

Laughter in the Dark Study Guide

Laughter in the Dark by Vladimir Nabokov

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Plot Summary

Rich, respectable, happy Albert Albinus lives in Berlin with his wife and daughter, but abandons them for young Margot Peters, whom he loves but is not loved in return. In the end, he sees only that his life has been a disaster.

Albert Albinus, rich art critic, imagines animating Old Master paintings, but finds no producer willing to risk the project. He writes Axel Miller in the U.S. about the project but puts plans on hold while he takes up with Margot Peters, an usher at the Argus Cinema. Margot discovers his address and phone number and begins phoning. During a visit to Albert's flat, she is nearly discovered by brother-in-law Paul.

When Albert gives Margot money to rent a flat, she, knowing that Elisabeth reads his mail, sends her address, Albert's family moves out, and he moves in with Margot, who wants rather to move into his elegant flat and be seen with him in public. Eventually she gets her way. Albert finances a movie on condition that Margot plays a major role and throws a lavish dinner party in the flat, which brings drunken Margot together with Axel, recently back in Germany. Margot desires Axel, but has invested too much energy in gaining access to Albert's riches to abandon him. Axel becomes a regular visitor, claiming to be homosexual in order to throw off Albert's suspicions.

Albert learns at the last moment that his daughter is dying, Axel and Margot talk him out of attending the funeral, and she demands he leave off his depression to attend her screening. It proves such a fiasco that Albert buys a car and suggests a vacation. Axel offers to drive. In Rouginard, Albert meets the writer Udo Conrad, who refers to Margot and Axel's amorous behavior, which is confirmed by a French colonel. Albert intends to shoot her for her treachery, but is persuaded simply to whisk her away. Driving for the first time in his life, overwrought with emotion, on winding mountainous roads, Albert swerves to avoid oncoming bicyclists, and is lucky only to be blinded.

Albert nearly goes insane. A specialist offers little hope, Margot tends to him in a Swiss chalet, with Axel not in New York as his farewell letter claims, but in the far bedroom. Albert adapts and develops keen hearing, Axel torments him with odd noises and tickling, and Elisabeth sends Paul to fetch Albert home. When he learns that Margot has come to clean out the flat of valuables, Albert enters rooms that he sees in memory, hunts her by scent and body heat, and dies when she turns the gun on him. Pain brings wondrous blueness to Albert's eyes as he considers the ruination of his life.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

Albert Albinus throws away his successful life for the unrequited love of a girl. He gets the idea of animating an Old Master landscape, a project requiring a thorough artistic knowledge and much cash, and faces technical difficulties in capturing the colors. After several producers scoff, Albert thinks of Alex Rex, who from the U.S. recommends that Albert finance the picture and advance him a large fee for designing it. While hearing brother-in-law Paul's fear of the risk, Albert snaps at wife Elisabeth, to whom he should confess his affair—or run away, see a psychoanalyst, or shoot the girl.

For nine years since marrying in Munich simply because it happens, Albert is faithful to Elisabeth, who thrills him no more than premarital loves. He dotes on her during pregnancy (although during her three-week confinement he is tempted to find a "friendly girl") and stays true during the eight years that transform daughter Irma into a reserved girl surprised to be alive. Lust is the only topic about which Albert is not frank with Elisabeth, who reads all of his letters. Early for an appointment, Albert ducks into a cinema, is led to his seat by a slight girl on whose pale face he tries not to dwell, but at which he stares when the lights go up. She is sulky, painfully beautiful, and about 18. After three days of trying to forget her, Albert returns to the Argus, but fails to attract her eye. Next night is Paul's visit, and Albert reminds himself that he is happy and vows not to return to the Argus.

Margot Peters' father is a house porter, shell-shocked during the war; her mother is equally battered—and battering—insolent and vicious, priding herself in keeping the staircase spotless; and Margot's older brother Otto is a political firebrand. Margot is a bright, high-spirited tomboy until age 12, then a pretty young teen, jostled by her brother's friends, who begins thinking about modeling as a first step to movie stardom. Flirting with a guy on a red motorcycle, Margot accepts a ride into the country, fights off his advances, and walks home to be beaten by her brother, who sees the pick-up.

That winter, Margot moves in with Frau Levandovsky and begins nude modeling, which is not as exhilarating as Margot imagines. Levandovsky wants to fix her up with a pure love-struck provincial boy, who turns out to be thirty and distinguished. Axel Miller learns about Levandovsky's pimping on the train from Bremen, devours Margot with his eyes, and has both women laughing at his funny stories. Not having received her full price, Levandovsky never leaves Margot and Axel alone. Frustrated, Axel locks her in the bathroom and spirits Margot happily away. Snooping fails to reveal who or what Axel is when he visits her new flat, bringing cheap gifts. It takes Axel a month to leave. The last morning, he asks her not to turn around as he sketches her, then kisses her, and never returns.

Although her room is paid through July, Margot nearly jumps from her window, works the dance hall, entertains two cheap Japanese and a beastly old man who dies after



buying her a fur. She hocks it, takes a cheaper room, and visits a film company, whose elderly manager proclaims her lucky to meet him instead of someone shady. At a second office she is not allowed in. Her landlady arranges with a cousin for Margot to become an usher. Seeing a timid man eye her, Margot pursues him, dodges a kiss, and runs into her building. Albert, who has removed his ring, begs, and promises to return.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The opening chapters establish characters and mood. It is hinted from the start that Albert Albinus has met a girl in darkness and desires to kill her to get himself out of a jam. Albert's imaginative animation project serves no long-term purpose but begins to open up the world of Old Master art in which he dwells. Axel Rex, a German artist of genius and some renown, writes from America that Albert should fund the project himself—and advance him funds to get it under way. Suggesting they animate Pieter Brueghel's complex Netherlandish Proverbs shows subtly that Axel has not read the project description.

When Albert first sees Margot Peters in the cinema, he notes that her eyes are resemble those painted by Bernardino Luini, a 16th-century Italian master. On their second encounter, the film in progress shows a car speeding through hairpin curves, prefiguring Albert's accident late in the novel. Richard Wagner's opera Lohengrin becomes a running joke. Margot's background is then examined, as a nude model for art classes, flirtatious but unsuccessful, pimped out to Axel Miller (Albert's colleague, who is not in the U.S. but in Bremen). When Axel locks the annoying old woman in her own bathroom and steals Margot away, it establishes a motif for the rest of the novel. A quick love-them-and-leaven-them sort, Axel spends a month with Margot before leaving, and she learns only later that he sketches her on their last morning together.

Margo does the sorts of things that desperate young women do in books and movies and is lucky not to be harmed. When she settles for being a movie usher, she is frustrated. Her first impressions of Albert are not flattering, but he is the first male to notice her lately. Margot pursues him as he panics at the prospects of realizing his dreams. He slips off his wedding ring, gets over-excited, is sent away, and slips on the ring before it can cool in his pocket. He know as he walks away that "It has started."



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary

Remarkably, nothing changes at home. Paul still spends his evenings there and Elisabeth suspects nothing. Margot avoids love-making and knows that Albert's surname is not Schiffermiller. In a cheap café where no one will recognize Albert, Margot finds his name in his hat, looks up his address and phone number, wriggles out of her coat, primps, and admonishes Albert to be good. He prides himself that he can teach her much in bed.

In the morning, Elisabeth reads the mail and answers the phone. She is busy with Irma when it rings again and Albert hangs up on Margot, saying it is a wrong number. Albert confronts Margot outside the Argus indignantly, but Margot announces she is through with him. Knowing that he should let it drop, Albert begs forgiveness and offers financial support. Margot denounces him as a liar, coward, and fool, forcing him to admit he is married. To learn the truth, Margot phones again. Although Elisabeth is in the bath, Albert is afraid to talk and forbids a visit.

Margot insists on seeing his house while Elisabeth and Irma are at tea. She admires the richness, shakes off embraces, and locks Albert in the bedroom. When the door opens, it is Paul. Albert worries while Paul investigates and later Irma and her friends play, and remains on edge until bedtime, when he hurries to the library—but finds no Margot.

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

Remarkably, nothing changes for Albert at home. Margot withholds sex and determines his identity. She quickly resents going to cheap cafés where no one recognizes Albert. Margot wriggles out of her coat, primps, and admonishes Albert to be good (which becomes for him a cherished memory) and he innocently prides himself on all he can teach her in bed. Albert does not know that he has already seen her nude in a sketch made by the son of the family physician, Dr. Lampert. Note that Albert had not been impressed.

Margot becomes a predator, phoning, insisting on seeing his flat—knowing from the false name that he is a liar. How she gets the phone number shows her cunning. Albert is too nervous of being seen and too filled with passion to be anything but dumb. Margot believes no situation is too risky or difficult to explain away. She is playful in the flat, admiring everything, touching things he asks her not to touch, and finally locks him in the bedroom - a replay of her escape from Frau Levandovsky's clutches. Albert endures hours of torment, fearing that Margot will be found. A splash of crimson in the library heightens the tension. In the end, it is a pillow that Albert has brought in to make it comfortable while reading "Nonnemacher's History of Art—ten volumes, folio." The



precision of the citation helps set the scholarly mood of the room. Folios are over-sized books, best studied on the floor.



Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

Margot gives her landlady notice. She has seen that Albert is indeed rich and that his wife does not appear formidable. She knows he will not pleasure her like Miller, but he will be pleasant and can open to her the world of film. She accepts money to rent a flat in a nice neighborhood and lets Albert kiss her. He is sure that Elisabeth must see the fire it inflames in him, but she cannot conceive of being deceived. She accepts that business has him preoccupied. Observant Paul, however, struggles to disbelieve evidence in an overheard phone call that Albert could be cheating.

Margot begins spending on furnishing the flat whose address she has not provide Albert. He worries that she has fled with his money and is certain from Paul's face that he knows. Unable to abide the thought of an evening at home, Albert goes to Margot's old place and learns from her bitter, drunken "aunt" where she lives. Armed with the address, Albert races to "paradise." The huge cook lets him in. Claiming to have sent the address in a letter, Margot wonders what has taken him so long. Speechless, Albert races home to beat the postman. Rather than face Elisabeth, who will have opened it, Albert returns to Margot's. She expects a visit from Elisabeth, which will clear things up. She drops her books and offers to comfort Albert.

Albert is uncomfortable in the morning, having not shaved or bathed and wearing the same clothes. Margot is acrobatic in bed and comfortable with nudity. After sex, she falls quickly asleep. Her bathroom is cold and disgusting as he prepares to leave. Entering his silent house, almost persuaded not to stray again, Albert learns from distraught Freida that his family has moved. Paul arrives two hours later to fetch the trunks, declares that Albert is a scoundrel, and Elisabeth lucky if she survives the shock. Paul refuses to be calmed.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Albert's imagination tells him that Elisabeth must see guilt shining from him like a halo (an interesting juxtaposition) and worried (more likely) that Margot has taken his money and run away -and (most likely) that Paul has figured it all out. Albert hopes that as a male, Paul will understand. Albert is grossly mistaken, for Paul holds his sister's happiness sacred. Elisabeth learns of the adultery through the mail, when Margot sends Albert her address. This is certainly an intentional slip, meant to bring everything out in the open so that Albert will acknowledge her in public.

Margot hopes that Elisabeth will race over and have it out with her. All of the racing is done by Albert, who tries to head off the postman (it is Germany, so delivery is absolutely precise), decides against offering a lame excuse, and returns to rage at Margot but accept her sexual comfort. He is relieved that she is no blushing virgin. In



the morning, he also discovers in the bathroom that she is also a slob and resolves to teach her cleanliness.

An idyllic description of Albert's morning stroll through springtime Berlin-West, contrasts with the tomblike silence of the Albinus flat, where maid Frieda informs him that the family has left. Albert sees the evidence of hasty packing, and details make clear that Elisabeth has no plans to return. Paul, come to fetch the trunks, insults Albert and his "slut," and dismisses the idea that this is a tragedy. In fact, *Laughter in the Dark* has the earmarks of tragedy according to Aristotle: catharsis through pity and terror, and death brought on by hubris (excessive pride). The doomed protagonist has to have some good qualities so that his death appears a terrible waste. When the first stage of Albert's tragedy is accomplished, Paul reappears in the story, again angry enough to kill, which goes quite against his nature. Albert and Paul both have declared that their passion is worth hanging for.



