In The Enchanted Hunters (a hotel in Briceland where Humbert Humbert and Lolita spend their first night together) Lolita confesses that in the previous summer she had a lesbian relationship with Elizabeth Talbot:

Her astounding tale started with an introductory mention of her tent-mate of the previous summer, at another camp, a “very select” one as she put it. That tent-mate (“quite a derelict character,” “half-crazy,” but a “swell kid”) instructed her in various manipulations. At first, loyal Lo refused to tell me her name.

“Was it Grace Angel?” I asked.

She shook her head. No, it wasn’t it was the daughter of a big shot. He -

“Was it perhaps Rose Carmine?”

“No, of course not. Her father - ”

“Was it, then, Agnes Sheridan perchance?”

She swallowed and shook her head - and then did a double take.

“Say, how come you know all those kids?”

I explained.

“Well,” she said. “They are pretty bad, some of that school bunch, but not that bad. If you have to know, her name was Elizabeth Talbot, she goes now to a swanky private school, her father is an executive.”

I recalled with a funny pang the frequency with which poor Charlotte used to introduce into party chat such elegant tidbits as “when my daughter was out hiking last year with the Talbot girl.”

I wanted to know if either mother learned of those sapphic diversions?

“Gosh no,” exhaled limp Lo mimicking dread and relief, pressing a falsely fluttering hand to her chest. (1.32)

The Talbot was a type of white hunting dog (mentioned by Turgenev in his Russian version of Flaubert’s *La légende de Saint-Julien l'hospitalier*, 1877). Russian for “dog” is *sobaka*. The characters in Ilf and Petrov’s novel *Dvenadtsat’ stul’yev* (“The Twelve Chairs,” 1928) include Fimka Sobak (a friend of Ellochka the Cannibal). Unlike Ellochka Shchukin (whose vocabulary consists of thirty words and short phrases), Fimka Sobak is a cultured girl. One of the words in her rich vocabulary (about 180 words) is *gomoseksualizm* (homosexuality). The name of one of the three diamond hunters in “The Twelve Chairs,” Vorob’yaninov (the former marshal of nobility in Stargorod), comes from *vorobey* (sparrow). In the list of dead souls that Sobakevich (one of the landowners in Gogol’s poem *Dead Souls*, 1842) sold to Chichikov there is a woman named Elizavet Vorobey:

Это что за мужик: Елизавета Воробей. Фу ты пропасть: баба! она как сюда затесалась? Подлец, Собакевич, и здесь надул!» Чичиков был прав: это была, точно, баба. Как она забралась туда, неизвестно, но так искусно была прописана, что издали можно было принять её за мужика, и даже имя оканчивалось на букву *ъ,* то есть не Елизавета, а Елизаветъ. Однако же он это не принял в уваженье и тут же её вычеркнул.

‘Elizavet Vorobey!’ But that is a woman’s name! How comes she to be on the list? That villain Sobakevich must have sneaked her in without my knowing it.” (chapter 7)

In the list of Lolita’s classmates (a poem that Humbert Humbert knows by heart) there are Elizabeth Talbot’s brothers Edgar and Edwin and a girl named Stella Fantasia (“adorable Stella, who has let strangers touch her”). In his introductory lecture in the Vasyuki chess club Ostap Bender (the main character in “The Twelve Chairs” and “The Golden Calf,” 1931) mentions *quasi una fantasia*:

Остап поклонился, протянул вперёд руки, как бы отвергая не заслуженные им аплодисменты, и взошёл на эстраду.

— Товарищи! — сказал он прекрасным голосом. — Товарищи и братья по шахматам, предметом моей сегодняшней лекции служит то, о чём я читал и, должен признаться, не без успеха в Нижнем Новгороде неделю тому назад. Предмет моей лекции — плодотворная дебютная идея. Что такое, товарищи, дебют и что такое, товарищи, идея? Дебют, товарищи, — это quasi una fantasia. А что такое, товарищи, значит идея? Идея, товарищи, — это человеческая мысль, облечённая в логическую шахматную форму. Даже с ничтожными силами можно овладеть всей доской. Все зависит от каждого индивидуума в отдельности.

