley Kubrick turned Nabokov's *Lolita* into a popular Hollywood movie, and it was filmed again in a more explicit version by director David Lynch in 1997. In 1995 virtually all of Nabokov's previously published short stories (including "A Guide to Berlin" and several never before translated from the original Russian) were collected as *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov.*

Plot Summary

Part I: The Pipes

"A Guide to Berlin" begins with the narrator entering a Berlin pub with a drinking companion after a morning spent, he notes, observing "utility pipes, streetcars, and other important matters." The story's first section marks the beginning of the "guide to Berlin" that the narrator describes to his listener later that day. On his way to the Berlin Zoo, the narrator had encountered several utility pipes not yet installed beneath the asphalt of the street in front of his home. He describes how the pipes got there, the exploits of the neighborhood boys on them after they were unloaded, and their appearance that morning after receiving a fresh blanket of snow. As the section closes, he notes that someone has spelled out the name "Otto" on the snow covering one of the pipes, a name that strikes him as "beautifully" mirroring the shape of the pipes themselves.

Part II: The Streetcar

Boarding a streetcar that will eventually drop him off at the Berlin Zoo, the narrator is reminded of its resemblance to the now extinct horse-drawn trams of St. Petersburg, Russia. The narrator observes how efficiently the streetcar conductor takes change and gives out tickets despite his coarsened hands, and likens his dexterity to that of a pianist. He admires the conductor's flawless performance of his daily routine despite the swaying of the streetcar and the cold Berlin winter. When the streetcar reaches the end of the line, its two cars reverse positions: the first car is uncoupled and released onto a side track until it falls behind the second car and then joins up with it from the rear. The narrator suggests that the streetcar will soon go into a museum for technological antiques. As the narrator approaches the Berlin Zoo, he imagines a writer of the twenty-first century assembling the details of a vivid portrait of life in 1920s Berlin simply by studying a mothballed streetcar at some museum of the future. To the writer of the twenty-first century, the narrator's "yellow, uncouth" streetcar will be a historical treasure.

Part III: Work

In the story's third section, the narrator describes individual scenes of Berlin's commercial life visible from the windows of the streetcar. Workmen rhythmically drive iron stakes into the earth of a torn-up intersection; a flour-doused baker on a tricycle shoots down the street, followed by a van collecting empty bottles from taverns; and a postman fills his mailbag from a stuffed letterbox. Of all these sights, the narrator's attention is arrested by the "fairest" sight of all, a meat merchant's truck piled high with skinned carcasses being delivered to Berlin butcher shops.

Part IV: Eden

In the story's fourth section, the narrator has arrived at the Berlin Zoo. He describes it as a "man-made Eden," a reminder of the "solemn, and tender," opening of the Old Testament, in which the tale of Adam and Eve and the Garden is first told. Although it is an imperfect paradise in that the animals are caged, it is the closest man can get to a utopia on earth, and thus the name of the hotel across from the Zoo—the Hotel Eden—strikes the narrator as particularly apt. Because it is winter, the narrator cannot view the Zoo's tropical animals, so instead he heads for the Zoo's amphibian, insect, and fish houses. The narrator likens the lighted windows of the aquarium to the portholes in Captain Nemo's submarine in the Jules Verne novel *20,000 Leagues under the Sea.* He then imagines that the red starfish he sees in one of the aquarium windows is the origin of the "notorious" red star emblem of the Soviet Union. By trying to establish a "topical utopia" like the legendary sunken city of Atlantis ("Atlantica"), the narrator notes, communist Russia only "cripples" the modern world with its ideological "inanities."

The narrator then makes a final guidebook-like recommendation: "do not omit to watch the giant tortoises being fed." Although the ancient tortoise dining on moist leaves is physically unprepossessing, its majestic "ageless" shell seems to the narrator to carry the "splendid burden of time."

Part V: The Pub

The story closes where it began, after the narrator's morning trek but with the narrator and his companion now seated within the pub some time after the narrator has left the zoo. The listener immediately objects that the guide to Berlin the narrator has just offered him is "very poor." The narrator does not answer but only peers into the room at the back of the bar where, on a table that sits in front of a couch below a mirror, the barkeep's son is being fed soup. The listener again demands that the narrator explain his peculiar guide to Berlin, a city that strikes him in any case as "boring," "foreign," and "expensive." Still receiving no answer, he follows the narrator's gaze toward the child in the back room, who now raises his eyes to look back out at the bar. The narrator describes what the child sees: the bar's pool table, the metal bar itself, two obese truckers seated at a table, and, at another, the narrator and his companion. Although the scene is a familiar one to the child, the narrator "knows" that whatever the child's future life may bring, he will always remember the view he had from this table: the billiard table, the bar's denizens, the hovering cigar smoke, the patrons's voices, and the narrator's "scarred face" and missing right arm. The listener complains that he "can't understand" what the narrator sees in the other room, to which the narrator silently replies "how can I demonstrate to him that I have glimpsed somebody's future recollection?"

Summary

"A Guide to Berlin" is Vladimir Nabokov's short story about the importance of perspective when viewing everyday items and locations that will someday become elements of precious history and memory.

The author, who is also the narrator, tells the reader that he has visited a zoo this morning and is going to a pub to meet a friend. He shares with his friend the details of his day, including utility pipes, streetcars and other matters. The narrator begins the discussion of these matters by describing a network of black utility pipes that is being constructed close to his home. When the pipes were unloaded a few days ago, the neighborhood boys immediately converged on them and used the pipes extensively in their adventures. Now the novelty of the pipes has worn off for the boys, and the only thing holding onto the black pipes in a fresh dusting of snow, into which someone has written the name "Otto." The author is struck by the beauty of the two o's forming perfectly shaped bookends to the word in the snow.

The narrator then describes his morning trip on the streetcar and marvels at how one day this mode of transportation will vanish and become a relic in the history of travel. Even now, the author feels as if the trolley is showing signs of antiquity, and he is reminded of the horse-drawn coaches of not long ago, which are now obsolete.

The author is particularly taken by the hands of the streetcar ticket taker, and he comments on their agility in spite of their large size. Comparing the ticket taker's hands to those of a pianist, the author is fascinated as he watches the crude hands in the exchange of money one moment and steering the trolley forward the next, all the while balancing as the car jolts and lunges forward.

The thought of the streetcar going the way of the vanished horse-drawn vehicles makes the author muse about the day when someone in the twenty-first century will find a streetcar and retrieve a conductor's uniform from some museum in order to assemble a picture of life as it was in Berlin at the beginning of the twentieth century. Every minute detail of this experience, including the conductor's coin purse and the jolting movements, will be logged as part of history. The author thinks that his responsibility as a literary artist is to portray these mundane items today with the same reverence with which they will be viewed in the future.

Having taken a window seat on the streetcar, the author views the work and workers who populate the streets of Berlin during the course of a day's commerce. As he witnesses four street workers pounding iron stakes with mallets, the narrator is reminded of a carillon as the sounds of the two heavy metals collide.

The sight of a young baker dusted with flour reminds the author of an angel as the young boy flies by on a tricycle. Soon the sound of jingling bottles stacked inside a van catches the attention of the author, followed closely by a cart holding the long form of a black larch tree, its roots still balled, on its way to be planted somewhere. The postman

proceeds on his rounds, oblivious to all this other commotion, and the author is particularly struck by the sight of a truck filled with skinned carcasses parked in front of a butcher shop.

The author finally reaches his destination, which he calls a "man-made Eden on earth," the city zoo, which he likens to the beginning of the Old Testament in spite of the bars holding back the exotic creatures. Since it is December in Berlin, the tropical animals are all in hiding, but the author suggests visiting the amphibians and fish, especially since they represent the creatures from whom all life sprang out of the ocean. Particularly taken with the sight of the giant tortoises being fed, the author watches the creatures eat and is struck by the "ageless, well-rubbed, dull bronze" of the shells which carry the "splendid burden of time..."

At the end of the story, the author's companion in the pub thinks that the narration of the day's events does not make a very good guide to Berlin, but the author is too distracted by his surroundings to comment. The pub's walls are lined with magazines that serve as impromptu pieces of art surrounding the little tables in the cramped room.

At one end of the room sit the proprietor, his wife and his small child, who are eating lunch. The author watches as the man and his wife leave the child unattended while they serve their customers, and the author wonders what the child views through his young eyes. Surely, the child will one day recall the sight of the billiards table and the regular patrons filling the smoke-filled room.

The author's companion does not understand what is so fascinating about the sight of all this, and the author realizes that he cannot help his friend to understand that he has had a glimpse into a person's future recollection.

Analysis

The setting of the story is Berlin, Germany, in December 1925. Nabokov is a Russian expatriate living in Berlin at the time in the aftermath of World War I, and although it is never stated, readers can assume that Nabokov is the narrator. The point of view of the story is the first person narrative, which almost gives an essay like quality to the piece. The only other character in the story is the narrator's pub companion, who merely reacts to the narrator's depiction of his day in Berlin.

The story is told on the pretense and in the format of being a tourist guide to Berlin, but in actuality, it is a deeper story of the fuller impact of ordinary elements which a person encounters each day. In perspective, each person, profession, article and place encountered today will someday be viewed as a historical artifact or moment in time, and the author's message is that these elements should be revered in the present as well.

The author clearly has artistic sensibilities through his perspective on everyday elements such as the name "Otto" written in the snow, its o's mimicking the openings of the cylindrical utility pipes in the street. What appears to be a common scene of a small

family lunching turns into a reverie for the author, who imagines that he will be part of the subconscious memory of the child watching him as he registers the daily scene into his little mind. This scene is poignantly written, as the man and the child look at each other in the mirror over the bar, symbolizing the scene that will flash into the memories of both of them at some future time.

Not everyone has this gift of perspective and insight, and the author encourages the reader to view his own world with different eyes in the hopes of creating more reverence. He hopes others will take care in the shaping of each day that will one day be someone's memory.

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Characters

Listener

After the narrator, the unnamed listener—the narrator's regular drinking partner—is the most important character in "A Guide to Berlin." The narrator introduces him in the story's first sentence as his friend, and it is to him that he narrates the odd guide to Berlin that comprises the bulk of the story. Although he is deemed "the listener," he, ironically, is the only character who speaks in the story. When the reader first hears him in the story's last section, he is scornfully rejecting the narrator's guide and complains that the city it purports to describe is, in any event, "boring," "foreign," and "expensive." One view of the listener's role in the story is that he represents the blinkered, unimaginative, ordinary world, trapped in its own present and unable to see the glimpses of the future that sustain the narrator's spirit.