Chapters 10-12

Chapters 10-12 Summary

Albert moves in with Margot, who is cold about Paul's irate visit earlier. While Margot shops, Albert wonders why he is so calm, regrets Elisabeth swooning and shouting, wonders what Irma is hearing, and vows to kill himself if his beloved wife dies. He writes floridly and tearfully, begging Elisabeth's forgiveness, but gets no reply. Margot makes love whenever he wants, with abandon, knowing she cannot be pregnant. Albert teaches Margot to bathe daily and paint her nails. He rarely leaves the house or lets Margot go out. He tells about his childhood, about restoring paintings, and about the trench warfare, quickly boring her. He puts up with the "chamber of horrors" in which they live; Margot is just waiting to move into his luxurious flat.

One day in July, Otto, backed by Kaspar and Kurt, stops Margot on the street and demands that she extort real money for the family from her rich boyfriend. When Margot staggers in and pretends to faint, Albert is sure that she has been unfaithful and is ready to kill her, but she apologizes for lying about her family and tough childhood, tells the whole truth, including her brother's blackmail. She refuses to call the police.

Albert takes Margot clothes shopping for a trip to Solfi, an Adriatic resort. She ignores Otto, who is watching. As they pack, Albert muses about his fate. Doorbells make them jump. The first is a hat delivery, but the second is Otto, come to explain how his inexperienced sister is worrying the family. Albert claims to be her fiancé, but Otto will not be duped. Seeing the theme of innocence is not working, Otto warns that she is leading Albert by the nose. Saying he knows all about Margot, Albert threatens to kick Otto out, and insults him with a DM10 note. Otto defiantly accepts it.

After receiving Margot's letter Elisabeth feels as though Albert is dead and people are tricking her to think he has only deserted her. She remembers their last words and his departure. She is surprised at the volume of her tears. Deserting Irma is even worse, and she worries he will try to take custody. Paul advises that they go to the country, but Elisabeth hopes for Lazarus to return from the dead. Elisabeth ponders their married life and recalls lipstick on handkerchiefs. Paul changes his habits to spend time with Elisabeth but fails to divert her. One day at the park, watching a monkey escaping from its owner, Elisabeth says he will never come back and breaks into tears.

Chapters 10-12 Analysis

The irritations of moving in together are colorfully depicted. Margot's lack of taste greatly offends Albert and she knows it—but her goal is not to fix up her place but to move into his. There is not only an aesthetic divide, but also a generational one. His stories of World War I and his youth hold no interest for her. Two months after the break-up, Albert is still toying with getting back together with Elisabeth, who does not answer his letter.



During one of her sorties out—Albert is holed up indoors and discourages her going out—Margot runs into her brother and his gang. Otto wants a piece of her action. His friends want to cavort with her at the lake again.

Backed into telling the truth about her past to Albert, Margot probably does not even hear him say that he fears her emotional uproar is a guilty conscience over cheating on him. Albert seems quite fixated and only gets worse. Margot succinctly runs through her life story, which allows Albert to face down Otto when he turns up demanding money. The parallel between Otto and Paul and their differences—Otto is a coward and a hustler—are discussed, for they are not lost on Albert. The suspense built by doorbells as Margot ends her story is delicious. As Albert and Margot depart on their first vacation together, focus turns to Elisabeth, whose shattered mind seeks to understand what is happening.



Chapters 13-15

Chapters 13-15 Summary

Margot suns herself in a tight black bathing suit and Albert enjoys watching. The blue sky and water, parasols, and tents are lost on Albert, as he watches only Margot. She is the vignette on a new chapter of his life. She slaps him on the bottom to make him chase her into the surf. An Englishwoman mistakes Margot for Albert's daughter. Margot tries to catch a cricket as they return to their room, then strips off her suit. Evenings they go to the casino. Albert is jealous of every man that dances with her but tries not to show it. Margot tries to forget the excitement of Miller and only once allows herself to be kissed and thoroughly caressed, by a handsome Austrian. The life of glamor that Albert has given her is too important to risk

Back in Berlin, Margot recovers her self-confidence and is tired of hiding out in hotels. She refuses to be touched when Albert tries to comfort her, declares that he is ashamed of her and is welcome to return to Lizzy. Slumped on the floor, she demands to live in his Albert's old flat and entertain people. She is thinking ahead to living in Hollywood before he can get divorced and marry her. Crying has made Margot radiant in Albert's eyes.

Albert says nothing about the discomfort returning to his old flat brings, but Margot promptly rearranges everything. Answering phone calls is torture, saying that he and Elisabeth are living apart for the present (Margot scoffs). He does his best to keep people from thinking his mistress lives with him. Reactions to the separation are mixed. One night, as Albert soaps her back, Margot asks if he thinks she could become a film actress. Days later, she asks how films are made. Having promised to finance a film for a mediocre producer, Albert insists he give Margot the second female part. She insists he not attend rehearsals and is cross that she has to repeat lines and movements so often under blinding lights. She is pleased, however, with the leading lady, Dorianna Karenina, who is charming towards her and prophesies a wonderful career. Albert generally drops her off at the studio and picks her up later, but on the day of a short rehearsal, he wanders into Paul's neighborhood, watches for Irma, but flees seeing her. Margot is so pleased with her performance that day that Albert offers to invite Dorianna and others to dinner. Margot insists on sitting beside him. She goes along with maintaining the ruse of not living in the flat, however.

Chapters 13-15 Analysis

Sunning at Solferino on the beautiful Adriatic is described in minuscule detail, including an Englishwoman's mistaking Margot for Albert's daughter; she admonishes her husband to frolic with their children like that nice German man. Albert sees Margot as the "vignette" on a new chapter of his new life, using the word in the artistic sense of a decorative design in books. In the sense of brief incident, Margot also fits the bill. She



only once allows herself to be kissed and fondled by a handsome dance partner before realizing how much she stands to lose if Albert catches her and desists.

The degree to which Margot has planned out her life's campaign is shown clearly when her self-confidence returns in Berlin. Albert is looking for a flat to rent and they are living in a nice hotel, but Margot demands that he no longer act ashamed of her. They must move into his old flat and begin entertaining. She expects him to divorce "Lizzy" and marry her—provided she has not yet become a Hollywood movie star and left him behind. Margot's crocodile tears work.

Albert and Margot move into the old flat, under the maid's "censorious" gaze, and Albert is haunted with memories. His sexual performance drops to Elisabethan levels when he smells remnants of her perfume; Nabokov says earlier that it takes him a while to lose the inhibitions that Elisabeth had expect him to observe in bed. Within days, however, Margot has moved things around enough to change the "feel" of the place. Irma's nursery becomes a ping-pong room.

Irma recurs in a minor, passive role, as Albert is wandering about, wasting time during a short rehearsal on Margot's first film project. Albert appears to know Irma's school schedule and watches for her, but loses his nerve as soon as he thinks he sees her. His skittishness around Irma is shown several chapters later, helping Margot to give into temptation with a returned Axel. Meanwhile, Margot plays the second female lead in a film being made by a mediocre producer using Albert's money. He knows from the start it will be a disaster, but it is what Margot of the crocodile tears wants. While insisting that Margot keep up the ruse that she does not live with him, Albert agrees to host a dinner party.



Chapters 16-18

Chapters 16-18 Summary

Everything is set. The dinner guests are all paired: Dr. Lampert and Sonia Hirsch, Alex Rex and Margot, Boris von Ivanoff and Olga Waldheim. Conversation is lively. Albert watches Margot, beautiful in her black tulle gown with velvet dahlia, smiling defensively as she listens to things she does not understand, but is embarrassed when she stands to greet Dorianna, Rex, and two minor poets. Having only corresponded with Albert, Rex is not sure who the host is, but is hailed as the man who makes two continents laugh, and Albert hopes he is home in Germany for good.

When the dining room doors open, Margot rushes to the front and squeezes in, not realizing there is a set order. At table, she gulps wine and sits erect, staring straight ahead. Axel ignores Dorianna and argues about artistic realism with Baum, who has spent a fortnight in Ceylon writing his novel about India. Albert opens a discussion of his school companion, Udo Conrad, as a great stylist but sinfully weak on social problems. After dinner, Margot flits about after a minor poet, Axel insults Baum and drifts toward Albert, who laments not having gotten together on his film project. At present, Albert cannot afford it. Soon afterwards, the rather unsuccessful party ends.

With Margot trotting beside him to keep up, Axel tells a parable about coincidence and says he had never expected to see Margot again. She is prettier. She sobs and turns away, leaving him perplexed. She slaps him as he pulls something from his wallet and runs home. Axel recognizes the doorway. He pushes some paper into her collar before she closes the door in his face. Opening it on the stairs, she sees not money as she expects, but an old drawing of a naked girl facing the wall. She realizes what Axel had been doing on their last morning together. Thinking of all she could have avoided in life—especially Albert—and the pleasures Axel could have continued giving her, Margot weeps. After studying the sketch once more, Margot tears it up and throws it through a grating; keeping it would be too dangerous. Finishing her climb, Margot finds Albert in his pajamas, begging for sex. She demands he get a divorce or go back to Lizzy, to which he promises to see his lawyer.

Axel is happy to be back in Germany after finding fame but not fortune in America. being expelled as an undesirable alien after involvement in fishy money transactions. German humor is not up to Axel's level, so he worries about surviving. He has always had a poker face, and dreams poker when he cannot find partners. Axel awakens, thinking about Margot, which rarely happens with ex-lovers. He first leaves Germany to avoid the War, abandoning his half-witted mother, who promptly dies in a fall. As a child he tortures animals and later applies morbid curiosity to his art. He loves caricature and fooling people, but despises practical jokes. Humor should follow the Hegelian syllogism of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Axel is annoyed at lacking cynicism toward Margot who he leaves two years earlier for fear of growing too fond of her.



To learn if Margot is living with Albert, Axel drops in informally as he has learned in America. He asks to examine Albert's fine paintings and recognizes one that he forges years ago. When Margot emerges from the bath, Axel asks if they are relatives, and Albert admits that they are lovers. At dinner, Margot sits between them, behaving as she thinks an actress should, shuddering at the thought of keeping Axel. Axel repeats his Lohengrin story, knowing that Albert gets only half the joke. When Albert says that Margot will soon appear on screen, she pouts but is proud of reaching Axel's level.

Axel begins hanging around Albert and Margot, disliking Albert's high-brow conversations, but Albert begins to like Axel immensely. One evening, the trio attends an ice hockey match at the Sports Palace, when Albert panics, seeing Paul and Irma, and bows out, claiming to have forgotten a phone call. Axel is relieved to have Margot alone. When crowd noise allows, they talk about her being jilted, his coming back, her wanting a divorce, him calling that nonsense. Axel insists they can be careful enough to fool Albert; Margot refuses to do anything that will risk all the effort she has made to set Albert up. The din grows too great for Margot, and as they are leaving, she sees Paul staring at her in disgust. She understands why her "worm" has crawled away.

Chapters 16-18 Analysis

Margot runs out of her element at a formal dinner party and face-to-face with Axel, who jilts her two years before. He is using his real name, Axel Rex, under which Albert knows him, but they have never met. Soon they are sitting on either side of a drunken Margot, each holding a thigh, she feeling caught between heaven (Axel) and hell (Albert). The brilliant company talks about art and literature, and Nabokov samples conversations for the reader. When the party is over, Albert rates it as not much of a success.

Leaving with the other guests in order to keep up the ruse, Margot walks with Axel. Believing that Axel is propositioning her with money, Margot slaps him. Later, she finds that Axel slips her an old charcoal drawing of her, made their last morning together. She cherishes it but destroys it to avoid the danger of discovery. Later it is seen that Axel carries it everywhere as a reminder of the one girl for whom he has truly cared. Caught between the man who has given her sexual ecstasy and the man whom she has been cultivating to bring her fortune and fame, Margot demands that Albert get a divorce and marry her. His promise seems to convince her.