Ostap bowed, stretched out his hands as though restraining the public from undeserved applause, and went up on to the dais.

"Comrades and brother chess players," he said in a fine speaking voice: "the subject of my lecture today is one on which I spoke, not without certain success, I may add, in Nizhni-Novgorod a week ago. The subject of my lecture is 'A Fruitful Opening Idea'. "What, Comrades, is an opening? And what, Comrades, is an idea? An opening, Comrades, is *quasi una fantasia*. And what, Comrades, is an idea? An idea, Comrades, is a human thought moulded in logical chess form. Even with insignificant forces  you  can master  the whole of  the chessboard. It all depends on each  separate individual.” (chapter 34 “The Interplanetary Chess Tournament”)

*Quasi una fantasia* (1889) is a poem by Afanasiy Fet. Fet-Shenshin was married to Maria Botkin. In VN’s novel *Pale Fire* (1962) Shade’s, Kinbote’s, and Gradus’ “real” name seems to be Vsevolod Botkin (an American scholar of Russian descent, Professor Botkin went mad and became Shade, Kinbote and Gradus after the tragic death of his daughter Nadezhda). In his Commentary to Shade’s poem Kinbote mentions Prof. Botkin and quotes Shade who praised Ilf and Petrov:

Speaking of the Head of the bloated Russian Department, Prof. Pnin, a regular martinet in regard to his underlings (happily, Prof. Botkin, who taught in another department, was not subordinated to that grotesque "perfectionist"): "How odd that Russian intellectuals should lack all sense of humor when they have such marvelous humorists as Gogol, Dostoevski, Chekhov, Zoshchenko, and those joint authors of genius Ilf and Petrov." (note to Line 172)

Fet is the author of *Sredi zvyozd* (“Among the Stars,” 1876) and *Ugasshim zvyozdam* (“To the Extinguished Stars,” 1890). Stella is Latin for “star.”

The slogan on the wall of the room where Ostap gives his lecture, “Assistance to drowning persons is in the hands of those persons themselves,” brings to mind Humbert Humbert’s plans to drown Charlotte in Hourglass Lake. As they go from the car to the lakeside, Charlotte mentions the Talbots and Beardsley Colledge:

The Humberts walked on, sandaled and robed.

“Do you know, Hum: I have one most ambitious dream,” pronounced Lady Hum, lowering her head - shy of that dream - and communing with the tawny ground. “I would love to get hold of a real trained servant maid like that German girl the Talbots spoke of; and have her live in the house.”

“No room,” I said.

“Come,” she said with her quizzical smile, “surely, *chri,*  you underestimate the possibilities of the Humbert home. We would put her in Lo’s room. I intended to make a guestroom of that hole anyway. It’s the coldest and meanest in the whole house.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, the skin of my cheekbones tensing up (this I take the trouble to note only because my daughter’s skin did the same when she felt that way: disbelief, disgust, irritation).

“Are you bothered by Romantic Associations?” queried my wife - in allusion to her first surrender.

“Hell no,” said I. “I just wonder where will you put your daughter when you get your guest or your maid.”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Humbert, dreaming, smiling, drawing out the “Ah” simultaneously with the raise of one eyebrow and a soft exhalation of breath. “Little Lo, I’m afraid, does not enter the picture at all, at all. Little Lo goes straight from camp to a good boarding school with strict discipline and some sound religious training. And then - Beardsley College. I have it all mapped out, you need not worry.” (1.20)

At Beardsley (where Lolita goes to a school for girls) Humbert Humbert plays chess with Gaston Godin (a Frenchman who loves little boys):