Narrator

The unnamed narrator is the central figure in the story. His descriptions of the things he encounters during a morning's tram ride to the Berlin Zoo is the reader's only source of information about the city and its people. Although the narrator discloses little about himself, it appears that, like Nabokov, he is a writer who once lived in St. Petersburg, Russia. Because of his apparent distaste for Russian communists ("topical utopias and other inanities"), the reader may infer that the narrator is also a Russian emigre living, as many of Nabokov's exiled countrymen did, in Berlin's Russian district south of the Berlin Zoo.

Unlike Nabokov, however, the narrator appears to have been terribly disfigured by war or some other tragic incident. The reader learns, for example, that he carries a "rubber heeled" walking stick; that women sympathetically give up their window seats for him when he boards streetcars, though they avoid looking at him; and that the child who regards him in the bar at the end of the story sees an "empty right sleeve and scarred face." Throughout the story, the narrator is quietly attentive, reflective, and sympathetic towards the world around him, and is acutely conscious of the passage of time.

Themes

Art and Experience

In "A Guide to Berlin" Nabokov presents a series of short vignettes of everyday life in the Berlin of the 1920s that illuminate the themes of time, memory, and the artist's response to experience. The artist's duty to record everyday experience is summed up in "The Streetcar" section, where the narrator declares, "I think that here lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right." In the narrator's eyes, the artist's obligation to ordinary experience is not simply to *record* it, but to portray it with the same nostalgic generosity with which future generations will view it.

Throughout "A Guide to Berlin" Nabokov shows the narrator taking his idea of literary creation directly to heart. In the narrator's own creation—the guide he narrates to his drinking companion—he portrays the everyday life around him with "kindly" eyes, as the future, he imagines, will also view it. For example, he transforms the mute ordinariness of the sewer pipe into a linguistic object by noting its resemblance to the letters in the name "Otto." He compares the coarse, black-nailed hands of the streetcar conductor to the nimble hands of a pianist; he transforms the construction workers' brute pounding into a musical "iron carillon"; and he elevates a scurrying baker covered with flour into an "angelic" figure. Later, at the Berlin Zoo, the aquarium's ordinary windows become the portholes of Captain Nemo's submarine *Nautilus* in the Jules Verne novel *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, and the ugly "ancient" tortoise messily eating its leaves is transformed into an "ageless" symbol of the "splendid burden of time."

The narrator of "A Guide to Berlin" not only asserts that the artist's duty to everyday experience is to "ennoble and justify" it as future generations will, he also actively memorializes it himself as he recounts the events of his morning trek through Berlin to his drinking companion.

Time

Although the timespan of the story "A Guide to Berlin" consists of the events of a single day (a December morning in Berlin in 1925), and primarily a single morning, Nabokov shows the past and future repeatedly invading the narrator's present. In addition to the everyday images that dominate the narrator's trip to the Berlin Zoo, in "The Streetcar" section the historical past appears in the form of the narrator's memories of the St. Petersburg trams he rode eighteen years earlier. In the "Eden" section, however, the narrator also refers to a more distant, primordial past when he compares the Berlin Zoo to the Garden of Eden of the Old Testament. He reinforces this sense of the past as a profoundly remote and primal place through his images of the "ruins of Atlantis" or

"sunken Atlantica" and of the "ancient . . . cupolas" (shells) of the Galapagos Islands tortoises. Although the tortoise is "ponderous" and "decrepit," for the narrator its very ancientness redeems it. By comparing its shell to the bronze dome of some architectural landmark, the narrator views the tortoise's old age and decrepitude as a "splendid burden." In "A Guide to Berlin," time is used to represent both the "antiquity" and "rickety" obsolescence of the everyday world, as well as its "old-fashioned charm" and "splendid" age.

Memory and Reminiscence

In his autobiography *Speak, Memory* Nabokov wrote, "How small the cosmos (a kangaroo's pouch would hold it), how paltry and puny in comparison to human consciousness, to a single individual recollection, and its expression in words!" In "A Guide to Berlin" human recollection is presented as the only antidote to the constant "vanishing" of the present into the past. The narrator asserts that the role of the artist is to portray the present in the heightened, nostalgic terms in which the future will see it. "A Guide to Berlin" is itself an example of the narrator's recollection preserving and elevating the ordinary objects of the present by recording them sympathetically for "future times."

In the story's last section, the narrator, seated with his friend at a Berlin bar, sees the barkeep's son facing them from the bar's back room. When the child lifts his eyes from his magazine to look out at the narrator and the listener, the narrator sees what the child sees through the mirror on the wall behind the child's table. "Whatever happens to him in life," he thinks, "he will always remember the picture he saw every day of his childhood from the little room where he was fed his soup. He will remember the billiard table and the coatless evening visitor who used to draw back his sharp white elbow and hit the ball with his cue, and the blue-gray cigar smoke, and the din of voices, and my empty sleeve and scarred face, and his father behind the bar, filling a mug for me from the tap." Like the Berlin of 1925 that will live on in the works of some writer of the twenty-first century, the child's gaze assures the narrator that he too will live on in the child's "kindly" memory.

Style

Point of View

In "A Guide to Berlin" Nabokov presents several short vignettes about ordinary life in Berlin in December, 1925, from the vantage point of an unnamed narrator who describes these scenes to a drinking companion later in the day. The point of view of the story is that of the narrator's first-person subjective "I." In "The Pub" section, Nabokov introduces the voice of the listener—the story's second point of view (and its only use of spoken speech)—who complains that the "guide" he has just heard is dull and pointless. At the end of the story, the narrator sees himself as the barkeep's child views him by glimpsing his own reflection in the mirror that hangs on the wall behind the child. The story's third point of view is that of the silent child, whose field of vision and consciousness the narrator imagines as he views himself through the mirror.

Narration/Narrative/Narrator

The narrator of "A Guide to Berlin" is an unnamed Berliner who tells a drinking companion at a Berlin *Bierstube* about the events of his day in December, 1925. He narrates the entire story in the present tense but occasionally recalls or imagines events that occurred in the past or that could occur in the future. The narrator's narrative is subjective and personal: he idiosyncratically imagines, for example, that the shape of two utility pipes resembles the letters in the name "Otto"; he declares that the street car will "vanish" in twenty years though he cannot actually know this; and he concludes that the red star of the Russian Bolshevists "originated" in the "crimson five-pointed star" of the starfish, though there is no evidence for his belief. The tone of his narrative about the city and its denizens is one of sympathy and beneficence: the women who give him their seats when he rides the streetcar are "compassionate"; the conductor is like a "pianist" in his dexterity; the baker is "angelic" in his flour-covered clothes; and the pink and yellow animal carcasses on a butcher's truck are the "fairest" sight on Berlin's streets.

Setting

The setting of "A Guide to Berlin" is Berlin, Germany, shortly before Christmas in December, 1925. In this period Berlin and Germany were undergoing a significant transition. The economic hardship—notably runaway inflation, brought on by Germany's defeat in World War I—was disrupting German society and threatening its attempt to establish and nurture a democratic form of government after years of monarchical rule. The Berlin the reader encounters in "A Guide to Berlin" is viewed in small, sharply focused fragments. It is a busy, industrious place, a blend of obsolete technologies like the "rickety," "old-fashioned" streetcar and the new energy of construction and economic change represented both by the soon-to-be-installed sewer pipes and the construction

workers and other laborers the narrator glimpses through the streetcar's windows. Lurking in the shadow of this modern Berlin is the narrator's memory of St. Petersburg, Russia, the city of his youth, which is twice recalled by the image of the obsolete horse-drawn tram.

In the mid-1920s, Nabokov and the majority of his fellow Russian expatriates lived in central Berlin in the Schoneberg district, south of the Zoologischer Garten, the Berlin Zoo of Nabokov's story. In this same neighborhood forty years later U.S. president John F. Kennedy would give his famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech. In "A Guide to Berlin" the narrator concludes his tram ride by touring the Berlin Zoo, which reminds him of a man-made Garden of Eden and conjures up images of the legendary submerged kingdom of Atlantis and of the exotic Galapagos Islands. While the narrator's sympathy toward the city is clear throughout the story, in the last section Nabokov gives the reader another view of Berlin, that of the ill-natured listener, for whom the city is simply "a boring, foreign city, and expensive to live in, too...."

Structure

In describing "A Guide to Berlin" in 1976, Nabokov wrote that "despite its simple appearance this Guide is one of my trickiest pieces." The simplicity Nabokov referred to is the story's apparently straightforward "guidebook" structure: its five seemingly cut-and-dried sections, each dealing with a different aspect of Berlin life, from sewer pipes and streetcars to working Berliners, the zoo, and a pub. As Nabokov hinted, this "simple" organization masks an unusual and complex structure. The story's opening paragraph and its closing section, for example, act as frames for the middle sections of the story by introducing the character (the unnamed listener) and the setting (a Berlin tavern) that the narrator will return to in the last section after his departure from the zoo.

After the opening frame, Nabokov presents five sections that begin with realistic, "guidebook-like" descriptions but that open or expand out into philosophical or impressionistic language. For example, the narrator's precise, realistic description of the unburied sewer pipes in "The Pipes" dissolves, by the end of the section, into an imaginative comparison of the pipes's shape to the letters in the name "Otto." Similarly, "The Streetcar" begins with a narrow declarative assertion of fact about the future of the streetcar, but ends with an emotional artistic manifesto about the role of the literary artist. The "Work" section also opens by announcing the narrator's intent to give "examples of various kinds of work," but the plain "examples" the narrative presents are in fact colorful, cinematic images of human variety and activity.

Sections 1 through 4 of "A Guide to Berlin" all begin with simple declarative statements that are then followed by a series of long sentences often containing additional clauses. The subject of each of the story's sections also tends to expand in scope as the story progresses: the story begins with the four sewer pipes (section 1), broadens to encompass the activity in the streetcar (section 2), widens still further to the frenetic economic activity out on the street itself (section 3), and opens out yet again to the wide expanse of the zoo (section 4). Finally, although each vignette appears to be

independent, each is subtly linked: the reflection of the streetcar's lights on the pipe in section 1 foreshadows the narrator's description of the streetcar in section 2, as well as the Berlin street scene he glimpses from the streetcar's window in section 3. And the image of the winking lion on the tavern sign at the story's opening, the horses pulling the St. Petersburg trams in "The Streetcar," and the butchered sides of beef on the truck at the close of "Work" all anticipate the appearance of the animal world of the zoo in "Eden."