Axel's background and artistic philosophy are sketched, and neither makes him attractive. He is cynical about everything but Margot. When he drops in on Albert in the American manner, it is to analyze the relationship. He grows quickly bored with Albert's highbrow talk. Chapter 18 opens with Axel examining Albert's art collection, including 16th- and 17th-century canvases by the Dutchman Jacob van Ruisdael, the Italian Lorenzo Lotto, and two Frenchmen, Jacques Linard and Lubin Baugin. Eight years earlier, Axel forges the Baugin canvas, allowing him to agree drolly with Albert that it looks modern, almost surrealistic. Albert, of course, uses the term not in the loose, popular sense of dreamlike or unreal, but in technical terms, as resembling works done in the 1920s-30s, reacting against the horrors of World War I (several times alluded to in



this novel) and finding inspiration in Freud and Marx, both of whom have followers among the characters in *Laughter in the Dark*. Surrealists employ unconventional techniques depicting realistic objects, in contrast to the non-objective cubists, a representative of whose work sits at Albert's dinner table. Looking at the Baugin painting which Nabokov describes, it is hard to see surrealism.

The action then turns abruptly to a hockey rink, where Albert spies Paul and Irma and flees, leaving Margot and Axel alone together. The roar of the spirited crowd allows overhearing only fragments of conversation, but the two ex-lovers are clearly not at the same place. Axel laughs at the idea that Albert will divorce Elisabeth and marry Margot, and wants to take up together again behind Albert's back. Margot has worked too hard to take any risks. When the din proves too great after a spectacular goal, they leave. Paul glares at Margot, who wants to see him flailed for his earlier rudeness towards her. She resolves to let Axel kiss her in the taxi but no more—that usually seems to be crux of Margot's decisions about men: when to let them kiss her. Axel tells her she must pick up the tab for the taxi.



Chapters 19-21

Chapters 19-21 Summary

Worrying that Irma will see her father and wondering about Margot's companion, Paul is glad to head home. Seemingly telepathic since Albert's departure, Elisabeth senses something bad. In the morning, Irma is running a fever and hallucinating. Dr. Lampert examines her, and writes prescriptions. Influenza is going around Berlin. Irma is better next morning, but Paul and her nurse are sick. Irma sleeps, but a dream and thirst wake her. She hears from the street her father's four-note whistle and looks outside. Disappointed and freezing, she goes back to bed to dream of playing hockey with father. In the morning her temperature is 104 degrees. Elisabeth is tormented. Lampert visits again and, stopping next to treat Margot, decides against telling Albert that his daughter has pneumonia.

When Lampert leaves, Axel resumes sketching Margot. They talk about running away together. Margot wants to wait until she and Albert are married, so he cannot easily turn her away, and is sure her film will be a hit. When Margot consents to a kiss on the cheek, Axel's button gets caught in her lace, Albert discovers them, and leads Axel into his study to talk as him to draw caricatures for his critique of the White Raven exhibition, and advances him DM500. Looking through the catalog, Axel professes homosexuality. Albert broad-mindedly accepts this in artists, but feels Axel is missing a lot. Dorianna believes that Axel is gay.

As Margot recovers, on Axel's advice, she amuses herself placing prank phone. Meanwhile, Paul is getting a busy signal, trying to tell Albert about his daughter's crisis. Sick, sleepless for days, and sobbing, Paul goes to fetch Albert. Axel meets him on the street and refuses to be shewed away. Paul considers hitting him. The meeting of brothers-in-law is awkward. Axel watches bemused, and Margot says it is a trap to get him back. Hearing them, Paul gives up and goes home. Irma is tossing slightly when her nurse announces Albert's arrival. Cousins pull him among the vigil-keepers when he is overcome at the foot of the bed. Albert asks of no one in particular why no one calls him earlier. Albert hears from the street the four notes (from Siegfried) just before Paul announces the death. Albert sees Elisabeth holding Irma's hand and comforted by a nurse. Albert's eyes cloud as he looks at the dead face and he leaves unobtrusively. He walks home, not comprehending and reminiscing, and does not care that he has fought earlier with Margot. Smoking lustily, she watches Albert. Axel has just left, well-contended.

For the first time, Albert feels how low he has sunk and hopes that this death might bring reconciliation. He will attend Irma's funeral and remain with Elisabeth. He looks at the ping-pong table in the former nursery, feasts his eyes on Margot's beautiful face and contemplates a future beside faded Elisabeth, and forces himself to the window. When Margot asks why he is up so early, he says he is going nowhere.



Chapters 19-21 Analysis

These moving chapters chronicle Irma's fatal bout of pneumonia and plunge Albert into a crisis of allegiance. Dr. Lampert faces his own crisis, seeing Margot after he leaves Irma. He must decide whether or not to tell Albert about the danger. He decides, vindictively not to interfere. His logic is that Albert has made his bed and must now lie in it. Lampert does not factor in whether his patient might benefit from seeing her father. He also fails to level with Elisabeth and Paul about the grave symptoms of pneumonia. Advising Margot to stay indoors and chitchatting about her film, Lampert inwardly is calling Margot a snake and a slut and knowing that she will ruin Albert.

After Lambert's departure, Axel and Margot become relatively innocently stuck together and Albert seems menacing as he comes on the scene. Bizarrely, Margot cares only that her lace not be ruined. Axel is thinking up excuses as Albert leads him into his study and greatly relieved that it is to talk business. Perhaps he feels that confessing he is a homosexual will make it easier for him to hang around Margot in the future, or perhaps he has already been affecting this. Actress Dorianna Karenina apparently cannot think of any reason why Axel would take an immediate dislike to her other than that he is gay. Axel's amused reaction to the news is non-committal and the invention seems far too convenient to be spur of the moment. Albert's tolerant attitude is interesting in light of the persecution gays suffer under the Third Reich, which is not too far off from the setting of this novel. At any rate, Axel milks the role going forward.

Chapter 20 begins with a frolicsome description of Margot's childish telephone pranks during her recovery. Nabokov needs Albert's phone line to be tied up to force Paul into coming over in person to tell about Irma's impending death. He makes the reader feel bad for those who answer their phones and demonstrates that Margot has quite a warped mind. Paul, by comparison, emerges heroic, himself quite ill and sleepless with worry about his beloved niece. Trudging over through the snow, he runs into Axel, who insists he is an intimate friend of the family and follows him upstairs. Gentle Paul is ready to hit him. Delivering the news and expecting to take Albert back, he cannot believe his ears, hearing Margot argue that it is a lie and a trick to get him back. Paul leaves disgusted and defeated.

Albert and Margot's "hideous" quarrel is not witnessed. Albert shows up during Irma's last moments and has to be dragged into Paul's study to recover from the shock. He asks the doctor about her chances as he is leading a solemn old man, presumably a minister, into the room. Paul's one-word announcement of the death is also reported obliquely. Albert drags himself home to bed, oblivious to signs that Margo and Axel have just finished making love. In the morning, he begins to feel the "thin, slimy layer of turpitude" that has settle on his life. Nabokov's words squirm with depravity. Albert sees the death as an opening to make up with Elisabeth. She had almost smiled at him by their daughter's side. This is the second time in the novel that Albert has known unequivocally what is best for him, and has chosen a different path. Margot is too beautiful and Elisabeth too plain for this weak man to do right. He has not yet struck

bottom, so the tragedy is incomplete. When Margot asks him where he is going, he replies, "Nowhere." He has places yet to go, but that is where he ends up.



Chapters 22-24

Chapters 22-24 Summary

Two weeks later, Margot is still telling Albert not to be so depressed but to concentrate on her debut. Albert has been pouring out to seemingly Axel the feelings he cannot share with Margot. Axel talks about how misfortune and death can appear from nowhere. Perhaps, however, death comes before old age can ruin. Axel can talk endlessly, making up friends, shrewdly making fools of others. He always finds the witty or trite thing one needs to hear, showing that everything every invented is a clever trick. He watches Albert's torments as a first step to a roaring comedy that he means to stage manage. He tries to explain to himself that he likes Margot for her physical attributes, but knows that he shares a spiritual affinity with this vulgar Berlin girl. Margot glares at Axel for telling him in Albert's earshot about renting a room where they can meet undisturbed every day at 5 PM. Albert says he is buying her a car tomorrow. The two men laugh together, and the building personal shake their heads that tenants have to witness such things: daughter just dead and with another man hanging around. The mistress should be plumper.

Margot shudders blissfully waiting for the film to start. Axel sits between her and Albert and in front sit Dorianna and a film manager with a sty. The credits roll without music. Seeing herself on screen looking like her mother's wedding picture, leaning out a window with her buttocks on display, Margot is horrified. Delighting in her childish zeal, Albert leans over Axel to tell her—sincerely—that it is marvelous. Axel looks forward to her taking revenge on Albert. On-screen, Margot creeps about and finds her lover with the vamp, Dorianna, who draws applause. When Margot reappears, it ends. The real Margot wants to scratch the real Dorianna for congratulating her and feels like a soul in hell watching its earthly transgressions paraded. The film draws to a mawkish close, the audience laughs, and Margot leaves quickly, crying.

Margot swamps the world with tears, blames everyone in turn, and demands that Albert, having paid for the one copy, burn it. He reminds her they are going to buy her a car and can then drive south. Albert will find a clever producer next time. Claiming to be worried that Albert will leave her and refusing to kiss him, Margot asks about the divorce. Albert lies, saying Elisabeth will not grant it. When she presses against him Albert agrees to talk to his lawyers again, but inwardly rejects the idea.

Chapters 22-24 Analysis

Two weeks pass, unseen the the reader, in which Albert pours out his heart to Axel, whom he thinks is a friend. On the day her film premieres, Margot claims to commiserate but points out that Elisabeth and Paul had already probably poisoned Irma against him. Axel rents a place for them to rendezvous and no longer worries about talking openly in front of Albert. Fatefully, Albert is about to buy Margot a car. First, they attend the film



opening. Axel sits between Albert and Margot probably so he can be shown growing annoyed at being conversed across. She fights off Axel's advances. The movie is seen largely through Margot's shocked eyes. She sees her despised mother on the screen, not herself. Even the final mawkish scene in which she is holding her newborn baby, the baby gives her a look of non-recognition that elicits audience laughs. Margot flees, Albert follows helplessly, and Axel hopes this will seal Albert's fate when he is blamed.

On the way out, Axel asks Dorianna about her troubling stage name. She says that the boy who suggests it commits suicide. Asked if she has read Tolstoy, she asks deliciously, "Doll's Toy?" Anna Karenina is, of course, Leo Tolstoy's novel of a marriage between a staid old man and a lively young woman who falls in love with a young soldier and abandons her family. Having early in the novel witnessed a bloody suicide on the tracks, Anna does likewise, driven crazy by guilt, despair, and suspicion.



Chapters 25-27

Chapters 25-27 Summary

Axel draws in the room he has rented for Margot and she puts off the road trip. One day, Axel offers to drive rather than hiring a chauffeur, claiming he needs a holiday. She does not believe Axel that it will be hard to have sex during the trip; they are smart enough to find ways. Walking home, she takes a shortcut through her childhood neighborhood, and meets Kaspar. He tells her about her parents selling out and moving to North Berlin, and Otto is in Bielefeld. Kaspar urges her gently to visit her people, is happy she is getting married, but is sorry they cannot have fun like the old days. Secretly, Kaspar sees Margot going to the dogs and needing to marry a good, simple man—but not him.

Endless fruit trees pass and dead bugs clog the radiator as Axel drives lazily along into France, heading for the Riviera and on to the Italian lakes. Their last stop before the coast is Rouginard. They arrive at sunset, Albert gushing about the beauty and Margot on the brink of tears, find the first four hotels are booked solidly, but take a double room and a single that share a common bath. Margot and Axel exchange knowing glances as Albert worries about how "splashy" she gets in the tub. Margot locks the door as she begins her bath, and after a while, Albert worries that she has drowned as water thunders from the tap and pours out under the door. Looking quite exhilarated, Margot claims to have fallen asleep when she unlocks. She now wants to remain in Rouginard a long time.

For three weeks all three are happy, and Margot is much admired by people young and old, but Albert, strangely, feels no jealousy as at Solfi. He sees that she no longer tries to please others and needs no one but Axel, who has become Albert's shadow. After getting lost on a walk in the mountains, they find a depot of the Rouginard bus. Margot and Axel board, but Albert stops for a beer, and is surprised to meet Udo Conrad. Conrad hurriedly boards the bus, which leaves before Albert can pay his tab. He orders another when the bartender assures him it will circle the village and stop again. When it takes too long, an old man says that the bus hasn't stopped again since last Sunday. Margot and Axel sit contentedly when Albert finally gets home.