Because it supposedly tied up with her interest in dance and dramatics, I had permitted Lo to take piano lessons with a Miss Emperor (as we French scholars may conveniently call her) to whose blue-shuttered little white house a mile or so beyond Beardsley Lo would spin off twice a week. One Friday night toward the end of May (and a week or so after the very special rehearsal Lo had not had me attend) the telephone in my study, where I was in the act of mopping up Gustave’s - I mean Gaston’s - king’s side, rang and Miss Emperor asked if Lo was coming next Tuesday because she had missed last Tuesday’s and today’s lessons. I said she would by all means and went on with the game. As the reader may well imagine, my faculties were now impaired, and a move or two later, with Gaston to play, I noticed through the film of my general distress that he could collect my queen; he noticed it too, but thinking it might be a trap on the part of his tricky opponent, he demurred for quite a minute, and puffed and wheezed, and shook his jowls, and even shot furtive glances at me, and made hesitating half-thrusts with his pudgily bunched fingers - dying to take that juicy queen and not daring - and all of a sudden he swooped down upon it (who knows if it did not teach him certain later audacities?), and I spent a dreary hour in achieving a draw. He finished his brandy and presently lumbered away, quite satisfied with this result (*mon pauvre ami, je ne vous ai jamais revu et quoiqu’il y ait bien peu de chance que vous voyiez mon livre, permiettez-moi de vous dire que je vous serre la main bien cordialement, et que toutes mes fillettes vous saluent*). (2.14)

In Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856) Mlle Lempereur is Emma’s fake piano teacher. Offering Lolita his sleeping pills (in the dining room of The Enchanted Hunters), Humbert Humbert mentions the grape-blood of emperors:

When the dessert was plunked down a huge wedge of cherry pie for the young lady and vanilla ice cream her protector, most of which she expeditiously added to her pie I produced a small vial containing Papa’s Purple Pills. As I look back at those seasick murals, at that strange and monstrous moment, I can only explain my behavior then by the mechanism of that dream vacuum wherein revolves a deranged mind; but at the time, it all seemed quite simple and inevitable to me. I glanced around, satisfied myself that the last diner had left, removed the stopper, and with the utmost deliberation tipped the philter into my palm. I had carefully rehearsed before a mirror the gesture of clapping my empty hand to my open mouth and swallowing a (fictitious) pill. As I expected, she pounced upon the vial with its plump, beautifully colored capsules loaded with Beauty’s Sleep.

“Blue!” she exclaimed. “Violet blue. What are they made of?”

“Summer skies,” I said, “and plums and figs, and the grape-blood of emperors.”

“No, seriously - please.”

“Oh, just Purpills. Vitamin X. Makes one strong as an ox or an ax. Want to try one?”

Lolita stretched out her hand, nodding vigorously. (1.27)

“An ox or an ax” brings to mind Leskov’s story *Ovtsebyk* (“Musk-Ox,” 1863). The hotel name seems to blend Leskov’s *Ocharovannyi strannik* (“The Enchanted Wanderer,” 1873) with Turgenev’s *Zapiski okhotnika* (“A Hunter’s Notes,” 1852).

The queen that Humbert Humbert loses to Gaston Godin brings to mind the queen sacrificed by Ostap Bender (who plays chess for the second time in his life) to one of the Vasyuki enthusiasts:

Сперва любители, и первый среди них — одноглазый, пришли в ужас. Коварство гроссмейстера было несомненно. С необычайной лёгкостью и, безусловно, ехидничая в душе над отсталыми любителями города Васюки, гроссмейстер жертвовал пешки, тяжёлые и лёгкие фигуры направо и налево. Обхаянному на лекции брюнету он пожертвовал даже ферзя. Брюнет пришел в ужас и хотел было немедленно сдаться, но только страшным усилием воли заставил себя продолжать игру.

At first the enthusiasts, and first and foremost one-eye, were terrified at the Grossmeister's obvious craftiness. With singular ease, and no doubt scoffing to himself at the backwardness of the Vasyuki enthusiasts, the Grossmeister sacrificed pawns and other pieces left and right. He even sacrificed his queen to the dark-haired fellow whose skill had been so belittled during  the lecture. The man was horrified and  about to resign; it was only by a terrific effort of will that he was able to continue.