Images/Imagery

Because of the short length and everyday subject matter of "A Guide to Berlin," the story's sharp and vivid imagery plays a central role in achieving its effects. At least one scholar has noted that the story's vignettes and images seem to be constructed cinematically, that is, like the visually arresting images of a movie. For example, Nabokov repeatedly uses color to create memorable imagery: the tavern's "sky-blue" Lowenbrau sign with its white lettering; the "bright-orange heat lightning" of the passing tram's lights reflected in the snow; the "chrome yellow" and "pink" beef carcasses hauled into the butcher's bloody "red shop"; and the "crimson" starfish that reminds the narrator of the Soviet Union's national emblem.

In addition to color, Nabokov also emphasizes images that are sometimes constructed, as if by the black-and-white film of a camera, out of only light and darkness. In "The Pipes," for example, the narrator describes a stark photographic contrast: "an even stripe of fresh snow stretches along the upper side of each black pipe." In the climactic image of "The Pub" Nabokov creates a light-and-shadow effect through his description of the scene visible to the bar keep's son: "He will remember the billiard table and the coatless evening visitor who used to draw back his sharp white elbow and hit the ball with his cue, and the blue-gray cigar smoke, and the din of voices, and my empty right sleeve and scarred face, and his father behind the bar, filling a mug for me from the tap." In this intensely visual image, the narrator describes only parts of the things before him—an elbow, a pool cue, a sleeve, a face—because, like the film camera lens Nabokov may have used as his model here, the boy can only see what the light in the room exposes.

Symbols/Symbolism

Nabokov employs at least four major symbols in "A Guide to Berlin": the guide, the streetcar, the zoo, and the mirror. The story's conventional title prepares the reader to anticipate a factual, descriptive introduction to the major sights and locations of Berlin. Nabokov sustains this impression by dividing the story into brief, simply titled sections named like a tourist's guide after places and activities characteristic of urban life. As the narrator's idiosyncratic and subjective descriptions of Berlin soon make clear, however, his "city guide" is really a manual for *writers* in how to portray ordinary objects and people so as to ennoble and justify them for future generations. In the story's last scene Nabokov has the listener, who seems to represent a kind of insensitive everyman,

underscore the fact that the story he has just heard is a "guide" altogether different than the one he had expected ("That's a very poor guide.... It's of no interest."). The narrator's true audience, however, seems not to be the listener, who utterly fails to see or understand what the narrator does, but rather some future sympathetic reader who may look with "kindly," comprehending eyes on the narrator's creation.

The streetcar explicitly unites the first three vignettes of the story. Its lights are reflected in the snow that covers the sewer pipes the narrator encounters in the first section. In the second section, the streetcar stands out as a symbol of a rapidly changing Berlin that in twenty years will replace the streetcar with a more efficient mode of transportation, just as the horse-drawn tram was replaced before it. "Everything about it is a little clumsy and rickety," the narrator observes, and though he admires the conductor's efficiency at taking change and handing out tickets, the streetcar itself seems to represent the old ways of the narrator's distant St. Petersburg childhood: horse-drawn carriages, carriage boys in "long-skirted livery," and the "cobblestones" of a village street. The frenetic activity of the story's third section, "Work," seems only to assert the streetcar's obsolescence more pointedly: in a world quickly being transformed by construction workers and aswarm with motorized vans and trucks, the streetcar, like the "decrepit" tortoise of the "Eden" section, is an antique. And like the tortoise in the Berlin aquarium—and indeed like the crippled narrator himself—the streetcar is a symbol of a fading historical time that must wait hopefully for the "kindly mirrors of future times" to regain its past glory.

The zoo is the third major symbol of the story. From the opening sentence it is portrayed as the primary destination of the narrator's morning trip through Berlin, and all his encounters in the story's first three sections are preparations for his arrival there. The winking lion in the Lowenbrau sign in the opening paragraph, the horses pulling St. Peter-sburg's old trams in "The Streetcar" section, and the dead animal "carcasses" being carted into a butcher's shop in the scene before the narrator's arrival—all prepare the reader for the animal world described in "Eden." In that section, the narrator describes the zoo as a "man-made Eden on earth" that reminds "us of the solemn, and tender, beginning of the Old Testament." Although, the narrator admits, zoos cruelly confine animals behind metal bars, they represent "Eden nonetheless. Insofar as man is able to reproduce it." Like a writer's stories and other acts of "literary creation" or artistic reproduction, zoos are artificial things. They are human attempts to re-create what is unreal or lost, whether the biblical Garden of Eden of man's innocence and immortality or the original moments of past time that the writer can hope to portray and memorialize but can never relive. For the narrator the zoo symbolizes both the mortality that has been man's fate since his expulsion from the Garden and man's impulse to recapture "far-off times" through the act of literary creation.

The symbol of the mirror first appears in "The Streetcar" section, where the narrator describes the essence of "literary creation" as portraying "ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times." The Berlin writer of the twenty-first century, whom the narrator imagines re-creating the world of 1920s Berlin through a streetcar in a museum, will employ the "kindly mirror" of his future vantage point to transform the yellow streetcar. It will then become a "valuable and meaningful" object,

ennobled and justified by its age into something "exquisite and festive in its own right." In the story's final vignette, the symbol of the mirror reappears again in the form of the mirror hanging on the wall behind the bar keep's son. From his vantage point in the bar the narrator sees his reflection in this mirror and thus can view himself as the child sees him. Once he is fixed by the child's gaze ("he is now looking our way"), the narrator, like the faded streetcar, can live on indefi-nitely in someone's memory.

Historical Context

Vladimir Nabokov's life was profoundly and directly affected by many of the major political and social events of the twentieth century. As the grandson of a prominent Czarist government minister and the son of a minister of justice and leading Russian democrat, Nabokov grew up in an environment of material comfort and tolerant cosmopolitan liberalism. When the Bolshevists under V. I. Lenin launched their grasp for power following Russia's collapse in World War I, the Nabokovs, as quintessential members of the prewar Russian aristocracy, had no choice but to flee Russia for the West. In part because of his father's political background and in part because of his own talent and potential in languages and literature, Nabokov was admitted to Cambridge University from which he earned a degree in 1922. While he was at school, his father settled in the large community of expatriate Russian intellectuals in Berlin where he became the editor of a democratic daily newspaper named *The Rudder*. When his father was murdered in 1922 by reactionary Russians attempting to assassinate a prominent democratic Russian politician, Nabokov moved to Berlin and began contributing to his late father's paper while earning a living as a translator, writer, and instructor of English, Russian, and tennis. By 1925, the year "A Guide to Berlin" was published, the Bolshevists had all but secured their hold on Russian society, and an ambitious Communist Party member named Josef Stalin had begun the ascent to power that by 1926 would give him dictatorial control over the Soviet Union.

Nabokov was naturally bitter about the communists' success in Russia, and although he rarely addressed political issues in his fiction, "A Guide to Berlin" provides a brief glimpse into his attitude toward the political movement that forced his family from their homeland. In the "Eden" section of the story, Nabokov's narrator sees a "crimson" starfish at the Berlin aquarium that reminds him of the red star emblem of the new Soviet regime. The narrator fancifully imagines that "this, then, is where the notorious emblem originated—at the very bottom of the ocean, in the murk of sunken Atlantica, which long ago lived through various upheavals while pottering about topical utopias and other inanities that cripple us today." In this brief aside, Nabokov imagines the "inanity" of communism as arising from the bottom of the sea to "cripple" modern life, an unreal and doomed "uto-pia" like the legendary sunken society of Atlantis.

Following its surrender to the Allies in 1918, Germany was forced to agree to armistice terms that required it to make substantial reparation payments to its former enemies. Whether because the German economy was too weak to bear these payments or because Germany's leaders were unenthusiastic about paying them, the German economy began to experience crippling hyperinflation in the mid-1920s, which eventually led to the financial ruin of the German middle class. Germany's economic chaos also fatally destabilized the young democratic government known as the Weimar Republic, which had been created after Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated his throne in 1918. In 1925 the Locarno Treaty was signed in an attempt to stabilize Western Europe's postwar borders. But the Allies' uneasiness over Germany's geopolitical ambitions drove France in the same year to begin construction of the heavily fortified Maginot Line along the Franco-German border. Germany's continuing

political and economic instability soon allowed Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist party to gain a foothold with the German electorate and eventually to seize power in 1933. Indeed, the same year "A Guide to Berlin" was published, the first part of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* reached Berlin bookstores, unambiguously announcing Hitler's nationalist and antisemitic philosophy to a receptive audience of disaffected Germans. Two decades later, Hitler's concentration camps would claim the life of Nabokov's younger brother, Sergey.

In the tolerant political climate of the Weimar regime, however, German culture briefly thrived, and Berlin became a mecca for avant-garde cultural and intellectual activity. Elsewhere in 1925, Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess* (The Trial), Boris Pasternak's *Detstvo Luvers* (Childhood), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Ezra Pound's first installment of the poem *The Cantos*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* all made their first appearance in print. It was also during the period of the early and mid-1920s that Nabokov began to experiment with the literary styles that would later establish him as one of the most stylistically inventive writers of the twentieth century. Critics agree that the short stories penned by Nabokov in Russian during the 1920s represent his stylistic apprenticeship, his attempt to discover the true voice that would characterize his later fiction. Despite his fifteen-year stay in the German capital, Nabokov always claimed to have never really learned the German language, and his social circle reflected his almost exclusive association with the other expatriate Russians who settled in Berlin's Russian district near the city's zoological gardens. Nabokov's at times insular life in Berlin (which he called "an odd but by no means unpleasant existence") is perhaps alluded to in "A Guide to Berlin." There, the narrator is shown interacting with only one other character, an unnamed drinking companion whose Russian nationality may be implied in his alienated description of Berlin as a "boring, foreign city, and expensive to live in, too...."

Despite Nabokov's apparent aloofness toward his new German home, Berlin played a prominent role in much of his early fiction. Several of Nabokov's works from the 1920s take place in the German capital. In addition to the early Russian-language short stories "Blagost" ("Grace," 1924) and "Pis'mo v Rossiyu" ("A Letter that Never Reached Russia," 1925), Berlin is the setting for Nabokov's first novel, *Mashenka* (published a year after "A Guide to Berlin" and later translated as *Mary*): the story of a young Russian emigre living in a Berlin pension, or boardinghouse, who longs to be reunited with the lover he left behind in Russia. Similarly, in *Dar* (1937, later translated as *The Gift*), Nabokov used Berlin as the setting for the story of a young Russian emigre writer whose romance and eventual marriage to a Russian woman is directed by a benevolent fate. Finally, in *Korol', dama, valet* (1928, translated as *King, Queen, Knave*), Nabokov identified the setting only as "Metropolis" but left little doubt about the city's true identity —Berlin: "In the very name of that still unfamiliar metropolis, in the weighty rumble of the first syllable and in the light ring of the second there was something exciting to him; the famous avenue, lined with gigantic ancient lindens; . . . luxuriantly grown out of the avenue's name."