Chapters 25-27 Analysis

Axel volunteers to drive the new car on Albert and Margot's proposed vacation to France and Italy. Walking home from their regular assignment at the apartment/studio, Margot meets Kaspar, who fills her in on the family's situation and seems surprised she cares so little, and laments inaudibly that Margot is headed for ruin. Axel's cool driving gets them to Rouginard on the French Riviera, but they find accommodations only in the fifth place they try. Margot is in a foul mood, refusing to drive further or to stay longer than the night. Discovering that the two rooms are separated by a bath whose running tap makes wonderful cover noise for sex, Margot ruins the carpeting and decides to stay

a long time. Albert suspects nothing. He is amazed that the jealousy that consumed him in Solfi.

Margot and Axel lose Albert after a hike through the mountains, when Albert misses the bus. His old friend, the writer Udo Conrad, is also aboard, and his story of how they behave on the bus trip begins in the next chapter to build the story's tension. When Albert finally gets back to the hotel, Margot just lets him talk to himself.



Chapters 28-30

Chapters 28-30 Summary

Albert spends the next day trying to get an address for Udo and on the third day finds him while on a walk, after Margot refuses a day trip. Albert tells about the separation and Irma's death, but decides against mentioning Margot. When Albert mentions Mussolini, Udo does not recognize the name. They discuss Udo's last novel and how, given Germans' literary tastes Udo will be forgotten as a writer. Udo laughs about how, when he runs into Germans abroad, they always assume no one understands their chatting—like Albert's companions, who seem happy he is left behind. After discussing Baum's book, Udo begs the need to write. Colliding on the way home, with a retired French colonel who asks the whereabouts of the lovers who cuddle in the garden beneath his window, Albert returns to Udo and hears the bus conversation characterizes as cheap, loud, nasty, and amorous prattle.

Albert heads straight to their room, hears Margot's shrill laughter from outside, motions her in, and takes a position by the door, holding an automatic pistol. Margot must die instantly for her deception. A maid interrupts and Margot examines a blister. Seeing the gun, she stays calm, refuses to stand up, and laughs when Albert shakes her. She dares him to shoot her. His stutter returning, Albert talks of deceit, but Margot insists that she is faithful. Hearing about witnesses on the bus, Margot reminds Albert that Axel does not care for women, they they have been entertaining themselves by annoying people, and that they find one another repulsive. After an hour, Margot launches herself onto the bed and sobs hysterically.

Albert sits by the window, mentally reviewing every episode with Axel. Claiming to believe her, Albert insists that Margot pack to leave. Albert is incapable of facing Axel, given the mental pictures he has formed. Refusing a kiss, he threatens to shoot if Margot does not hurry. A porter carries out their luggage. Playing poker on the terrace, Albert sees the car swerve awkwardly out of the garage and drive away. Paying his debts, he looks for Margot, finds the room emptied, and asks downstairs if they have at least paid his bill.

Chapters 28-30 Analysis

These chapters show Albert becoming uncomfortable with being always part of a threesome. Having run into Udo Conrad, Albert searches for him diligently to no avail. Eventually, Albert runs into Udo again by chance, finding him exercising his green thumb in the garden of a cottage he has just rented. Udo makes it sound like Albert has been avoiding talking about old times. It is a psychological defense.

As they take a stroll, Udo dislikes serious talk about family troubles, politics, and the state of German literature. Udo feels like an amphibian once it takes to land. He has no



homesickness but worries about being forgotten. Albert declares that he could not live permanently as an expatriate, which soon becomes his fate. Udo remarks offhandedly about how German tourists assume no one will understand what they overhear, as is the case with Albert's companions on the bus. This comment festers while Albert heads back to the hotel. En route, he literally runs into a French colonel who admits envying the sounds of lovemaking he hears from his garden. Trying not believe the obvious, Albert gets Udo to describe the couple's conversations: they are in a gross Eden together.

Albert returns to the hotel, intending dramatically to shoot Margot with a pistol he always keeps in his yellow camel's hair overcoat. She laughs him off while calculating how best to escape, and vehemently denies the charges made by the colonel and Udo. Albert now sees that the homosexuality has always been just a ruse, but is willing to accept they are perhaps only friends and pulling more pranks like the telephone calls during her recovery from flu. At any rate, the mental pictures are stuck in his head, so Albert insists they leave immediately. Talking about Udo and the colonel, Albert declares that he alone has been blind. This soon turns prophetic, and the confrontation with the pistol will be repeated at the end of the novel.

Note that Udo's ignorance of Benito Mussolini's name, while intended to show he is radically apolitical. This in turn reinforces his reluctance to write about socially-relevant matters, which, in turn, relegates him to the literary scrap pile that he fears—helps set the novel. Mussolini assumes power in Italy in 1922 and there is no evidence that Hitler has come to power in Germany in 1933 or that the demonstrations and violence that precede this have begun.



Chapters 31-33

Chapters 31-33 Summary

From boyhood Albert has not been good at mechanical things, and has a hard time getting the car out of Rouginard. Margot asks tartly what his plans are, but he has none beyond reaching the mountains. He is distraught and confused. As the road starts to wind, Margot reminds him to stay to the right and suggests either she drive or they hire a chauffeur. Albert requires more reassurance of Margot's innocence, and she grows tired of giving them. Seeing Margot shrug out of a coat, Albert is filled with nostalgia and pulls over to weep uncontrollably. To the left rise red cliffs. To the right, beyond a parapet, plunges a ravine cut by a rushing river. Recovering, Albert drives on and seems to be doing better as they approach a sharp curve. High above, an old woman gathering herbs sees two unexpected bicyclists. A small mail plane flies overhead. Weather across Europe is sunny that day. In Berlin, Elisabeth hears a white-clad ice cream vendor and feels funny dressed in black. She feels restless this morning. She has visited Irma's grave as always, but nothing has happened to account for her tingling.

Albert regains consciousness in a clinic in Grasse two weeks after surgery to stop bleeding in his brain. His eyes are bandaged, but his scalp is regrowing hair. Albert pictures swerving to avoid the cyclists and slamming into a telegraph pole. Margot has told him the story of how the car flips and only the post saves them. Albert cares only about when the bandages come off and what the German newspapers say. He spends his time making sense of incoherent sounds, hears the nurse teaching Margot French, and dares to peep out of the bandage, seeing no light, even when he strikes a match. Margot scolds him and both try to calm him, but he feels an impenetrable wall of darkness become part of himself, despairs, and repeatedly screams.

Chapters 31-33 Analysis

Chapter 31 begins with a jovial catalog of Albert's failures using mechanical objects. Even in his specialty, he lets others do the hands-on work of restoring. Recall that he had planned on hiring a chauffeur to drive the new car he buys Margot, and that he is behind the wheel only because he needs to flee Axel, the excellent driver. Recall that the novel is set decades before automatic transmissions are common in Europe; Nabokov resists the temptation of having fun with learning to coordinate clutch and gear shift, showing instead Albert's penchant for jamming on the brakes at the first sight of oncoming traffic and inability to steer to the right side of the road. Albert seems to be getting better at it—manfully refusing to let Margot drive even as he breaks down in unmanly tears—when unseen danger looms.

Nabokov dramatically places an old woman picking herbs on the steep hillside above in a position to see the coming accident, and then breaks chapter. Before examining the



accident scene, Chapter 32 soars with a mail plane high over the cliffs, and then Nabokov then jumps to equally sunny Berlin, where Elisabeth sits high on a balcony after visiting Irma's grave. Nothing is odd about the day, but she feels something. Recall Elisabeth's premonition on the evening that Irma falls ill after the ice hockey match. Note the black/white contrast between her mourning clothes and the ice cream vendor's uniform. Irma links the two by her love of desserts, first seen when she is introduced early in the novel. Nabokov's description of Albert's existential scream evokes Edvard Munch's famous painting, but Albert's taste in art is far removed from it, even if he could think, as he always had, in artistic terms.



Chapters 34-36

Chapters 34-36 Summary

Albert's cuts and bruises heal, but the sense of darkness remains. He howls and tears frantically at his eyes, and alternates between semi-consciousness and panic. Eventually, he lies silent and motionless, listening to sounds and visualizing his earlier life. Margot reads a letter from Axel, forgiving Albert's rudeness, and sympathizing with his misfortune, and saying he is heading to New York. He blames spoiled, fickle Margot for seeking admiration from someone of Axel's "unnatural inclinations." Albert is glad that Axel is gone, believes this is God's punishment for distrusting Margot, and claims to believe her. Margot says she is going to the travel agency but meets Axel to report how well it has gone well. She believes they should take separate coaches to Zurich to see a specialist Axel takes money to buy tickets and thinks he should hold their funds.

Walking around the hospital grounds and traveling by train and taxi to Zurich make Albert's head swim, even with Margot guiding him. She tells him not to act like a two-year-old. The specialist puts Albert's of healing at even and recommends a sanatorium. Margot instead rents a small chalet above a fashionable resort. Axel takes the sunniest room and hires a cook at high wages, warning her as Albert's doctor to avoid him; he is crazy and dangerous. There is to be no gossiping in town or anyone allowed on the grounds. Margot fetches Albert, who in dark glasses, hunches like an owl. Margot lead Albert through the rooms and describes everything fictitiously, while Axel laughs silently. The doctor has ordered separate bedrooms. When Albert tries to walk through the house on his own, he does badly and exhausts himself. After Margot tucks him in bed and serves dinner, she joins Axel in his bed. At first, they take the precaution of whispering.

In what he thinks is an ennobling black shroud, Albert pictures scenes from his life, contrasting beautiful Margot with pale Elisabeth and playful Irma. He has lived sadly and shamefully, not using his eyes fully. Even Margot is now but "a rustle and a perfume," as in the dark cinema long ago. He wants to believe in "spiritual vision" and that his life with Margot is not deeper and she more devoted. Whenever she touches him, however, he yearns for her. Perched on the window sill, Axel delights in watching them together. Axel takes risks, touching Albert, or having Margot sit on his lap as she reads to Albert. Albert is desperate to find someone to give him back his sight.

Albert grows comfortable inside his room, but finds the outdoors too full of sounds to form a picture. His hearing grows so acute that Axel cannot come and go unnoticed. Still, Axel grows bolder, joining them for dinner, timing his chewing to Albert's. When Axel chokes and Margot covers for him, Albert fears that he is hallucinating. While Albert naps, Margot and Axel go on strolls Axel advises against demanding marriage, but to siphon off Albert's fortune gradually by getting him to sign blank checks. When it runs out, they will leave him—with a dog as a token of gratitude. Margot and Axel know that



after a certain large stone they must be silent, lest Albert hear. One day, she laughs too close to the house and Albert emerges from the trees sensing she is not alone.

Their evenings are spent with Albert in his armchair and Margot and Axel on the sofa, she telling stories from her childhood. Afterwards, Albert goes up to bed. He often feels his alarm clock when he wakes up, to see what time it is. One night, Albert feels disturbed and gropes to Margot's locked door. Recalling as a boy clambering along the cornice from his window to a maid's, Albert decides to try it. He drops his stick, nearly falls off, but manages to crawl inside. Margot is not there. Sweating and bleeding, he calls out, and Margot comes, breathless. She claims it is morning and she has been sunning herself. She grudgingly allows a "great exception" and has sex with him. Albert then sleeps until noon and is scolded for his exploit. Albert spends the day thinking about repeating the event and, hearing a cough coming not from Margot's direction, refuses to believe no one else is there. Axel grows bolder, making bird calls. Margot turns Albert down on talking with Emilia and getting a shave.

Chapters 34-36 Analysis

Albert's terror is described most graphically, along with his attempts at accommodating psychologically to his new world, by adding spiritualism to his relationship with Margot. When desire overtakes him, she turns him down and threatens to leave. Albert falls for a goodbye letter from Axel, claiming that he he heading back to America. He is, of course, on hand waiting to enjoy Margot and play his childish pranks on the blind man he has never been able to stand. The train trip from Grasse to Zurich is harrowing, as Nabokov suggests every way in which the newly-blind can be distracted and disoriented. Albert chastises himself for not having used his eyes well enough to picture the specific elements of life; on the train, with no visual sense of the rush of forward motion, every movement and sound makes him motion sick. Margot tells him not to be a baby. When they reach the chalet, Margot leads Albert around, maliciously telling him falsehoods about the decor. Axel is like a child, enjoying everything, mimicking and even making bird calls to make Albert feel he is hallucinating.