In his Commentary to Shade’s poem Kinbote mentions Ferz Bretwit (a diplomat whose name means in Zemblan “chess intelligence”). *Ferz’* is Russian for “chess queen.” In the second of his “Three Chess Sonnets” (1924) VN mentions “the star-shaped intrigues of the queen” (*zvezdoobrazny kaverzy ferzya*) and *feya rifm* (the fairy of rhymes) taking off on her toe, like a ballerina. Describing his games of chess with Gaston Godin, Humbert Humbert mentions Lolita practicing dance techniques:

Sometimes, from where we sat in my cold study I could hear Lo’s bare feet practicing dance techniques in the living room downstairs; but Gaston’s outgoing senses were comfortably dulled, and he remained unaware of those naked rhythms - and-one, and-two, and-one, and-two, weight transferred on a straight right leg, leg up and out to the side, and-one, and-two, and only when she started jumping, opening her legs at the height of the jump, and flexing one leg, and extending the other, and flying, and landing on her toes - only then did my pale, pompous, morose opponent rub his head or cheek a if confusing those distant thuds with the awful stabs of my formidable Queen. (2.6)

In VN’s novel *Dar* (“The Gift,” 1937) Fyodor decides to write “The Life of Chernyshevski” (Part Four of “The Gift”) after reading an article on the author of “What to Do?” in the Soviet chess magazine *8 × 8*. Describing the story of his book’s publication, Fyodor compares himself to a ballerina:

Пожав влажную руку сияющего Буша, он вышел на улицу, как балерина вылетает на сиренево освещенные подмостки. Моросивший дождь казался ослепительной росой, счастье стояло в горле, радужные ореолы дрожали вокруг фонарей, и книга, написанная им, говорила с ним полным голосом, все время сопутствуя ему, как поток за стеною. Он направился к конторе, где служила Зина; против этого черного дома, с добрым выражением окон наклоненного к нему, он нашел пивную, ею указанную.

"Ну что?" - спросила она, быстро войдя.

"Нет, не берёт", - сказал Федор Константинович, внимательно, с наслаждением, следя за угасанием её лица, играя своей властью над ним, предвкушая восхитительный свет, который он сейчас вызовет.

Having shaken the moist hand of radiant Busch he emerged onto the street like a ballerina flying out onto the fluorescent stage. The drizzle seemed a dazzling dew, happiness stood in his throat, rainbow nimbi trembled around the streetlamps, and the book he had written talked to him at the top of its voice, accompanying him the whole time like a torrent on the other side of a wall. He headed for the office where Zina worked; opposite that black building, with benevolent-looking windows inclined toward him, he found the pub where they were to meet.

“Well, what news?” she asked, entering quickly.

“No, he won’t take it,” said Fyodor watching, with delighted attention, her face cloud as he toyed with his power over it and anticipated the exquisite light he was about to summon. (Chapter Three)

Like VN, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev (the narrator and main character in “The Gift”) is not only a writer, but also a chess composer. Fyodor compares a chess problem that he composed to a constellation:

Ещё два-три очистительных штриха, ещё одна проверка, - и задача была готова. Её ключ, первый ход белых, был замаскирован своей мнимой нелепостью, - но именно расстоянием между ней и ослепительным разрядом смысла измерялось одно из главных художественных достоинств задачи, а в том, как одна фигура, точно смазанная маслом, гладко заходила за другую, скользнув через всё поле и забравшись к ней подмышку, была почти телесная приятность, щекочущее ощущение ладности. На доске звёздно сияло восхитительное произведение искусства: планетариум мысли. Всё тут веселило шахматный глаз: остроумие угроз и защит, грация их взаимного движения, чистота матов (столько-то пуль на столько-то сердец); каждая фигура казалась нарочно сработанной для своего квадрата; но может быть очаровательнее всего была тонкая ткань обмана, обилие подмётных ходов (в опровержении которых была ещё своя побочная красота), ложных путей, тщательно уготовленных для читателя.