Although Nabokov's closest ties were to Berlin's Russian emigre circle, he enthusiastically embraced the growing German film movement, which encompassed

such prominent figures as Fritz Lang, Josef von Sternberg, and Erich von Stroheim. During the period in which Nabokov wrote "A Guide to Berlin," documentary films about Berlin (for example, Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a City*) were an especially popular subject for German filmmakers, and Nabokov even served as an extra in a number of German films. Both Nabokov's fascination with the purely visual language of cinema and the popularity of these Berlin documentaries may well have played a part in the writing of "A Guide to Berlin." The documentary, "day-in-the-life" quality of the story's "guidebook" structure, for example, as well as Nabokov's use of brief, acutely visual vignettes and sharp images of color and light may hint at the influence of the German film movement on the story's development.

Critical Overview

The original publication of "A Guide to Berlin" (as "Putevoditel' po Berlinu") in a Russian-language newspaper for the Russian expatriate community in Berlin virtually guaranteed that Nabokov's fourteenth published story would receive little initial critical attention. By 1930, however, Nabokov's first three novels— *Mashenka, Korol', dama, valet,* and *Zashchita Luzhina*—had established Nabokov's literary reputation, and he decided to gather his early stories into the collection *Vozvrashchenie Chorba* (1929, translated as *The Return of Chorb*). Writing to a friend in 1930, Nabokov described "A Guide to Berlin" as the best story in the collection, but contemporary reviewers preferred the title story, written in the same year as "A Guide to Berlin," about the loss of a lover. As Nabokov's reputation grew with the publication of such works as *Priglashenie na Kazn'* (1938, *Invitation to a Beheading*) and *Lolita* (1955), critics continued to ignore "A Guide to Berlin" in favor of the contemporaneous "The Return of Chorb."

With Nabokov's reputation firmly established by the late 1960s, however, critics began to redress this imbalance, and "A Guide to Berlin" began to garner the attention Nabokov had always maintained it deserved. In his *Nabokov: His Life in Art,* critic Andrew Field devoted a page and half to the story, which he called a "successful story of a purely descriptive sort." Field's insights included his assertion that the story comes close to achieving the form of the "prose poem" in some passages, his identification of the streetcar as a symbol of a passing Berlin, his noting of the Berlin Zoo's presence in the story as a "dual metaphor of artistic form and human fate," his identification of a similarity between the story's style and that of Turgenev's "careless sketches," and his assertion that the audience for the narrator's "guidebook" is primarily the literary artist. In her 1978 study of Nabokov's short stories of the 1920s, *Blue Evenings in Berlin,* Marina Turkevich Naumann echoed Field's observation that the "guide" Nabokov had in mind is a guidebook for literary artists writing for future generations. After noting that the things that populate the story—street scenes, trams, childhood memories—recur frequently in Nabokov's other works, Naumann discussed the story's "compositional design," in which the opening and closing sections act as "frames" for the middle sections and the individual sections are linked by tone and subject matter. Characterizing "A Guide to Berlin" as a "contemplative" and "philosophical" piece, Naumann examined its literary influences, which include Turgenev and Gogol; its literary allusions (Jules Verne and the Old Testament); and its unusual grammatical structure.

D. Barton Johnson's "A Guide to Nabokov's 'A Guide to Berlin'" (1979) placed the story in the context of Nabokov's early career and apprentice works. While noting the contributions of previous critics of the story, Johnson argued that none had satisfactorily explained why Nabokov had stated over the years that "A Guide to Berlin" was among his favorite and "trickiest" stories. After suggesting that "in the most general terms, the story treats the favorite Nabokovian themes of time, memory, and their relationship to art and the artist," Johnson fastened on Nabokov's use of the mirror to explicate the story's "tricky" complexity. He noted that mirrors appear not only in "The Streetcar" and "The Pub" sections but that one of the characteristics of mirrors—image reversal ("left is

right, right is left")—occurs both in the narrator's descriptions of the coupling streetcars and on the level of the story's language itself, through Nabokov's use of palindromes and anagrams. According to Johnson, through the story's linguistic inventiveness Nabokov demonstrates the "ingenious integration of theme and device that marks his mature work."

In 1990, Brian Boyd discussed "A Guide to Berlin" in his biography of Nabokov's first forty years, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years.* Describing the story as "the boldest advance yet in Nabokov's art," Boyd noted its "disjointed structure," plotlessness, and Nabokov's mastery of arresting literary images and detail. Boyd viewed the story as organized not so much by the objects and locales of the physical Berlin—the pipes, the streetcar, the working Berliners, and the zoo—as by the "different possible relations of time." For example, Boyd pointed out how the story's focus shifts between present, past, and future, moving from the narrator's vision of the near future, when he believes that the streetcar will have vanished, to the past of St. Petersburg and its horse-drawn trams, to the twenty-first century, when an "eccentric" writer will re-create 1920s Berlin, and finally, at the story's close, to the child's future recollections of the time in which the story takes place. For Boyd, Nabokov's principal subject in "A Guide to Berlin" is "the absurdity of our inability to return to our past."

In his 1992 study, *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other,* Julian W. Connolly argued that "A Guide to Berlin" illustrates the theme of "the value of remaining receptive to the everyday flow of life and of establishing channels of communication with external others." For Connolly, the "other" the narrator wishes to connect with is not the unseeing listener in the Berlin bar at the story's conclusion but the "future generations of curious readers" who offer the narrator the only hope of "empathic connection." The narrator demonstrates his ability to forge this bond with others by projecting himself into the inner life of the bar-keep's child. The narrator somehow knows, for example, that the child is "forbidden to touch" the billiard cue ball and is not "dismayed" by the scene in the bar he views from the back room. In his contribution ("The Future Perfect of the Mind: 'Time and Ebb' and 'A Guide to Berlin'") to a 1993 study of Nabokov's short fiction, Robert Grossmith discussed "A Guide to Berlin" as an example of Nabokov's "fascination with the premonition of future memories and the attendant defamiliarizing power of such perceptions." For Grossmith, the story's final scene, in which the narrator "memorializes" the present moment by glimpsing the child's "future recollection," represents the "keystone of an entire aesthetic," in which realistic details and everyday "trivia" must be captured and preserved by the writer in order to ensure their survival into the future. The writer can achieve this, Goldsmith argued, only by "defamiliarizing" them, that is, by removing them from their ordinary contexts in order to render them strange and memorable.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Bodine is a writer, editor, and researcher who has taught at the Milwaukee College of Business. In the following essay, he discusses the style of "A Guide to Berlin," focusing on Nabokov's description of the story as "tricky."

When the full extent of Nabokov's talent began to declare itself in the novels he wrote between 1940 and 1970, Nabokov's critical reputation began a steady ascent that by the time of his death had earned him, in the eyes of some critics, a place among the twentieth century's foremost literary masters. "As long as Western civilization survives," his obituary in the *New York Times* concluded, "his reputation is safe. Indeed, he will probably emerge as one of the greatest artists our century has produced." For many of his admiring critics Nabokov seemed an altogether unique literary presence laboring in a sphere all his own. One such critic called him "one of the most strikingly original novelists to emerge since Proust and Joyce," and *Time* magazine claimed that "he derived from no other writers and leaves no true imitators." Although Nabokov's genius was often attributed to his elegant and precise command of language (the English novelist Martin Amis, for example, called him "our greatest stylist"), for many critics the brilliance and erudition of his prose were secondary to his true gift: an ironic, haughty, but finally compassionate view of the world that was pervaded by a sense of exuberant, mischievous play. Nabokov was described by the *Sunday Times* of London, for example, as a "high-souled genius" who "communicated in every sentence his own playful and godlike bliss." And among the contemporary novelists who could perhaps claim to be among his peers, John Updike said of him, "Nabokov writes prose the only way it should be written, that is, ecstatically."

At the time of his death Nabokov's exalted reputation rested largely on his novels. From his first English translation of one of his early Russian-language novels, *Despair* (1937), to his celebrated master works—*Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada*—Nabokov seemed to have left his Russian short stories of the 1920s decisively behind him. In the decade before his death, however, Nabokov, with the help of his son Dmitri, began systematically translating his 1920s Russian stories for publication in the 1976 collection *Details of a Sunset*. It was only then, a half-century after the original publication of "A Guide to Berlin," that the story Nabokov had more than once singled out for special praise become accessible to his English-language critics.

Most early critics of "A Guide to Berlin" contented themselves with explications of the story's odd "guidebook" format, its major images, and its apparent aesthetic message. The narrator's "guide to Berlin," these critics agreed, was in reality a guidebook or manual for literary artists, and its five seemingly independent sections were in fact subtly linked vignettes (brief sketches focusing on sharp detail), framed by the story's opening and closing sections and connected internally by the presence of the streetcar that carries the narrator from his home to the Berlin Zoo. Unable perhaps to make sense of the story's odd vignette structure, its apparent lack of plot or action, and its strange blend of detailed imagery and literary manifesto, these early critics described "A Guide to Berlin" in absolute terms as either a "philosophical" or "contemplative" piece,

or as a kind of "realistic," "purely descriptive" work. In a 1979 essay on the story D. Barton Johnson argued that while these labels were helpful as far as they went, none managed to adequately explain why in 1930 Nabokov had called "A Guide to Berlin" his best story or why, forty-five years later, he was still talking about it as "one of my trickiest." In his essay, Johnson approached this putative "trickiness" head on, using the appearance of the mirrors in "The Streetcar" and "The Pub" sections of the story as clues to the story's hidden complexity.