It seems out of character for Albert to recall his pimply-faced boyhood and crawl out on a cornice, when he has had so little success navigating the chalet, but he does, having become desperate for Margot. She, of course, is not in her bed. After lying about the time of day and fearing that Albert will sense the temperature is wrong, Margot allows him to have sex with her. She lets him get away with nothing else that might endanger them, like talking with the cook or having someone in to shave his beard. That they are not paranoid in avoiding contact with town becomes clear in the concluding chapters. Margot and Axel have agreed on their goal and plan: bleed Albert dry financially and abandon him by winter.



Chapters 37-39

Chapters 37-39 Summary

Paul learns of Albert's accident from a newspaper, of his condition from the Grasse police, and of his Swiss address from their common bank. Large checks are being drawn regularly, possibly forged. Picturing Albert at his dangerous mistress' mercy, Paul wonders what to do until Elisabeth sends him to Switzerland. Paul arrives in Brigaud, learns about the chalet, the niece, and the doctor, and considers that Albert may be well cared for. Margot and Emilia come to town, do not notice the taxi, but hear about a stranger who has driven up to see Albert.

Axel is sitting stark naked in front of Albert like Rodin's Thinker, staring and tickling Albert with a grass stem as though it were a fly. Suddenly, Albert reacts to a noise on the terrace, and Axel sees Paul, who knows his identity. Albert insists that he is alone. As Axel stalks away, Paul seizes Albert's stick and swings at his head. He connects, but Axel escapes upstairs, grinning. Albert asks for his yellow overcoat to be sure his gun is there, then calms down and is willing to be removed from the chalet, but wants to speak with Margot first. He is helped into the taxi, which nearly knocks Margot down as it lurches away.

Albert arrives clean-shaven wearing dark glasses and a purplish-brown suit he would never buy himself. Elisabeth sobs, Albert bows slightly. They eat silently and Albert is put to bed in Irma's nursery. After being turned down for a final meeting with Margot in Switzerland, Albert stops talking. His intent, of course, is to fill her with bullets. He says nothing for three days in Berlin, but hides his gun in a locked chest of drawers and sleeps with the key. Albert pictures Margot and Axel packing quickly and alertly and fleeing. On the fourth morning, when no one answers the phone, Albert picks it up. The house porter, Schiffermiller, informs him that Margot is at the flat fetching some things. Hanging up, Albert fetches his gun, gropes down the stairs, makes it to the rainy street, and is helped by a stranger into a cab. He counts the turns, and is surprised to arrive so soon. He hushes the porter, takes his key, and rides the elevator up alone.

Albert hears Margot preparing things for Schiffermiller to lug downstairs. Holding his pistol ready for use, Albert slams the only door to the room behind him and pictures the familiar layout. Moving towards Margot's perfume and warmth, Albert moves in on his lovely target, wishing she would shriek. Knowing better than to fumble with the key to lock the door, Albert pushes a table in front. He recalls blind man's bluff, long ago. He stumbles over a trunk and kicks it aside. Irritated at her silence, when Margot begins crawling towards his legs, Albert fires. A throne chair knocks him down and a swift hand grapples for the gun. His former "nightmare mate" twists it free, turns it on him, and fires point-blank. He feels the pain and his eyes fill with a "dazzling glory" of blissful blueness. He thinks what a mess his life has been, bends forward, and falls like a doll to one side.



Around the dead man, the cabinets are emptied. A woman's glove lies on a table. A trunk from Hôtel Britannia, Rouginard, stands by the sofa. The doors to the room and to the landing are open wide.

Chapters 37-39 Analysis

Paul learns from the newspaper about Albert's blindness and tracks him down to Brigaud, Switzerland, but decides to go fetch him only when Elisabeth's extrasensory perception sees the truth and hands him a packed suitcase. It is quite a dramatic conclusion to a brief, convoluted chapter. Brigaud proves as gossipy as advertised. Paul quickly learns about Albert and his niece, but the doctor's presence throws him. Good-heartedly, he considers that the demon woman may be taking good care of Albert after all. Margot arrives at the post office just after Paul's departure up the mountain.

Axel has been taunting Albert as usual, sitting like the Rodin statue. Paul recognizes him, of course, and Axel is upset only that their game has been ruined. For the second time, placid Paul wants to do physical harm, and does, landing a blow to Axel's head. Nabokov remarks, tongue-in-cheek, that Axel covers his nakedness like Adam found out in Paradise. Rather than chase Axel, Paul spirits Albert out of the "torture chamber." Albert wants only to get close enough to Margot to shoot her. Once he has his gun and knows that he will not get a chance in Switzerland, he falls silent for virtually the rest of his life. In Paul's flat, Elisabeth wonders if he is not dumb as well as blind.

Albert knows that Margot will not disappear without looting the flat's treasures, and when she shows up on the fourth day, this is reported by a servant (whose surname Albert has been using whenever he needs a pseudonym). Albert believes that he knows every turn from Paul's flat to his, but is off as badly as when he tries to walk the chalet unattended. He does better inside his flat, where he can picture everything. He knows that he must get close to Margot before firing. He secures the only exit and navigates towards her by scent and body heat — like the anaconda he earlier likens her to — but is undone when he cannot see a chair hurled at his legs. Margot is, of course, stronger and more agile, and turns the tables. Albert seems happy to experience blue light before dying in agony.

Nabokov turns the final paragraph into stage directions, panning the dead body and room emptied of treasures. Axel's whereabouts after Brigaud are strangely unaccounted for.



Characters

Albert Albinus

A middle-aged, not particularly gifted art-critic living in Berlin, Albert is novel's unheroic main character. Rich, respectable, and happy until he abandons his somewhat obtuse wife, Elisabeth, for a young mistress, Margot Peters, who does not return his love, Albert watches his life end in disaster. Good-looking and well-bred, Albert is unlucky in love affairs before marrying Elisabeth. He has a pleasant smile, slightly bulging light-blue eyes, a slow mind, speaks well but with slight stammer, and lives comfortably on money inherited from his father and soundly invested. Elisabeth does not thrill Albert, but he loves her and does not expect to need more sexually than she on occasion gives. He remains faithful, although tempted a bit during Elisabeth's three-week confinement before the birth, until daughter Irma is eight years old and he meets Margot. Albert's rival for Margot's affection, Axel Rex (a.k.a. Miller) views Albert as "an oaf with simple passions and a solid, too solid, knowledge of painting."

Albert is introduced imagining animating Old Master paintings but finds no producer willing to take the risk. He writes Axel in the U.S. about the project. Plans are interrupted as Albert takes up with Margot, whom he sees ushering in the Argus Cinema. He returns until she approaches him. Albert uses a pseudonym, Schiffermiller, which is his house porter's name, but Margot learns his address and phone number, begins phoning, and insists on visiting the flat. Brother-in-law Paul nearly runs into Margot and grows suspicious.

Margot sees to it that Elisabeth learns of the affair, Elisabeth and Irma move out, but Albert moves in with Margot rather than bring her to his elegant flat. Albert finances a movie on condition that Margot play a major role and throws a lavish dinner party, which inadvertently brings Margot together with Axel, her ex-lover. Margot wants to be with Axel, but has invested too much energy in gaining access to Albert's riches to abandon him. Axel becomes a regular visitor, claiming to be gay to throw off suspicion.

Albert learns only at the last moment that his daughter Irma is dying of pneumonia, is persuaded by Axel and Margot not to attend the funeral, and has to lay aside his depression to attend Margot's disastrous screening. Albert buys her a car, suggests a vacation, and accepts Axel's offer to drive, since Albert has no mechanical aptitude. In Rougine, Albert meets an old schoolmate who refers to Margot and Axel's amorous behavior, which is confirmed by a French colonel. Albert intends to shoot Margot for her treachery, but is persuaded simply to whisk her away. Driving for the first time in his life, overwrought with emotion, on winding mountainous roads, Albert swerves to avoid oncoming bicyclists, and is lucky only to be blinded.

Robbed of his most precious sense, Albert nearly goes insane. A specialist in Zurich offers little hope. Margot sets Albert up in a Swiss chalet, with Axel not in New York as his farewell letter claims, but in the far bedroom. Albert adapts to getting around indoors



and develops keen hearing, but is disoriented outdoors. He grows so lonely that he repeats an adolescent adventure, climbing out his window and into Margot's.

Paul learns of Albert's accident and whereabouts and fetches him back to Berlin. Albert resists leaving until he has an opportunity to get near Margot and shoot her. In Berlin, Albert never speaks until he learns that Margot has arrived to clean out the valuables. He takes a cab, enters rooms he sees in memory, hunts Margot by scent and body heat, and dies when she turns the gun on him and fires. The pain causes wonderful blueness to spread over Albert's eyes as he considers the ruination of his life.

Margot Peters

A teenage aspiring actress, Margot seduces, fleeces, and finally kills the hapless Albert Albinus. Albert's first impressions of her are: slight figure, swift walk, cheeks that by flashlight appear painted by a great artist on a dark background. Later the art historian adds: "Luini-esque" hazel eyes, glistening lips, a downy mole, and dimples. Unfortunately, she speaks in vulgar Berlin slang with a throaty voice and observes poor personal hygiene.

Margot Peters' father is a house porter shell-shocked during World War I. Her mother is equally battered—and battering. Margot's older brother, Otto, is a leftist political firebrand. Margot is a bright, high-spirited tomboy until age 12, then a pretty young teen jostled by her brother's friends and dreaming of modeling and movie stardom. Frau Levandovsky becomes Margot Peters' landlady when Margot is 16, arranges for Margot to become an artist's model and pimps her to Axel Miller (a.k.a. Rex). Axel sets Margot up in a flat,. And visits her for a month before announcing he must leave forever. To survive, Margot sells herself to a series of men and tries to get a movie audition before taking a job as usher in the Argus Cinema. There she swiftly grows bored until she notices a shy, middle-aged man returning frequently and eying her. As they meet, she avoids intimacy and claims to be an orphan, daughter of a painter, who lives in poverty with her aunt and want to quit her exhausting job. Learning Albert's address, and phone number she begins calling. Visiting Albert's flat one afternoon when everyone is away, she locks him in the bedroom, and leaves just before brother-in-law Paul arrives (he holds the outer door for her). Albert explains it as a foiled burglary attempt, but Paul grows suspicious even before overhearing a phone call.

Albert pays for a flat, Margot sends him the address, knowing that his wife routinely reads his mail. Albert is found out, his family moves out, and he moves in with Margot, who wants to move into the elegant flat. Eventually she gets her way. After her movie debut proves a fiasco—she looks like her despised mother on-screen—Margot gets a second wish: a lavish dinner party in the flat. Margot wears a black tulle gown with velvet dahlia at her breast, smiles defensively as she listens to things she does not understand, drinks to excess, and commits every faux pas. She sits between Albert and Axel, recently back from the U.S., instantly wants to be with him, but has invested too much energy in gaining access to Albert's riches to abandon him.



Axel becomes a regular visitor, claiming to be homosexual in order to throw off Albert's suspicions. The truth comes out on vacation, when Margot and Axel are seen together too intimately and too often for word not to get back to Albert. Albert holds a gun on Margot as she talks her way out of it. Margot offers to drive, but Albert insists on doing it, and in a freak accident loses his sight. Margot is a less than sympathetic nurse, taking Albert to a mountain chalet and joining Axel in mocking and emptying the blind man's bank account. Paul learns of the accident and comes to Albert's rescue, and Albert waits in Berlin for a chance to kill Margot. As expected, she comes to the old flat to collect valuables, Albert confronts her, hunts her by scent and body heat, and dies when Margot knocks him down, controls the gun, and shoots him in the chest.

Axel Rex

A German forger of 17th-century paintings and most recently a cartoonist living in New York, Axel enters the novel when Albert Albinus writes him about a project of animating Old Master landscapes. Axel eventually responds by suggesting that Albert foot the bill and advance him half of his hefty fee. Axel suggests Pieter Breughel's complex Netherlandish Proverbs, proving he has not read the project description.

