

Presenter: Erika Knowles

Title: War and Peace in 1914: Nabokov's "Sounds"

Abstract:

Vladimir Nabokov's "Sounds" contains various allusions to Tolstoy in various forms. How does the character of Pal Palych fit into the Tolstoyan schema in this story? Textual clues in passages that feature Pal Palych provide insight into the allusions that Nabokov is making and what the significance of Pal Palych and the Tolstoyan tradition might be. The setting of scenes including Pal Palych, his characterization, and his use in the plot all fulfill this function. Nabokov assigns him the profession of teacher and the hobby of woodworking, similar to Leo Tolstoy in the middle and latter half of his life. The inclusion of symbolic objects in the scenes, like a lion and a lithographic illustration of Tolstoy, for example, adds to the way Nabokov uses Pal Palych as a character to embody the presence of Tolstoyanism in the story. Pal Palych, in dialogue, also assists with a very subtle allusion to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. I will show that Pal Palych is used for this role in Nabokov's effort to place the private heartbreak that Pal Palych and the other characters experience in juxtaposition with macro-level world events and the beginnings of catastrophic war. This is a Tolstoyan way of framing a story, very much in the vein of *War and Peace*, and Pal Palych, as a placeholder for Tolstoy, is the catalyst for it. The rich reserve of Tolstoyan features of the story serve equally multitudinous purposes, but are essential to the overall impression the story creates. Setting "Sounds" at the very beginning of World War I, yet mentioning it in passing and leaving the private feelings and lives of the characters to constitute the plot, reveals that Nabokov is both making a statement about grief and human psychology and drawing inspiration from *War and Peace*.