As students of Nabokov's later works would have recognized, "The Eye," his 1930 novella about the artistic process and a poet's failed romance, had also employed the device of the mirror in a tale also set in Berlin, that combined elements of the love story, detective novel, and social commentary. In "A Guide to Berlin," Johnson showed, the mirrors were keys to the story's "tricky" meaning; Nabokov had deliberately "coded" the story, he argued, to emphasize the ideas of "reflection" and "image reversal" suggested by his use of the image of the mirror in two sections of the story. In "The Pipes," for example, Nabokov has a passing streetcar reflect its lights in the snow that covers a pipe in front of the narrator's home, and then has the narrator discover that the name "Otto," scrawled in the snow on the pipe, is mirrored in the very shape of the pipe itself, with its "tw*o o*rifices" (O—O) and its taci*t t*unnel" (-tt-). Similarly, in the next section, "The Streetcar," Nabokov twice uses the narrator's memory of the now "vanished" horse-drawn trams of St. Petersburg as reflections from the past, or as historical mirrors of the eventual fate of the "old-fashioned" streetcar in which the narrator rides. In the section's penultimate paragraph, Nabokov underscores this sense of historical "mirroring" by repeating the phrase "the horse-drawn tram has vanished" from the section's opening line. Then, in his manifesto for an art of "proactive nostalgia" (as Johnson calls it) at the end of "The Streetcar," Nabokov employs the mirror image directly: "I think that here lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be *reflected* in the kindly *mirrors* of future times" (emphasis added).

With the symbol of the mirror established as perhaps the key to the story's "trickiness," it takes center stage in the story's final section, "The Pub." The mirror behind the shoulders of the bar keep's son in the pub's back room enables the crippled narrator to see himself in the child's eyes, assuring him that as long as the child survives, he, too, will be preserved through the child's "future recollection." Nabokov makes clear, however, that only the narrator can see what the child sees; he has the narrator's disagreeable companion, the unnamed listener, flat-ly state, "I can't understand what you see down there." What enables only the narrator to "see" the child's future memories? Throughout the story Nabokov has hinted that the narrator's crippled physique may account for his ability to empathetically see others's "future recollections": either as a result of war or misfortune, the narrator walks with a "rubber heeled stick," his "scarred" features cause the women on the streetcar to try "not to look too closely" at him, and when the child views him from the bar's back room, he sees only the narrator's "empty right sleeve and scarred face." The narrator's empty right sleeve in particular underscores his similarity to the aged, repulsive tortoise at the Berlin Zoo, whom the narrator describes as having, like himself, "totally useless paws."

By emphasizing the narrator's physical disability (and, as Marina Turkevich Naumann has shown, reinforcing it by adding a new reference to it in his English translation), Nabokov seems to suggest that only the crippled narrator can see others' "future recollections" because he most of all depends on the "kindly mirrors of future times" to transform his physical decrepitude into something noble and splendid. When the narrator's companion complains that he doesn't see what the narrator sees, the narrator's note of triumph or exultation ("What indeed!") reflects his realization that—like the rickety streetcar, the ruins of Atlantis, or the decrepit tortoise—he, too, can be transfigured, despite his age and infirmity, into something "valuable and meaningful" through "someone's future recollection."

Since D. Barton Johnson's 1979 essay helped to unlock the "trickiness" of "A Guide to Berlin," later critics have identified the story as perhaps the earliest example of the subtlety and complexity that characterize Nabokov's later masterpieces. For example, in 1990 the author of Nabokov's definitive biography, Brian Boyd, described "A Guide to Berlin" as "the boldest advance yet in Nabokov's art" and argued that the story's surface organization of five vignettes dealing with the physical or "spatial" Berlin of 1925 gives way to a deeper temporal structure involving the relationship between the past (St. Petersburg and its horse-drawn trams; the ancient past of Atlantis), the present (Berlin in December, 1925), and the future (the eccentric Berlin writer of the twenty-first century; the child's future recollection). According to a 1992 study of the story, the narrator's ability to project himself into the consciousness of the barkeep's child—his ability to somehow know, for example, that the child is "forbidden to touch" the cue ball or to understand that the child is not "dismayed" by the scene in the bar before him—suggests that as early as 1925 Nabokov was experimenting with the theme of the relationship between the self and other. These themes would lead into his later themes of obsession and the merging of the self in another in such novels as *Lolita*, *Pale Fire,* and *Ada.*

Nabokov once remarked that "art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex." For the half-century between the original publication of "A Guide to Berlin" and the appearance of Nabokov's English translation, the story had been relegated to the heap of "experimental" tales in which Nabokov struggled, not always successfully, to find his own voice and themes. If it was read at all, it was seen as one of Nabokov's early "straightforward" apprentice works, lacking in "the polish, intricacy and artifice" of his later, more famous novels. But with Nabokov's English translation and his helpful hint to critics that the tale was as "tricky" as his mature work, "A Guide to Berlin" now stands as perhaps the first clear example of Nabokov's celebrated ability to interweave his favorite themes—memory, time, and their relationship to the literary artist—within a story of complex structure and ingenious imagery, of striking visual detail and playful verbal innuendo.

Source: Paul Bodine, Overview of "A Guide to Berlin," for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Connolly is Professor of Slavic Language and Literature at the University of Virginia. In the following excerpt, he offers an interpretation of the theme of "A Guide to Berlin," emphasizing Nabokov's development of imagery.

Nabokov's most comprehensive statement about the value of remaining receptive to the everyday flow of life and of establishing channels of communication with external others arises in the unusual sketch entitled "A Guide to Berlin." Published in December 1925, this sketch is the only one of the period to have an overtly programmatic orientation. While most of the early works revolve around a protagonist's preoccupation with the absence of a beloved other, this work has a different focus: the relationship of the writer to the outside world and to his potential audience. Nabokov's treatment of the self-other relationship here establishes principles which remain in force throughout his literary career.

The sketch consists of an untitled introductory paragraph and five separate vignettes bearing the titles "The Pipes," "The Streetcar," "Work," "Eden," and "The Pub." Much of the text presents the narrator's detailed observations of ordinary Berlin street scenes. In the second vignette, however, the narrator articulates the reason why he believes that such a record of observed detail is valuable. Stating that trolley cars will disappear some day, he declares that future writers will have to resort to museums to view the authentic remnants of the past. In those future days, every "trifle" (*meloch'*) from the past will be precious and meaningful. It is up to the writer, then, to take the interests of future generations into account. The narrator now introduces a key image—that of the mirror—to explain his view of the "sense" of literary creation. As he puts it, literary creation is meant to portray "ordinary objects *as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors* of future times . . . when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right." The implications of this mirror image will be discussed below. For the moment, however, one should recognize that the narrator's awareness of the inevitability of loss in life and of the role that verbal art may play in preserving life's transient experiences points to a basic concern of Nabokov's own art. His fiction is permeated both with a haunting recognition of the fragility of all that is precious in life and with a fervent desire to find a way to preserve treasured moments of experience. The narrator also reveals here his sensitivity to the needs of an unknown "other"—in this case, future generations of curious readers. He underscores this conviction in the last vignette.

Describing a pub in which he sits with a companion, the narrator observes that the pub consists of two rooms. He and his companion sit in one room, while in the other—part of the proprietor's apartment—he sees a couch, a mirror, and a table at which a child sits eating soup. This segment may seem at first glance to be a passage of neutral description, but two elements herald its special import. First, the reference to the mirror echoes the theme of the perception by future generations introduced earlier in the sketch. Moreover, as the narrator continues the description, he includes not only *his* view of the scene, but also that of the *child*: "he is now looking our way. From there he

can see the inside of the tavern—the green island of the billiard table, the ivory ball he is forbidden to touch . . . a pair of fat truckers at one table and *the two of us* at another."

This incorporation of the child's perspective draws attention to an important feature of the narrator's approach to the outside world. As in the earlier passage about the writer's responsibility to the future, he expresses an awareness of the perspective of an external other. He even speculates on the child's psychological attitude toward the scene he beholds, stating that the child has long grown accustomed to this scene and therefore is not "dismayed" by its proximity. The narrator's ability to imagine the inner world of another is a vital attribute of the artist in Nabokov's world, so long as this capacity does not cascade into massive personal projection, thereby obliterating the other's autonomy.

The narrator's comprehension of the other's viewpoint has a positive effect on him. Mentally responding to his companion's lack of appreciation for the import of this moment, he expresses his delight at having glimpsed "somebody's future recollection." Although the narrator's satisfaction in achieving a sense of empathic connection might be rewarding for any artist, this experience may have an additional benefit for him. Focusing on the fact that the child "will always remember" the view he had of the pub scene, and perceiving that an image of the narrator himself is included in the child's view, the narrator may have discovered here a possible means of transcending the personal limits of his own time and space. By envisioning himself as part of the scene that the boy will remember in the future, the narrator perceives that he will remain alive in the boy's memory, and therefore will not be consigned to oblivion as long as the child himself survives. A small emendation that Nabokov made when revising his story for translation supports this premise. In the original version, the items listed by the narrator in his description of the child's perspective included the billiard table, a billiard player, and the child's father. The English version, however, adduces a new item: "my empty right sleeve and scarred face." An image of the narrator himself is now explicitly included among those things which the boy will recall in future years and which therefore will survive the passage of time.

At several points in the text, then, Nabokov's narrator indicates the importance of forging a connection to an external other, whether it be making an impression on the memory of a child or conveying the essence of things "as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times." What makes "A Guide to Berlin" particularly distinctive, however, is that Nabokov not only articulates the premise within the narrator's discourse, he also illustrates it by manipulating the very building blocks of that discourse—the letters of the text itself. As D. Barton Johnson has pointed out, Nabokov carefully embedded in his text "mirror image" palindromes and anagrams of key words such as "OTTO"; this mirroring technique "pre-figures" the central theme of "future memories." At the same time, however, it reaffirms the narrator's fundamental concern—the importance of being aware of the perceptions of anonymous others. That is, while the narrator's discourse speaks *overtly* about a potential audience of future generations, the text of his discourse—composed by the authentic *auctor*—speaks *covertly* to just such an other: the presumed reader of the sketch itself.

It is worth noting that Nabokov's narrator does not find a receptive audience for his observations within his narrated world. Although the narrator shares his collected observations with his drinking companion, the latter remains unresponsive. He calls the narrator's guide "very poor" and suggests that no one cares about the narrator's experiences. Nor does the narrative mention any other addressee in the text. Yet while the other who is physically present within the narrator's world is not receptive to the narrator's vision, there exists a different type of other who is not physically present in that world but who may indeed be more receptive—the presumed reader of the text. Nabokov's works frequently focus on characters who find themselves surrounded by an unresponsive world and who look to an anonymous audience for understanding and acceptance.

The presence of encoded verbal material within the text of "A Guide to Berlin" thus discloses a seminal feature of Nabokov's art: the potential of his narratives to speak on two distinct levels simultaneously. In addition to the surface-level message which his fictional narrators intend their readers to absorb, one may perceive a second message from the implied author to the implied reader which may modify or contradict the first message. In "A Guide to Berlin," the message of the secondary channel of communication opened by the embedded verbal material reinforces that of the surface level: both levels indicate the importance of establishing communicative links to external others. In later Nabokov texts, however, the two messages can diverge radically.