From his youth, Axel is a cad, torturing animals. He first leaves Germany to avoid World War I, abandoning his half-witted mother, who promptly dies in a fall. He appears under the name of Axel Miller at Frau Levandovsky's responding to her offer to prostitute the beautiful girl. Axel is tall, slim, square shoulders, with listless black hair brushed back like a wig, hollow cheeks, skin that looks powdered, sharp, twinkly eyes, odd, three-cornered nostrils, and deep furrows around his mouth. He wears foreign clothing. Growing tired of being chaperoned and not wanting to pay Levandovsky's full fee, Axel locks her in her lavatory and sets Margot up in a flat. It takes a record month for him to move on, and on the last morning he sketches her quickly. He leaves Margot for fear of growing too fond of her.

Two years later, he is back in Berlin, having been expelled from the U.S. as an undesirable alien after involvement in fishy money transactions. Axel loves caricature and fooling people, but despises practical jokes. Humor should follow the Hegelian syllogism of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. He worries about surviving as a cartoonist. Invited to Albert's dinner party, Axel is not sure of who the host is and rubs his hands nervously, as though washing them. Introducing himself, Albert says he had pictured Axel as short, fat, and wearing horn-rimmed glasses. He tells guest that "this is the man who makes two continents laugh" and hopes he is back in Germany permanently. Axel wants to resume relations with Margot, who is not Albert's lover, and feigns homosexuality to remain harmlessly near her. Albert offers him a job illustrating a literary critique he is writing. After Margot's disastrous film debut, Axel volunteers to drive them on vacation, and thoroughly enjoys the set-up in France, where Margot has easy access to him through a shared bath. When Albert hears too many rumors about their sexual behavior, he takes Margot away.



Albert is blinded in a car wreck and taken to Switzerland. Axel writes him a letter, claiming innocence in regard to Margot, announcing he is returning to New York indefinitely, and wishing him well, having lost the "prince of senses." In fact, Axel stays with Margot, pretending to be Albert's doctor when they set up in a Swiss chalet. They make love every night and Axel watches Albert all day, tormenting him with sounds and even tickling him to simulate a fly. He is sitting before him, naked, like Rodin's Thinker when Albert's brother-in-law, Paul, arrives to rescue him. Paul smashes Axel in the face with Albert's stick, but Axel retreats upstairs, smiling. He is not seen after this in the novel.

Elisabeth Albinus

Albert Albinus' placid, wispy, fair-haired, colorless-eyed, delicate-skinned 35-year-old wife of nine years, Elisabeth, has a habit of asking questions about things she has just heard discussed in her presence and to which she knows the answer. She is the daughter of a well-known theatrical manager who once has a crush on an older actor, becomes engaged on a ski trip in Switzerland, marries in Munich to avoid the crush of relatives, and is a clinging soul, docile, and gentle. Elisabeth is vacantly content during her pregnancy, is confined for three weeks in nursing home before delivery, and brings home baby Irma. When Irma is eight, Elisabeth cannot conceive that her husband might deceive her, although she knows about his premarital flings and adultery is talked about everywhere in modern culture. Albert's sudden nightly absences and irritability bring no suspicion in Elisabeth, but raise plenty in her doting brother, Paul.

After Albert leaves home and she takes Irma to Paul's, Elisabeth develops a kind of extrasensory perception, sensing something wrong the day Irma gets sick with what turns into fatal pneumonia, and on the morning that Albert driving into the foothills of the Alps has the accident that blinds him. She visits her daughter's grave daily, dressed in black. She senses the danger that Margot poses to her blind husband and packs a bag for Paul, to go to Switzerland and rescue him. She weeps seeing Albert, and he bows slightly. He says nothing for three days and she wonders if he is also dumb. Elisabeth is sleeping when Albert takes a phone call saying that Margot is cleaning out valuables from the old flat and goes over to his death.

Irma Albinus

Albert and Elisabeth Albinus' eight-year-old daughter, Irma is reserved like her mother, seems surprised to be a live but has a "mortal gaiety." Freckled with a bumpy forehead, eyelashes too fair, and a nose too long, Irma is far from pretty. She loves colorful marbles. When Albert moves in with lover Margot Peters, he worries what Elisabeth is saying about him to Irma, and Margot and supposed friend Axel Rex later convince Albert that Elisabeth and Uncle Paul have poisoner her against him. Albert sees Paul and Irma at an ice hockey game and flees so as not to be seen. Overnight, Irma runs a high fever, rallies for one day, and then begins slowly dying of pneumonia. Her father is



called too late to talk with her. She dies, Margot forbids Albert from attending her funeral, and Elisabeth visits her grave daily thereafter.

Herr Baum

A dinner guest at Albert Albinus' first soirée after breaking up with his wife Elisabeth, Baum is stout, red-faced, and fussy, with communist leanings and a comfortable income. His wife is an elderly woman, a former swimmer with seals. Baum has just published a 500-page novel set in Ceylon, having spent two weeks there researching it. *Discovery of Taprobana* deals with a Chinese traveler long ago crossing the Gobi to India and discovering a great jade Buddha in Ceylon.

Udo Conrad

A German writer, author of the *Memoirs of a Forgetful Man* and *The Vanishing Trick*, Udo is Albert Albinus' school companion in Heidelberg. Afterwards they meet from time to time. Udo's name comes up at Albert's first dinner party after breaking up with his wife. He acclaims Udo as an author of "exquisite vision and a divine style," but "sinful" contempt for social problems. When they meet in a bar at Rouginard, France, after six years, Udo has grown a blond beard, but remains a "quaint, frail, rather eerie and not very happy" person. He knows nothing about the Albinuses' breakup. Udo leaves the hotel, rents a cottage, and is found by Albert gardening.

Udo puts Albert on the defensive for avoiding him and dislikes talk about Albert's separation and Irma's death. Albert withholds mention of lover Margot. When Albert mentions Mussolini, Udo does not recognize the name. They discuss Udo's last novel and Germany's literary situation. Udo would write in French if it did not mean abandoning all that he has learned. Udo is certain he will be forgotten as a writer in Germany and does not want to talk about socially-relevant topics. He runs into Germans sometimes and finds it amusing that they always assume no one understands them speaking—Albert's companions, for example, who seem quite happy he is left behind. Listening to them is enjoyable but does not evoke homesickness. He is like an amphibian. Udo confirms for Albert Margot and Axel's licentious talk and behavior on the bus.

Emelia

The old cook hired by Axel Rex, posing as blind Albert Albinus' doctor in Switzerland, Emelia accepts the high-paying job even though she is told that the patient is insane and has already hurt another woman. Emelia becomes devoted to Axel. Emilia is shopping in town with Margot Peters when Albert's brother-in-law arrives to fetch him home.



Freida

Albert and Elisabeth Albinus' maid, Freida is tearful when she tells him the family has moved out in the wake of his adultery. Earlier, he orders her to take books to a fictitious Margot Peters' first visit. Although clearly disapproving, Freida continues to care for the empty flat and is told to say the family is visiting Italy. Freida is cold towards Margot when she moves in as mistress.

Sonia Hirsch

A dinner guest at Albert Albinus' first soirée after breaking up with his wife Elisabeth, Sonia is a "plain-faced, motherly cubist," childlike, hunch-shouldered, and fluttery eyes. She speaks nonsense hurriedly and blushes.

Paul Hochenwart

Albert Albinus' stout, good-natured, cigar-smoking brother-in-law, Paul spends most evenings at his sister's house, admiring Albert's learning and taste. Arriving one evening, Paul finds Albert locked in the bedroom by Margot Peters when she comes to look at his flat. Paul is skeptical about the story of a burglar and wants to call the police, but Albert convinces him to keep silent, even withholding the break-in from his sister. Unlike Elisabeth, observant Paul suspects something is going on. He replays everything, including holding the door for a schoolgirl in a red dress. Eavesdropping on a phone call, Paul learns of the tryst before definitive proof comes out. Elisabeth's happiness is sacred to Paul

When Elisabeth learns the truth, Paul takes her and Irma into his flat and rearranges his schedule. Picking up her trunks, Paul runs into Albert and is sore tempted to attack him physically. He calls him all the vile names he can think of. Months later, Paul takes Irma to an ice hockey game, sees Margot and her secret lover Axel Rex together, glares at her, and rightly assumes that Albert has seen him and Irma and fled. When Irma contracts pneumonia, Paul tries first to phone and then goes over to the flat to fetch Albert and is appalled when Margot and Axel oppose his going. Paul announces the girl's death. Paul also reads in the papers about Albert's accident, which leaves him blind in Switzerland. At Elisabeth's behest, Paul goes to Albert, discovers the situation, finally does assault Axel, and brings Albert home to his flat. While Paul is at work, Albert sneaks out to confront Margot and meets his death.

Boris von Ivanoff

A dinner guest at Albert Albinus' first soirée after breaking up with his wife Elisabeth, Ivanoff is "lean, ferrety, with bad teeth and an eyeglass," and insists on the honorific "von."



Dorianna Karenina

A dinner guest at Albert Albinus' first soirée after breaking up with his wife Elisabeth, Dorianna is a fairly well known actress who stars in the film in which Margot Peters makes her disastrous film debut. Dorianna is famous for her exquisite shoulders, Mona Lisa smile, and "husky grenadier voice." Albert rates her a second-rate actress. Dorianna has never read Tolstoy and knows only that the guy who tells her to adopt this stage name later commits suicide. Because he does not fawn on her, Dorianna believes that Axel Rex, Margot's secret lover, is gay.

Kaspar and Kurt

Otto Peters' friends since childhood, Kurt has an anchor tattooed on his forearm and a dragon on his chest. He appears only once more in the story, backing up Otto when he confronts his sister's lover. Fair-haired and muscular, Kaspar stays in the old neighborhood, working in a confectioners and hoping some day to have a shop of his own. Seeing Margot Peters again, Kaspar realizes that she is going to the dogs and ought to marry a good simple man—but not him. He would like to frolic with her in the lake again, though.

Dr. Lampert

A dinner guest at Albert Albinus' first soirée after breaking up with his wife Elisabeth, Lampert is the Albinus family doctor. His specialty is the throat, he plays mediocre violin, and his son years earlier sketches Margot Peters in the nude, before giving up art. Lampert once shows the drawing to Albert who, not knowing the model's identity, prefers a drawing of a bearded hunchback Lampert treats Irma Albinus for pneumonia and Margot Peters for a fever. He decides not to tell Albert about his daughter's dangerous condition, feeling it is up to his estranged wife to tell him. He despised Margot and believes she will destroy Albert.

Frau Levandovsky

An elderly, large-proportioned, genteel woman whose cheek bears a large purple birthmark, Frau Levandovsky becomes Margot Peters' landlady when Margot is 16. She arranges for Margot to become an artist's model, first in a girls' school and then in a real studio, and tries to pimp her to Axel Rex (calling himself Miller). Axel finally gets tired of her chaperoning, locks her in the lavatory, and sets up Margot in a flat.

Otto Peters

Margot Peters' older brother, Otto works in a bicycle repair shop and is a committed socialist (perhaps even a communist). His "comrades," Kaspar and Kurt, like to cavort



with pretty Margot at the beach. Otto is in Breslau when Margot moves out, sparing her lectures about capitalists buying the daughters of the poor. After Albert Albinus moves in with Margot, Otto, backed by Kaspar and Kurt, stops her on the street to extort money for the family. When she ignores him, Otto shows up to tell Albert about the family's concern for his inexperienced sister and, later to warn him that she is leading him by the nose. Saying he knows all about Margot, Albert threatens to kick Otto out, and insults him with a DM10 note, which Otto defiantly accepts. Otto later moves to Bielefeld.

Olga Waldheim

A dinner guest at Albert Albinus' first soirée after breaking up with his wife Elisabeth, Waldheim is a "white-armed, full-bosomed singer" with orange wavy hair, wonderful inflections, and stories about her Persian cats.



Objects/Places

Argus Theater

The Argus is the shabby Berlin cinema house in which Albert Albinus' and Margot Peters first meet. She works there as an usher. Albert first drops in to kill some time before a meeting. He returns regularly to see the beautiful face lit by a flashlight, looking like it belongs on a Old Masters' canvas.

Brigaud

Brigaud is the fashionable Swiss resort town above which Axel Rex rents a small chalet for his ostensible patient, the blind Albert Albinus and his ostensible niece, Margot Peters. Brigaud is near Zurich, where Albert gets his depressing diagnosis.

Grasse

Grasse is a town in southeast France in the foothills of the Alps where Albert Albinus is treated after his near-fatal driving accident, swerving in the mountains to avoid two oncoming bicyclists.

56 Kaiserallee

Albert and Elisabeth Albinus live with their daughter Irma in a nicely-appointed upstairs flat on the Kaiserallee until Albert's affair with young Margot Peters is discovered and he moves out. Elisabeth and Irma then move in with her brother Paul, leaving the flat unoccupied except for the maid. Months later, Albert and Margot move in and Margot rearranges everything to remove memories. She returns after an accident in Switzerland leaves Albert blind to clean out valuables, but Albert is warned, confronts her, intending to kill her, but has the gun turned on himself and slumps over dead.

Munich

Munich is the south German city in which Albert and Elisabeth Albinus marry, after becoming engaged in Switzerland. Nuptials there allow them to avoid all of their Berlin acquaintances.

Paradise Dance Hall

The Paradise is the establishment in Berlin where a friend sometimes takes Margot Peters at age 16 and she learns to dance, being propositioned by elderly men.



Pontresina

Pontresina is the Swiss resort where Albert Albinus, his future wife Elisabeth, her brother Paul, and an athletic cousin vacation. The trip somehow is responsible for the engagement and subsequent marriage in Munich.

Rouginard

Rouginard is the last town before reaching the French Riviera. Albert Albinus, Margot Peters, and Axel Rex arrive there from Berlin on a vacation drive just before sunset and find the first three hotels are booked solidly. At the Hôtel Britannia they finally obtain a double room and a single that share a common bath. Margot and Axel exchange knowing glances as Albert worries about how "splashy" she gets in the tub. The hotel, in a "sickening Moorish style," is surrounded by hills of pine, and lies an hour's drive from the sand beach.

Limping into a nearby village on day from a hike, intending to catch the bus that runs regularly to the hotel, Albert runs into his old friend, writer Udo Conrad. Udo sits behind Margot and Axel and is amused by their lusty conversation. Albert misses that bus. He finds Udo in a rented house and hears about the bus ride. Hearing confirmation of their amorous behavior beneath a retired French colonel's window, Albert confronts Margot, who claims innocence, and after an hour stops threatening to shoot her and claims to believe her. They drive off hastily, leaving Axel behind.

Solfi

Solfi is a dazzling resort on the Adriatic shore, where Albert Albinus and Margot Peters seek refuge when her brother tries to blackmail her into extorting money from her rich new boyfriend. Albert is jealous of every man without whom beautiful Margot dances in the Solfi casino, although she allows only one man to kiss and fondle her before deciding the risk to her long-range plans is too great.

Sports Palace

The Munich Sports Palace provides the venue for an ice hockey match between Sweden and Germany attended by Albert Albinus, Margot Peters, and Axel Rex in a rich luxury box, and Albert's estranged brother-in-law Paul and daughter Irma. Spotting his brother-in-law Paul and daughter Irma, Albert sneaks out like a worm rather than chance their seeing him. Margot begs him to stay, but Axel is relieved to have her to himself. The Sports Palace proves a noisy, hot-and-cold place ill-suited for serious conversation of what Margot and Axel are to do next. When finally the din grows too great for Margot, they leave and Margot sees Paul glaring at her. Paul is glad when the match ends, to get Irma home without seeing her father. Next morning, Irma and Margot are both sick, Irma fatally.

Zurich

Zurich is the Swiss city in which Albert Albinus visits eye specialists who are able to offer only even odds of regaining his sight.



Themes

Lust

Lust, defined as overwhelming, unrestrained craving, controls three main characters in Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Bearded Man*. The sexual aspect is strongest, creating a classic triangle among middle-aged Albert Albinus, young Margot Peters, and Axel Rex (a.k.a. Miller), although the last is too cynical to identify fully with any passion or emotion.

Albert seems not to have had too powerful a libido before seeing beautiful Margot while she is working as an usher in a movie theater. In keeping with his art training, he pictures her as sharply-lit Old Masters painting and at first tries to sublimate his feelings. He marries Elisabeth for no discernible reason after a string of unsuccessful affairs; as an adolescent, lust leads him to climb out of his bedroom window and into the adjoining window of a maid, who turns out to be previously taken. During Elisabeth's three-week confinement before giving birth, Albert is tempted to take a temporary lover but fails to act on it. He is content with a rather tepid sex life. Margot pursues and easily captures him sexually.

Margot likewise has little libido until Frau Levandovsky hires her out as a nude model in art school and tries to pimp her to Axel Miller (a.k.a. Rex). Axel steals her away and makes her first sexual experiences so intent that she is effectively spoiled for anyone else. When he abandons her after a month, she turns in desperation to small-time prostitution before getting the job as usher. She lusts, however, after Hollywood stardom, and uses Albert to take the first steps towards achieving it. When Axel comes back into the picture, she lusts for him and allows Albert to take pleasure in her sparingly and grudgingly.

Greed

Margot Peters and Axel Rex (a.k.a. Miller) are greedy opportunists, but all of the minor artists appear affected by the need for fame and/or to avoid oblivion. Margot from adolescence wants to be a Hollywood movie star, and soon after becoming acquainted with Albert Albinus sees that his wealth and social and artistic contacts can be of value to her. She does little to cultivate any talent she might have—enormous in her own eyes, until she sees herself on screen as the embodiment of her despised mother—through acting lessons.

Axel as a child is sadistic and later incorporates this into his work as a caricaturist. He has a past of forging 17th-century paintings, one of which he discovers in Albert's flat. To avoid military service in World War I, he flees Germany, leaving his mother to die tragically alone. He is by nature a gambler, dreaming about poker games when live partners are not available. He is deported from the U.S. after involvement in shady



financial transactions. It takes Margot, however, and her determination to profit from her relationship with Albert to "convert" Axel to real larceny. Even before Albert is blinded in an accident, Margot and Axel gain control over his check book, and begin systematically clean out his account. They joke about buying him a dog as a thank-you before running away together. They might have succeeded had Albert's brother-in-law not managed to track him down through the bank.

The novel's tragic ending occurs because Albert knows that Margot will not be able to resist returning to the Berlin flat to loot its treasures. By this point, Albert is greedy to take her life and thus, somehow, redeem his own. She turns the tables on him, wresting away his gun and shooting him, and hauling away everything she wants.

Concern

Concern is a commodity in short supply in Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading*. Its epitome is Paul, Albert Albinus' hefty brother-in-law, who first sees signs of Albert's unfaithfulness and, when it is confirmed, takes in his sister Elisabeth and eight-year-old niece Irma, and significantly rearranges his comfortable lifestyle to accommodate them. Although he is angry enough at Albert to strike him—having never in his life hit another human being—Paul twice does Albert a good deed: first coming to his flat to fetch him to his daughter's deathbed when the phone line is constantly busy, and later, traveling to Switzerland to rescue him from imprisonment and exploitation at the hands of his unloving mistress, Margot Peters. Paul brings Albert back to Berlin, cleans him up, and endures his silence as a house guest.

Paul's concern for his sister's welfare is compared and contrasted with the filial concern of Otto, Margot's older brother. Otto learns about Margot having landed a rich lover and at first tries to shake her down, ostensibly to benefit the whole impoverished family. He later confronts Albert, first to plead on behalf of the worried family for the return of the innocent girl, and then, seeing that Albert knows the family's history fully, switching to a dire warning that she is leading him around by the nose. Albert gives him money to go away and tries to put the best possible face on Otto's concern.

The most unexpected display of concern comes when Elisabeth senses that something has befallen her estranged husband and sends Paul to rescue him. She weeps, seeing him again, and gets no more than a slight bow in return. She goes about the flat silently, wishing not to disturb the poor blind man. Paul is at work and Elisabeth sleeping when Albert learns that Margot is back in Berlin, and dies at her hand when he tries to kill her. Paul and Elisabeth's feelings are left unresolved and greedy Margot slips away, unconcerned, bearing the family valuables.



Style

Point of View

Vladimir Nabokov narrates *Laughter in the Dark* from a single, generally objective perspective in the third person past tense. First-person dialog is relatively sparse and not well differentiated by character. Nabokov is privy to characters' thoughts and emotions, and frequently in tense situations intermingles characters' true thought processes with the words with which they are fumbling to get out of trouble. The chief character, Albert Albinus, is a well-to-do, middle-aged art critic of marginal intellectual power. Nabokov sounds always slightly superior to him, dashing off the names of painters and their works. He never condones Albert's affair with the grasping teenage femme fatale, Margot Peters, whom he treats rather more harshly and less affectionately than his most famous creation, *Lolita* in the novel of the same name. Parallels between them are impossible not to notice.

Gentle but highly moralistic brother-in-law Paul is treated with understanding and sympathy; he is protecting his beloved sister. Less attractive is Margot's brother, Otto, when he does the same. The true villain is, of course, love-them-and-leave-them Axel. He seems odious from first introduction and depiction, and Nabokov makes sure that the reader gets the point by telling how as a child he sets fire to mice and does things unmentionable to cats; as a young adult, he abandons his demented mother in order to avoid the World War I draft, and she promptly dies in a tumble downstairs. He has been invited to leave the U.S. by the government. Still, for two years he has cherished the memory of young Margot, and wants to take back up with her when they meet through Albert. Feigning homosexuality to dupe Albert is typical of Axel's cynicism.

Setting

Vladimir Nabokov sets *Laughter in the Dark* primarily in Berlin, his own haunting place between the world wars. He gives few hints as to the time of the action. Benito Mussolini, mentioned in Chapter 28, comes to power in 1922 and "talkies," movies with sound, introduced late in the decade are briefly debated. Leftists and homosexuals, targeted by the Nazis, are still at liberty. Oddly, the economic hardships that grow out of the Treaty of Versailles in mid-1919, a decade before the Great Depression begins, seem not to have affected Germany.

Through Albert Albinus the upper crust of German society is seen and through Margot Peters the working class. Scenes are set in homes and other venues of both sorts to make the difference plain. An international elite is shown enjoying itself both in Solferino on the Adriatic Sea and Rougignard, on the French Riviera. German author Udo Conrad, met in Rougignard, seems to be living abroad permanently because he dislikes the literary atmosphere in Germany. When Albert is blinded in an automobile accident in the mountains, he is seen briefly in a Swiss clinic before being whisked away to Brigaud, a



fashionable resort town apparently near Zurich, where the eye specialists are located. Albert, Margot, and Axel (unbeknownst to Albert) are depicted living in a charming two-story chalet in a bucolic setting. Albert is rescued then, taken back to Germany, and dies in his old flat.

Language and Meaning

Vladimir Nabokov is a skilled and determined word artisan in Russian, English, and French. He first writes *Laughter in the Dark* in Russian while living where the novel is set, in Germany, and is known to have disapproved of the first English translation. No translator is named on the title page or verso, so it may well be that Nabokov creates this version himself. It lacks the polish and playfulness of the later *Lolita*, which Nabokov writes in two languages. The drollest literary allusion in this novel is naming an actress Dorianna Karenina but having had her never read "Doll's Toy" (Tolstoy).

As the narrator of a tragic story about a well-to-do, moderately intelligent art critic in an era when "talkies" are coming into vogue and surrealists are vying with cubists in the visual arts and social issues are taking over belles lettres, Nabokov can touch on many areas while leaving Albert Albinus and artist Axel Rex (a.k.a. Miller) living in the 17th century. Albert unconsciously describes people and things in terms of the art of that era. A dinner party gathers his diverse creative friends together to be characterized by Nabokov, if not caricatured more savagely by Axel, the novel's premier scoundrel.

Soon after this unsuccessful soirée, Albert's life comes apart: his estranged daughter dies, he discovers that Axel is not homosexual as claimed but having an affair with Margot, and then he loses his eyesight, the prince of senses, particularly for someone in Albert's position. Nabokov empathizes with Albert's agony in searing passages, but never justifies his choices. Albert allows himself to be duped. Only at the end does Nabokov let up on the old man, allowing the shock of the gunshot that kills him to wash blue color across his eyes.