"A Guide to Berlin" offers direct insight into the writer's concerns and convictions during his first years as a prose writer. Foremost among these is his belief in the importance of sensitivity to the potential perceptions of others. Not only does such sensitivity sharpen the observation and the description of life in art, it may provide a way to transcend the narrow spatial and temporal limitations of one's own life. The sensitivity to the perceptions of others which the narrator reveals in "A Guide to Berlin" is, however, not matched by most of the other protagonists in Nabokov's early fiction. While many of his protagonists express concern for the feelings of others, they often submerge that concern under their own needs and projections. In his first novel *Mary*, Nabokov provides his first detailed treatment of this problem.

All together, Nabokov's stories of the 1924-25 period lay down the foundations upon which the complex edifice of his subsequent fiction will be built. They highlight the dangers of obsession with an internal image of another, while signalling the benefits of establishing empathic bonds with others. They also disclose the first traces of the seminal bifurcation between the authorial and character dimensions of the self in Nabokov's fictional world, and they suggest the central role that projection and creation can play in the development of a character's identity. Although the early stories do not explore the implications of these processes in detail, they indicate the direction Nabokov's subsequent fiction will follow....

Source: Julian W. Connolly, "'A Guide to Berlin'," in *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other,* Cam-bridge University Press, 1992, pp. 27-31.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Johnson offers an interpretation of Nabokov's use of mirror images in "A Guide to Berlin," noting connections between imagery and theme in the story.

The eight-page sketch "A Guide to Berlin" was Nabokov's fourteenth published story and was first published in the Russian emigre newspaper *Rul'* on Christmas Eve, 1925. At the opening of the story the nameless narrator, an emigre Russian writer, sits in a Berlin *Bierstube* and describes the sights of his wholly unremarkable day. This seven-line *mise en scène* is the first half of a frame which is completed at story end by a longer, present tense episode set in the same pub. The piece consists of five numbered vignettes which range in length from a single paragraph to slightly over two pages. The first, entitled "Truby" ("Pipes"), describes a row of large utility pipes lying along the curb awaiting burial in an as yet undug trench. As the narrator goes out in the morning after a night snowfall he notes with pleasure that someone has written the word "OTTO" in the fresh strip of snow atop the pipe. The narrator has planned a trip to the Berlin Zoo and boards a tram. The tram and its conductor form the subject matter of the second vignette which is called "Tramvaj" ("Streetcar"). This episode is conceived in the form of a nostalgia piece written in part from the viewpoint of a writer of the next century. The narrator-guide lovingly catalogues such inconsequentialities as the trolley pole jumping its overhead wire, the ceremony of the conductor at this job, and the ritual of the end-of-the-line decoupling of the two tram cars with their switch of position and subsequent recoupling—all reminiscent of the switching of the horses on the horse-drawn trams of Petersburg some eighteen years before. The vignette ends with an apotheosis in which the very "sense of literary creation" is said to be the recreation of the minutia of the present as they will be seen "in the kindly mirrors of future times . . . when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right." The guided tour continues in the third vignette, "Raboty" ("Work"), with the speaker enumerating various people seen at their daily tasks through the tram window: street repair men, a passing truck loaded with empty beer bottles, a postman emptying a corner mailbox, a man delivering fresh carcasses to a butcher shop. In the fourth section, entitled "Edem" ("Eden"), our guide arrives at the city zoo where he muses on the Atlantis-like aquarium exhibits. Of particular interest to him are the crimson starfish, which recall the "notorious emblem," that is, the Bolshevik Red Star, and the giant tortoises, whose domed shells resemble church cupolas. The cycle of sights comes to an end in the fifth section, "Pivnaja" ("The Pub"), where the narrator has been recounting his day's travels to his companion, who is bored by the mundane guided tour. The modest pub in which the two friends sit drinking is divided into two rooms, and the narrator can see through the passageway into the squalid back room where the publican's blowzy faded wife is serving her small son a bowl of soup. As the narrator watches him, the boy looks out into the bar where his gaze takes in the narrator and his companion. The narrator then reflects that the boy will always remember the sight of the barroom through the passageway, his father serving the customers, and so on. As the narrator muses, his friend irritably remarks that he cannot understand what is so interesting in the view. In

the closing line the writer ponders "How can I demonstrate to him that I have glimpsed somebody's future recollections?"

There have been two rather extended discussions of this story. Field notes that in places the piece "comes extremely close to the form of the prose poem." The tram episode he views merely as a pretext for the above-cited passage in which Nabokov defines and justifies his conception of the writer's role. The zoo, an artificial paradise with bars, is seen as Nabokov's "dual metaphor of artistic form and human fate." Following his description of the pub scene, Field concludes that "A Guide to Berlin" is a "guide book written with a very restricted type of tourist in mind; it is a guidebook for the artist." Naumann provides a more detailed analysis. Although noting the poetic qualities of the sketch, the author includes it in her category of "realistic" (as opposed to "symbolist") stories. Noting with some puzzlement the odd assortment of sights included in the "Guidebook," Naumann views the story primarily as a collage of Nabokov's favorite Berlin motifs, pointing out their frequent occurrence in his other works. Like Field, she sees the story as an artist's credo but one "not written merely for art's sake, nor for a drinking companion, but for future generations." It is, she says, Nabokov's explicit statement of the *raison d'être* of minutia in literature. Both of these exegesis have some interesting insights and would doubtless seem satisfactory were it not for Nabokov's comments suggesting greater depths in the story. Certainly neither commentary gives sustenance to Nabokov's claim that the story is one of his trickiest.

In the most general terms, the story treats the favorite Nabokovian themes of time, memory, and their relationship to art and the artist. These themes are stated explicitly in two passages. The "Streetcar" vignette opens with the narrator's reflection on the obsolescent electric tram and its predecessor, the horse-drawn tram. In a hundred years, he thinks, a writer visiting a town museum in search of local color for his work will be enchanted by the 1920s tramcar and its appurtenances. It is this passage that leads to the formulation of the narrator's artistic credo: "to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate." In the concluding section, the narrator watches the boy in the back room and muses that the scene viewed by the lad is the stuff of the boy's "future recollections." In addition to their common theme the two passages are linked by a common structural device. We have remarked the metaphoric "kindly mirrors of future times." The final pub scene contains a vital but unobtrusive real mirror which is the actual source of the narrator's image of the boy's future recollections. Looking through the passageway from the bar into the apartment the narrator's eye is greeted by "a cramped little room with a green couch under a mirror, out of which an oval table . . . topples and takes up its solid position in front of the couch." A few lines later it is mentioned that the narrator "can make out very distinctly the couch, the mirror, and the table in the background beyond the passage." These mirror references occur in both the Russian and the English texts. In the translation, however, yet a third reference (not found in the original text) calls attention to the device: while the Russian text reads "Tam, v glubine, rebenok ostalsja na divane," the English has been altered to "There, under the mirror, the child still sits alone," with the critical mirror replacing "v glubine." This sentence introduces the description of what the boy sees in the barroom. A close reading reveals that the description of the boy's

view is actually the view seen by the narrator in the mirror above and behind the boy. By virtue of the mirror the narrator is seeing himself, his friend, and the interior of the barroom as it appears to the boy whose future memories the narrator is thus observing. This is the mirror of future recollections. Further supporting this interpretation of the role of the wall mirror is that in contrast to the other vignettes the physical layout of the barroom and its furnishings, the passageway, and the living quarters in the rear are all carefully detailed. The lines of sight are clearly drawn and the crucial position of the mirror is emphasized and reemphasized.

This embodiment of theme in structural device is characteristic of much of Nabokov's best later work and may in some measure account for his particular affection for the story. It would, however, scarcely qualify the story as one of his "trickiest." This interpretation also leaves aside the role of the material in the other vignettes. One possibility is that the episodes treating the utility pipes, the jobs, and the zoo might serve as exemplification of the "pro-active nostalgia" theme that the narrator sees as the meaning of literary creation. This view, while plausible to an extent, would not seem to justify Nabokov's high opinion of the piece, for these remaining vignettes seemingly fail to display the cunning integration of allusion and motif with theme which synthesizes Nabokov's best work. As examples we might cite the numerous Poe allusions which form a persistent and peculiarly appropriate subtext to *Lolita*, or the pervasive motif of the iconic Old Church Slavic alphabetic characters betokening the linguistic (and physical) imprisonment of the artist-protagonist in *Invitation to a Beheading*.

The mirror image motif which dominates the final scene and which reflects the earlier thematic statement is obviously central to the story's meaning but appears to be restricted to those sections and, hence, does not seem to qualify as an integrative device joining the various vignettes into a unified whole. Before discarding the possibility, however, it might be well to consider that mirrors have other properties in addition to reflection. Just as Nabokov neglects to mention that the narrator is viewing the boy's future memories via a mirror, he also leaves to the reader's imagination a second quality of mirrors. Mirrors reverse their images: left is right, right is left. Mirror image reversals play an important role in Nabokov's repertory of literary devices both on the level of thematic metaphor and of microstylistics....

Various kinds of mirror image inversion, albeit without benefit of mirrors, permeate all of the remaining sections of "A Guide to Berlin." Perhaps the most evident of these reversals occurs in the "Streetcar" section. After his inventory of the activities of the conductor at work, the narrator continues: "At the end of the line the front car uncouples, enters a siding, runs around the remaining one and approaches it from behind . . . I am reminded of how . . . the horses used to be unhitched and led around the potbellied blue tram." Left and right, or depending on your point of view, front and back, are reversed.

The foregoing represents a mirror image reversal on the level of narrative event. Another, and more important type of reversal is to be found on the word and phrase level. Before considering this second type of inversion, however, we must ponder the question, what is the written language's equivalent to mirror image reversal? The answer is—palindromes. On rereading the individual vignettes we find that all contain

mirror image palindromes and, in addition, anagrams—some of which are also palindromic. At the end of the first vignette, "Pipes," the narrator, seeing the word "OTTO" traced in the snow atop the pipe thinks how appropriate the name with its "dvumja belymi 'o' po bokam i cetoj tixix soglasnyx poseredke" is to the pipe with its "dvumja otverstviem i tainstvennoj glubinoj." Not only is the name "OTTO" a mirror image palindrome, but its reversible physical shape bears an obvious resemblance to the large utility pipe with its "O" at each end. Also noteworthy is the descriptive phrase "OTverstviem i TainstvennOj glubinoj" which anagrammatically contains the iconic key word "OTTO." Nabokov's Englishing of the passage shows some modification of the wording in order to obtain the requisite effect: ". . . that pipe with its two Orifices and its Tacit Tunnel." It might further be noted that the open pipe permits reciprocal vision and that the older Russian expression for 'telescope' is *opticeskaja truba* . The "Streetcar" section, in addition to the reversal of narrative image already described, also includes an "OTTO" anagram in its opening lines. Commenting on the decline of the streetcar as a mode of transport, the narrator remarks pointedly "Ja uze cuvstvuju v nem cto-to OTzivsee, kakuju-TO staromodnuju prelest'." It is perhaps forced to see the *to-to* of *cto-to* as a reversal of the syllables of the following anagrammatic "OTTO," but it nonetheless rather neatly prefigures the subsequent reversal of the tram cars at the end of the line.