Structure

Vladimir Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* consists of thirty-nine numbered but untitled chapters, which vary widely in length. Nabokov opens the novel by stating the whole story in a single run-on sentence, which he goes on to expand into 292 pages because in telling a person's life, "detail is always welcome." There are no obvious structures above the chapter level, as the novel flows fairly smoothly forward.

Nabokov establishes quickly that Albert Albinus, the wealthy subject of this disastrous life story involving the abandonment of his wife for the sake of a young mistress who does not love him, is somewhat of a dreamer, who needs other people to keep him centered. By the end of Chapter 1, Albert is ready to kill the still unseen temptress who is threatening his happiness. Nearly every chapter leaves the reader dangling. The characters are gradually introduced and their intertwinings are set up. Tension builds as it becomes clear that Margot is a hunter. She twice sets Albert up to be caught in his



unfaithfulness, the second time successfully. She is less than pleased when he moves into her world rather than taking her into his.

The novel eventually moves back into the handsome Albinus flat and Albert stops acting ashamed of Margot in public. The dinner party that reunites Margot and her former lover Axel is played for comedy, Irma's illness and death for true tragedy, and Margot's debut as a film actress for tragic-comedy. The threesome then leaves for vacation on the Riviera where blind Albert sees the truth about Margot and Axel's tryst behind his back, and then is physically blinded in a car accident. Margot's treatment of blinded Albert in their Alpine chalet is shocking. She is simply out to empty his bank account and abandon him. Albert is saved by his clairvoyant wife and brother-in-law, but perishes at Margot's hand when he tries to kill her for ruining his life.



Quotes

"Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he love; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster.

"This is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling; and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome." Chapter 1, p. 7.

" 'Forgive me,' he said. 'Don't be cross with me, Margot. I can't live without you. Look here, I've thought it all over. Drop your job. I'm rich. You shall have your own room, your own flat, anything you like...'

" 'You're a liar, a coward and a fool,' said Margot (summing him up rather neatly). 'And you're married—that's why you hid that ring in your mackintosh pocket. Oh, of course, you're married; else you wouldn't have been so rude on the 'phone.'

" 'And if I am?' he asked. 'Won't you meet me any more?'

" 'What does it matter to me? Deceive her; it'll do her good.'

" 'Margot, stop,' groaned Albinus.

" 'Leave me alone.'

" 'Margot, listen to me. It is true, I have a family, but please, please stop jeering about it... Oh, don't go away,' he cried, catching her, missing her, clutching at her shabby little handbag.

" 'Go to hell!' she shouted, and banged the door in his face." Chapter 5, pp. 53-54.

" 'If I was her aunt,' she said with a wink, 'I'd not be likely to know her address. No,' she added with a certain vehemence, 'she hasn't got no aunt.'

" 'Drunk,' thought Albinus wearily. 'Look here,' he said, 'can't you tell me where she has gone?'

" 'She rented a room from me,' said the woman pensively, as she bitterly reflected on Margot's ingratitude in hiding from her both the rich friend and her new address, thought there had not been much difficulty in sniffing out the latter.

" 'What can I do?' exclaimed Albinus. 'Can't you suggest anything?'

"Yes, sadly ungrateful. She had helped her so; now she did not know whether by telling she would be doing Margot a service or the reverse (she would have preferred the second), but this big, nervous, blue-eyed gentleman looked so unhappy that with a sigh she told him what he wanted to know.

" 'They used to be after me, too, in the old days,' she muttered, nodding her head, while she let him out, 'that they did.'" Chapter 8, pp. 76-77.

"Albinus gazed at Otto with curiosity, as he reflected that the young brute was talking sense in a way, for he had as much right to concern himself over Margot's welfare as Paul had to worry on behalf of his sister. Indeed, there was a fine flavor of parody about



this talk, in comparison with that other dreadful conversation two months ago. And it was pleasant to think that now at least he could stand his own ground, brother or no brother—take advantage, as it were, of the fact that Otto was simply a bluffer and a bully.

" 'You'd better stop,' he said, very resolutely, very coolly—quite the patrician, in fact. 'I know exactly how things stand. It is no concern of yours. Now please go.'" Chapter 11, pp. 105-106.

"The door of the dining room opened. The gentlemen looked round for their ladies. Rex stood aloof. His host, who already had Dorianna on his arm, gazed about in search of Margot. He saw her right in front squeezing among the couples who were streaming into the dining room.

" 'She is not at her best tonight,' he tonight anxiously, and handed over his lady to Rex. "By the time the lobsters were being tackled, the talk at the head of the table where (the following string of names would be best arranged in a curve) Dorianna, Rex, Margot, Albinus, Sonia Hirsch and Baum were seated, was in full swing although rather incoherent. Margot had emptied her third wineglass at one gulp and was now sitting very erect with bright eyes, staring straight in front of her. Rex paid no attention either to her or to Dorianna, whose name annoyed him, but was arguing across the table with Baum, the author, concerning the means of artistic expression." Chapter 16, pp. 130-131.

"The art of caricature, as Rex understood it, was thus based (apart from its synthetic, fooled-again nature) on the contrast between cruelty on one side and credulity on the other. And if, in real life, Rex looked on without stirring a finger while a blind beggar, his stick tapping happily, was about to sit down on a freshly painted bench, he was only deriving inspiration for his next little picture.

"But all this did not apply to the feelings which Margot had aroused in him. In her case, even in the artistic sense, the painter in Rex triumphed over the humorist. He felt a little annoyed at being so pleased to find her again: indeed, if he had left Margot, it had been only because he was afraid of becoming too fond of her." Chapter 18, p. 144.

" 'Is this a catalogue?' asked Rex. 'May I have a look at it? Girls, girls, girls,' he continued with marked disgust, as he considered the reproductions. 'Square girls, slanting girls, girls with elephantiasis...'

" 'And why, pray,' asked Albinus slyly, 'do girls bore you so?'

"Rex explained quite frankly.

" 'Well, that's only a matter of taste, I suppose,' said Albinus, who prided himself on his broad-mindedness. 'Of course, I don't condemn you. it's a thing widely spread, I believe, among men of artistic temperament. In a shopkeeper, it would repel me, but in a painter, it's quite different—quite likeable, in fact, and romantic—romance coming from Rome. Nevertheless,' he added, 'I can assure you that you lose a great deal.'

" 'No, thank you. A woman for me is only a harmless mammal, or a jolly companion—sometimes.'



"Albinus laughed. 'Well, as you are so outspoken about it, let me, in my turn, confess something to you. That actress woman, Karenina, said as soon as she saw you that she was sure you were indifferent to the gentler sex.'

"('Oh, did she?' thought Rex.)" Chapter 19, pp. 166-167.

"As soon as the lights went up, she left her seat and walked rapidly toward the exit.

"With a worried look of apprehension, Albinus hurried after her.

"Rex got up and stretched himself. Dorianna touches his arm. Beside her stood the man with the stye, yawning.

" 'A failure,' said Dorianna, winking. 'Poor little lass.'

" 'And are you satisfied with your performance?' asked Rex curiously.

"Dorianna laughed. 'I'll tell you a secret: a true actress cannot be satisfied.'

" 'Nor can the public sometimes,' said Rex calmly. 'By the way, do tell me, my dear, how did you come to hit on your stage name? It sort of disturbs me.'

" 'Oh, that's a long story,' she answered wistfully. 'If you come to tea with me one day, I shall perhaps tell you more about it. The boy who suggested this name committed suicide.'

" 'Ah—and no wonder. But what I anted to know... Tell me, have you read Tolstoy?'

" 'Doll's Toy?' queried Dorianna Karenina. 'No, I'm afraid not. Why?'"

Chapter 23, p. 191.

"They went on talking in this way for an hour. Margot was gradually getting the upper hand. But at length she could stand it no longer and had a fit of hysterics. She threw herself onto the bed in her white tennis frock, with one foot bare, and, as she gradually calmed down, she wept into the pillows.

"Albinus sat in a chair by the window; outside the sun was shining and gay English voices floated across from the tennis-ground. Mentally he reviewed every least episode from the beginning of their acquaintanceship with Rex, and among them some were touched by that livid light which had now spread over his whole existence. Something was destroyed forever; no matter how convincingly Margot tried to prove that she had been faithful to him, everything would henceforward be tainted with the poisonous flavor of doubt.

"At length he rose to his feet, walked across to the bed, gazed at her pink wrinkled heel with the bit of black plaster on it—when had she managed to stick it on?—gazed at the golden brown skin of her slim but firm calf, and reflected that he could kill her, but that he could not part from her." Chapter 30, pp. 228-229.

" 'Calmez-vous. Don't excite yourself,' said the voice of the nurse.

"These sounds, these footsteps and voices seemed to be moving on a different plane. He was here and they were somewhere else, but still, in some unaccountable way, close at hand. Between them and the night which enveloped him was an impenetrable wall. He rubbed his eyelids, turned his head this way and that, jerked himself about, but it was impossible to force a way through this solid darkness which was like a part of himself.



" 'It can't be!' said Albinus with the emphasis of despair. 'I'm going mad! Open the window, do something!'

" 'The window is open,' she answered softly.

" 'Perhaps there is no sun... Margot, perhaps I might see something in very sunny weather. The merest glimmer. Perhaps, with glasses.'

" 'Lie still, my dear. The sun is shining, it is a glorious morning. Albert, you hurt me.'

" 'I... I... ' Albinus drew a deep breath which seemed to make his chest swell into some vast monstrous globe full of a whirling roar which presently he let out, lustily, steadily... And when it had all gone, he started filling up again." Chapter 33, pp. 243-244.

"Everything, even what was saddest and most shameful in his past life, was overlaid with the deceptive charm of colors. He was horrified to realize how little he had used his eyes—for these colors moved across too vague a background and their outlines were singularly blurred. If, for instance, he recalled a landscape in which he had once lived, he could not name a single plant except oaks and roses, nor a single bird save sparrows and crows, and even these were more akin to heraldry than to nature. Albinus now became conscious that he had not really been different from a certain narrow specialist at whom he used to scoff: from the workman who knows only his tools, or the virtuoso who is only a fleshly accessory of his violin. Albinus' specialty had been his passion for art; his most brilliant discovery had been Margot. But now, all that was left of her was a voice, a rustle and a perfume; it was as though she had returned to the darkness of the little cinema from which he had once withdrawn her." Chapter 36, p. 257.

"The shot rent the darkness, and immediately afterward something struck him across the knees, bringing him down, and for a second he was entangled in a chair that had been flung at him. As he fell he dropped the pistol, but found it again at once. At the same time he was conscious of rapid breathing, a smell of scent and sweat hit his nostrils, and a cold, nimble hand tried to wrench the weapon from his grasp. Albinus seized something living, something that let forth a hideous cry, as though a nightmare creature were being tickled by its nightmare mate. The hand he was taching twisted the pistol free and he felt the barrel prod him; and, together with a faint detonation that seemed miles away, in another world, there came a stab in his side which filled his eyes with a dazzling glory.

" 'So that's all,' he thought quite softly, as if he were lying in bed. 'I must keep quiet for a little space and then walk very slowly along that bright sand of pain, toward that blue, blue wave. What bliss there is in blueness. I never knew how blue blueness could be. What a mess life has been. Now I know everything. Coming, coming, coming to drown me. There it is. How it hurts. I can't breathe...'

"He sat on the floor with bowed head, then bent slowly forward and fell, like a big, soft doll, to one side." Chapter 39, pp. 291-292.

Topics for Discussion

How are time pieces and locks the bane of Albert Albinus' existence? Which are worse?

How is Leo Tolstoy's great novel, Anna Karenina, used in this novel? Based on whether or not you have read Anna Karenina, how would you rate the reference?

How does Otto contribute to the novel? Are his and Paul's motivations the same?

Does Axel think up his homosexual persona on the spot, when he fears Albert has found him and Margot out, or has it already been in the planning? How do you justify your answer?

Albert sees Irma's funeral as an opportunity to get back together with Elisabeth. Had he had the strength to follow through, might he have repaired his life? Would Margot and Axel have let him go?

How does the atmosphere of a hockey match add and/or detract from Margot and Axel's discussion of their future? Why would Nabokov set this event at the point in the novel that he does?

What does the flooded hotel room in Rouginard say about the three main characters?