The mirror image palindrome "OTTO" also occurs in an anagram in the first line of the third vignette, "Raboty": "Vot obrazy raznyx rabOT, koTOrye ja nabljudaju iz tramvajnogo okna." The device of letter transposition is also used here: *OBRAzy ... RABOt* perhaps echoing the *to-to/ot-to* inversion. It would be possible to attribute such matters to chance were it not for the fact that the corresponding English passage in the translation has been markedly expanded in order to incorporate equivalent anagrammatic elements. In the Russian original the above quoted sentence is the entire first paragraph. This sentence-paragraph has been augmented in the English as follows: "Here are examples of various kinds of work that I observe from the cRAMmed tRAM in which a compassionate woman can always be relied upon to CEde me her window SEat—while trying nOT TO LoOK too CLOsely at me." The "cRAMmed tRAM" obviously mimics *obRAZy RAZnyx*; "nOT TO," *rabOT, koTOrye*, and perhaps, the, metathesized "LoOK . . . CLOsely" deliberately parallels the transposed *OBRAz ... RABOt*. These syllable doublings and inversions iconically evoke the dual nature of the streetcar with its two, reversible, cars in tandem. Even were it not for its divergence from the Russian text the new material in the English might well call attention to itself simply by its Baroque and gratuitous nature.

"Eden," the fourth vignette, is perhaps the most intricate in its inversions. Looking through the portholes of the Berlin Zoo aquarium, the narrator sees a crimson, five-pointed starfish. This, he thinks, is the source of the "preslovutaja emblema:—samogo dna okeana—iz temnoty poTOPlennyx Atlantid, davnym-davno perezivsix vsjakie smUTy,—OPyty gluPOvaTyx UTOPij—i vse to, cto trevozit nas." This passage on the origin of the Bolshevik Red Star contains two notable incidences: the usual anagrammatic "OTTO"—*temnOTy poTOplennyx*, and the first of a series of plays on the root sequence *(u)top-ija* and *pot(u)* in which the root of *uTOPija* turns to *pot* 'sweat.' There is a further pun involving *uTOPija* and *poTOPlennyj* 'drown.' The English text,

again with some adjustment, succeeds in capturing both of these bits of word play: "The notorious emblem originated . . . at the very bOTTOm of the sea, in the murk of sunken Atlantica, which long ago lived through various upheavals while pOTTering abOuT TOPical uTOPias and OThter inanities that cripple us TOday." The following paragraph of both texts continues the plays on the palindromic "OTTO" and the inverted utopias. The final vignette also contains its own encoded anagrammatic "OTTO" and, moreover, at a particularly appropriate point. In the passage containing the narrator's description of the scene which he, the narrator, sees indirectly in the mirror and which the boy sees directly, the introductory expression is "OTTuda vidnO." The boy and the narrator are looking through the telescope, the *opticeskaja truba*, of time. It is also of note that the physical layout of the pub building with its two openings connected by the passageway through which the characters regard the scene resembles the pipe-telescope with its inscription.

Nabokov's theme of "future memories," the true artist's creative goal, which is cleverly captured in the tacit mirror imagery of the final section, is consistently and cunningly prefigured in all of the preceding guidebook vignettes by means of the various technical devices illustrated above. "A Guide to Berlin," despite its seeming artlessness, is thus the first of Nabokov's writings to show the ingenious integration of theme and device that marks his mature work. Perhaps this accounts for Nabokov's special affection for the story over a period of half a century.

Source: D. Barton Johnson, "A Guide to Nabokov's 'A Guide to Berlin'," in *Slavic and East European Journal,* Vol. 23, No. 3, Fall, 1979, pp. 353-61.

Critical Essay #4

Turkevich Naumann is a professor at Douglas College, Rutgers University. In the following excerpt, she offers her interpretation of the significance of the imagery in "A Guide to Berlin."

Berlin is the city that is almost always a background theme in Nabokov's early stories. For him Berlin did not have the special, personal, social, or political connotation that Paris had for Balzac or London had

for Dickens. It assumed importance because it actually surrounded him as he wrote. Apropos of this, Nabokov said: "I have always been indifferent to social problems, merely using the material that happened to be near, as a voluble diner pencils a street corner on the table cloth or arranges a crumb and two olives in a diagrammatic position between menu and salt cellar." Berlin is the setting for his novels *Mashen'ka* and *Korol' dama valet*, for instance. In *Dar*, Fedor's peregrinations through Berlin are pages long. Berlin is the prominent backdrop in "Blagost'" and "Pis'mo v Rossiiu"; and it is the central theme of one of Nabokov's earliest stories, "Putevoditel' po Berlinu" ("A Guide to Berlin").

Ostensibly this story is a standard guide to Berlin's sights and scenery, but not the type of red guidebook that Nabokov depicted on the old woman's stool in "Blagost." This is a special guide to some of the "important" sights and aspects of the city: the pipes, the trams, the jobs, the Hotel Eden, the beer hall.

One is struck first by the narrator's opening comment that these disparate and seemingly trifling things are "important" features of Berlin and, secondly, by the odd combination they represent. However, as the narrator describes them, it becomes clear that this is a writer's guide and that this writer has a definite purpose. He has not written it merely for art's sake, nor for a drinking companion, but for future generations: . . .

I think that here lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right: the times when a man who might put on the most ordinary jacket of today will be dressed up for an elegant masquerade.

Actually the aspects of Berlin he has chosen are not as disparate as they appear to be initially. They are all facets that particularly interested Nabokov. The Berlin street life, trams, childhood memories that dip into the past or project into the future, and even the fascinating letter combinations considered in this story are recurrent motifs in many of his other works.

The entire story is told in the present tense, and the hero-narrator is the subjective "I." Its tone is marked by the narrator's reiteration of his subjectivity and by his positive

reaction to Berlin, which is in turn rejected by the writer's drinking companion in the final frame of this piece. Only then does the narrative move into dialogue. However, this dialogue is one-sided. The drinking companion speaks, but the narrator continues his straight narrative. Thus two methods are employed simultaneously.

Seemingly "Putevoditel' po Berlinu " follows a guidebook format and therefore does not have the traditional short-story structure. It does, however, have a compositional design. There is a definite frame. The narrator, after a morning trip to the zoo, goes into a beer hall with a drinking companion. Thus the storyteller and listener are immediately presented. Within the frame are vignettes of various spots in Berlin: I. "Pipes"; II. "Tram"; III. "Jobs"; IV. "Eden"; and V. "Beerhall." The last scene ties the conclusion structurally to the introductory frame. All of these short pieces, although clearly divided by Roman numerals, are intricately linked by subject matter and by the general tone of beauty and philosophy that colors the realistic descriptions. An introductory comment to the effect that the narrator will speak of "pipes and trams" brings the reader to the first sketch, so brief and poetic that it appears to be a poem. The trams, which have left their orange reflection on those pipes, are the subject of the second vignette. Here he speaks of fashions and passing fads. In "Pis'mo v Rossiiu" he had noted modish fluctuations in various dances; now he turns to the fate of diligences and horse trams and sadly reflects that the electric trams will soon be replaced as well. The narrator focuses in particular on the tram conductor, whom Nabokov has already depicted in "Pis'mo v Rossiiu." He observes how nimbly the man goes about his duties: . . .

The conductor who gives out tickets has very unusual hands. They work as nimbly as those of a pianist, but, instead of being limp, sweaty and soft-nailed, the ticketman's hands are so coarse that when you are pouring change into his palm and happen to touch that palm which seems to have developed a harsh chitinous crust, you feel a kind of moral discomfort. They are extraordinarily agile and efficient hands, despite their roughness and the thickness of the fingers.

In "Putevoditel' po Berlinu," Nabokov's narrator regards the details of Berlin's daily life with sympathy. To him, it seems that in the future this trivial material will be of museum caliber. The rickety yellow tram and the conductor's uniform will be found in display cases and some twenty-first-century writer will see them as curious aspects of the past. This observation brings the narrator to [a] momentary reflection upon the duty of the writer.... For him, however, all of these everyday details are not only valuable for history but are meaningful and beautiful in themselves. For instance, the Christmas trees at the tram stop not only reflect the holiday publication date of this story (24 December 1925) but are poetically shown as a part of the Berlin scene: . . .

. . . at the stop, at the edge of the pavement, crowd the Christmas trees.

In Part III, "Jobs," life is—not too surprisingly—described from the tram window. The tram is still the structural link. The observer's field of vision is limited by the window and is perpetually moving. First the narrator sees the asphalt and the street itself. Men are working on it, as in "Vozvrashchenie Chorba." Compare the two following sentences: . . .

She attempted to catch it on the wing by means of a child's spade found near a heap of pink bricks at a spot where the street was under repair. A little way off the funnel of a workers's van emitted gray-blue smoke which drifted aslant and dissolved between the branches—and a resting workman, one hand on his hip, contemplated the young lady, as light as a dead leaf, dancing about with that little spade in her raised hand.

At an intersection the pavement has been torn up next to the track; by turns, four workmen are pounding an iron stake with mallets; the first one strikes, and the second is already lowering his mallet with a sweeping, accurate swing; the second mallet crashes down and is rising skyward as the third and then the fourth bang down in rhythmical succession.

This last image recalls the contented stoking sailors in "Port," for there is a live rhythm and music to their tasks akin to bell chimes: . . .

I listen to their unhurried peal, the cast-iron chiming, four repeating notes.

In *Pnin* Nabokov repeats this image of street repairs: ". . . workmen came and started to drill holes in the street—Brainpan Street, Pningrad—and patch them up again, and this went on and on, in fits of shivering black zigzags and stunned pauses, for weeks."

In "Putevoditel' po Berlinu " the writer continues to observe other elements of Berlin street life, and with positive adjectives and editorial comments he describes the angelic baker, the emerald bottles on the truck, the graceful larch on the sleigh, the postman with his big black bag, and the most vivid scene, the butcher carrying the meat on his back: . . .

But perhaps fairest of all are the carcasses, chrome yellow, with pink blotches, and arabesques, piled on a truck, and the man in apron and leather hood with a long neck flap who heaves each carcass onto his back and, hunched over, carries it across the sidewalk into the butcher's red shop.

Having turned his attention thus, the narrator not unexpectedly moves to Part IV, "Eden." In this vignette he becomes increasingly philosophical, reflecting first on the city zoo as an earthly paradise created by man. In the frame to this story, the narrator had noted that he had visited the zoo in the morning. According to him, the zoological gardens tell us about the beginning of the world. Although he laments that all the animals are in cages, he concedes that the lion, if loose, would eat the doe. Nonetheless, it is a paradise to the extent that man can make it so. Appropriately, the Hotel Eden stands opposite the zoo. The writer moves figura-tively into the zoo, where now in the winter he finds the amphibians, fish, and insects the most interesting. Jules Verne's Captain Nemo and the mythological submerged continent of Atlantis color his description of his visit to the aquarium. He sees fish and marine flora and focuses on a live, deep red, five-pointed starfish lying on the sandy bottom.

This star evokes one of Nabokov's rare, although oblique, political comments: . . .

This, then, is where the notorious emblem originated—at the very bottom of the ocean, in the murk of sunken Atlantica, which long ago lived through various upheavals while pottering about topical utopias and other inanities that cripple us today.

The upheavals caused by utopian experiments such as Atlantis are still troubling the world today. In "Pis'mo v Rossiiu" these perturbations had been alluded to even more indirectly. Indictments of the Soviet regime by Nabokov are rare. When he focuses on his homeland, it is usually the Russia of his past, not the Soviet Union of his present (1925).

The fifth section of this story, "The Beerhall," represents the other side of the frame but describes the interior, not the exterior, of the beer hall. The narrator notes the bar, the billiard table, the little tavern tables, and presents a scene similar to the restaurant in "Port." However, his description has an interesting twist. It picks out the divan, mirror, and table in the adjoining room belonging to the beer-hall owner. There the narrator observes the owner's child being fed soup and then looking at an illustrated newspaper. Suddenly the narrator inverts the picture and shows what the child sees and how he views the narrator and his fellow drinker. Finally, the writer moves into the future: . . .

Yet there is one thing I know. Whatever happens to him in life, he will always remember the picture he saw every day of his childhood from the little room where he was fed his soup.

In this concluding fragment, the drinking companion repeatedly raises questions that indicate he has missed the point of the narrator's guide, thus accentuating and emphasizing by omission what the writer has described. For him the guide and Berlin are boring and dull. For the narrator, on the other hand, all that he has noted is important. Even the future memories of the beer-hall keeper's child hold significance for him. Thus the concluding remarks of the story aptly point to the future: . . .

How can I demonstrate to him that I have glimpsed somebody's future recollection?

The structure of this story is rather unusual. Not only are the short sections unobtrusively joined, but each section has a realistic description supplemented by a philosophical reflection on some aspect of the scene. Furthermore, the topics enlarge in scope as the story progresses. The reader moves from pipes to trams, to street life in general, to the zoo and animal life, and finally to the child whose life still lies ahead of him. The pervading sense of this story is that life in Berlin is gratifying and meaningful to the artist in all its aspects.

"Putevoditel' po Berlinu" has been compared with Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches* by Field. He notes that this story "has some of the air of a carefully arranged 'careless sketch'." These vignettes are in the narrative style and the language is realistic. This realism, as I indicated above, is acknowledged by the narrator. There are only ten or so "made-strange" adjective-noun combinations. Longer metaphoric phrases are more numerous. For example, the street pipes are the iron hoses or intestines (*kishki*) of the street. This image brings to mind Nabokov's later anatomical image in *Dar*, where a

poplar resembles the nervous system of a giant. Other extended metaphors deal with the conductor's agile hands, the music of the street workers, and a turtle whose shell is both a bronze cupola and the burden of time. These metaphors are not intended to convey any symbolic dimension in the way that the zoo denotes an earthly paradise. Instead, they serve to revivify ordinary objects that have dulled.

It is crucial here to consider Nabokov's training as a writer. In *Speak, Memory*, he recalled his tutor: "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 . . . to certain camera lucida needs of literary composition."

Nabokov's literary training also owed much to Gogol. Significantly, in his study of Gogol Nabokov cited the following passage from *Dead Souls*: "But a different lot and another fate await the writer who has dared to evoke all such things that are constantly before one's eyes but which idle eyes do not seethe shocking morass of trifles that has tied up our lives, and the essence of cold, crumbling, humdrum characters with whom our earthly way, now bitter, now dull, fairly swarms; has dared to make them prominently and brightly visible to the eyes of all men by means of the vigorous strength of his pitiless chisel."

Nabokov's observations are enlivened not only by metaphoric expressions but by the use of a variety of stylistic devices. Above I have noted his interest in letter shapes and sounds. In the frame of "Putevoditel' po Berlinu" Nabokov focuses on the blue beer-hall sign with white lettering and a picture of a winking lion. Part I concludes on a contemplative note about the letters etched into the snow on the pipes, which read "Otto": . . .

Today someone wrote "Otto" with his finger on the strip of virgin snow and I thought how beautifully that name, with its two soft o's flanking the pair of gentle consonants, suited the silent layer of snow upon that pipe with its two orifices and its tacit tunnel.

In Part III literary allusions are made not only to Jules Verne and mythology but to the Gospels and the Old Testament. Colors, which quickly convey an impression, occur throughout these sketches, and with particular frequency in the street scene in Part III where realistic vignettes predominate. These are almost fleeting, cinematic shots. Color is singular in its application in Part IV, "Eden." Crimson (*purpurnyi*) is the only color mentioned and quali-fies a star. This emphasis on the red hue of the star poetically expresses Nabokov's idea of the "notorious emblem," the Red Star of communism.

The grammatical structure of the sentences in "Putevoditel' po Berlinu" is singular. The sentences are very long, with many secondary clauses. Brief sentences are conspicuous by their infrequency. Parts II, III, and IV open with factual statements that give way immediately to sentences a paragraph long. In Part V Nabokov used *v glubine*

(in the depths) three times within a single page. I noted this recurrent phrase in "Port"; here it is used strictly with reference to the child whom the narrator sees sitting in the back room. The phrase accentuates not only the writer's spatial detachment from this child but the depth with which the author considers the child and his future memories. It also emphasizes a narrowing or a focusing of Nabokov's artistic lens. Nabokov often coalesced his images. In this instance the mirror, table, divan, and child are brought together linguistically. With the aide of *v glubine*, Nabokov moves from a large image to a small one. I point to the focusing-in found in the following three excerpts. In the final excerpt only the common denominators of the first remain: *v glubine, divan, rebenok* (child). The translation and italics are mine....

(1) "*In the depths* is a wide passageway, and there one can see a cramped little room with a green *divan* along the wall, under a mirror from which flows, a semicircular table covered with a checked oilcloth, and firmly stands in front of the *divan*. This room relates to the squalid little apartment of the owner. There, his wife, a faded German, feeds her towheaded *child* soup.

(2) From our corner, beside the counter, one very clearly sees *in the depths*, in the passageway—the *divan*, the mirror, the table. The mistress clears the dishes off of the table. The *child*, leaning on his elbows, is attentively examining the illustrated magazine.

(3) There, *in the depths*, the *child* remained on the *divan* alone.

"Putevoditel' po Berlinu" is thus another contemplative story that focuses on the "important" facets of the hero's surroundings. Once again the narrator is an artist—a writer—who concerns himself with the everyday sights of Berlin. However, this story, like "Pis'mo v Rossiiu," has a philosophical note. Nabokov projected into the future and observed that the child of the beer-hall keeper will someday recall the very minutiae of the present scene. Thus, trivial aspects of daily life not only assume value as past memories but have their place in the creation of new and future ones. The hero concludes that the significance of a writer's creation lies in the depiction of these commonplace things. This was Nabokov's explicit statement of the raison d'être of minutiae in literature....

Source: Marina Turkevich Naumann, in *Blue Evenings in Berlin: Nabokov's Short Stories of the 1920s,* New York University Press, 1978, pp. 56-67.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history of Berlin and Germany's Weimar Republic in the 1920s and compare and contrast its political, cultural, and social climate with those of Berlin in the 1930s and 1940s under Adolf Hitler.

Investigate the themes of memory and time in *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust. Compare and contrast the ways Proust conceives of memory and time with Nabokov's use of them in "A Guide to Berlin."

Investigate James Joyce's use of setting and realistic historical detail in *Ulysses* and compare and contrast it with Nabokov's use of them in "A Guide to Berlin."

Research the history of the Russian emigrant community in Berlin in the 1920s through the 1940s.

What Do I Read Next?

Lolita, Nabokov's darkly comic 1955 bestseller about a European professor's sexual obsession with a precocious American twelve-year-old girl and the murder his passion for her drives him to commit.

Pale Fire, the much-praised 1962 novel by Nabokov that consists of a 999 line poem by the late poet John Shade, together with the odd foreword and scholarly commentary of an unhinged Shade scholar.

Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s (1972) explores various social, cultural, and scientific developments in Berlin between World Wars I and II.

The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov, a 1995 collection of fifty-four stories and sketches (including "A Guide to Berlin") previously published in earlier collections plus eleven stories translated from Russian for the first time.

Sally Bowles, 1937, by Christopher Isherwood. Collection of well-known stories about bohemian life in Berlin in the 1930s. Source for the film "Cabaret."

Goodbye to Berlin, 1939, by Christopher Isherwood. Sketches about Berlin just before the outset of World War II.

Further Study

Field, Andrew. *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov,* Crown Publishers, 1986.

In a biographical study of Nabokov's life and work, Field provides a detailed treatment of Nabokov's life among the Russian emigres of Berlin in the 1920s.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited,* Vintage International, 1967.

Published when Nabokov was in his late sixties, this autobiography has been called "the finest autobiography written in our time."

Bibliography

Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years,* Prince-ton University Press, 1990, pp. 250-53.

Field, Andrew. *Nabokov: His Life in Art,* Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967, pp. 141-42.

Grossmith, Robert. "The Future Perfect of the Mind: 'Time and Ebb' and 'A Guide to Berlin'." In *A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction,* edited by Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo, Garland Publishing Co., 1993, pp. 149-53.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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