One or two more refining touches, one more verification—and the problem was ready. The key to it, White’s first move, was masked by its apparent absurdity—but it was precisely by the distance between this and the dazzling denouement that one of the problem’s chief merits was measured; and in the way that one piece, as if greased with oil, went smoothly behind another after slipping across the whole field and creeping up under its arm, constituted an almost physical pleasure, the titillating sensation of an ideal fit. Now on the board there shone, like a constellation, a ravishing work of art, a planetarium of thought. Everything here cheered the chess player’s eye: the wit of the threats and defenses, the grace of their interlocked movement, the purity of the mates (so many bullets for exactly so many hearts); every polished piece seemed to be made especially for its square; but perhaps the most fascinating of all was the fine fabric of deceit, the abundance of insidious tries (the refutation of which had its own accessory beauty), and of false trails carefully prepared for the reader. (ibid.)

According to Shchyogolev (one of the characters in “The Gift,” Zina Mertz’s step-father), he too could have written a novel:

Однажды, заметив исписанные листочки на столе у Федора Константиновича, он сказал, взяв какой-то новый, прочувствованный тон: "Эх, кабы у меня было времячко, я бы такой роман накатал... Из настоящей жизни. Вот представьте себе такую историю: старый пёс, - но ещё в соку, с огнём, с жаждой счастья, - знакомится с вдовицей, а у неё дочка, совсем ещё девочка, - знаете, когда ещё ничего не оформилось, а уже ходит так, что с ума сойти. Бледненькая, лёгонькая, под глазами синева, - и конечно на старого хрыча не смотрит. Что делать? И вот, недолго думая, он, видите ли, на вдовице женится. Хорошо-с. Вот, зажили втроём. Тут можно без конца описывать - соблазн, вечную пыточку, зуд, безумную надежду. И в общем - просчёт. Время бежит-летит, он стареет, она расцветает, - и ни черта. Пройдёт, бывало, рядом, обожжёт презрительным взглядом. А? Чувствуете трагедию Достоевского? Эта история, видите ли, произошла с одним моим большим приятелем, в некотором царстве, в некотором самоварстве, во времена царя Гороха. Каково?" - и Борис Иванович, обрати в сторону темные глаза, надул губы и издал меланхолический лопающийся звук.

Once, when he had noticed some written-up sheets of paper on Fyodor’s desk, he said, adopting a new heartfelt tone of voice: “Ah, if only I had a tick or two, what a novel I’d whip off! From real life. Imagine this kind of thing: an old dog—but still in his prime, fiery, thirsting for happiness—gets to know a widow, and she has a daughter, still quite a little girl—you know what I mean—when nothing is formed yet but already she has a way of walking that drives you out of your mind—A slip of a girl, very fair, pale, with blue under the eyes—and of course she doesn’t even look at the old goat. What to do? Well, not long thinking, he ups and marries the widow. Okay. They settle down the three of them. Here you can go on indefinitely—the temptation, the eternal torment, the itch, the mad hopes. And the upshot—a miscalculation. Time flies, he gets older, she blossoms out—and not a sausage. Just walks by and scorches you with a look of contempt. Eh? D’you feel here a kind of Dostoevskian tragedy? That story, you see, happened to a great friend of mine, once upon a time in fairyland when Old King Cole was a merry old soul,” and Boris Ivanovich, turning his dark eyes away, pursed his lips and emitted a melancholy, bursting sound. (ibid.)

Humbert Humbert is an old dog who marries a widow (Charlotte Haze) in order to get access to her daughter.

The characters in “The Gift” include the Chernyshevsky couple, Alexander Yakovlevich (who went mad after the suicide of his son Yasha) and Alexandra Yakovlevna. They have the same names and patronymics as the Assistant Warden of the Second Home of Stargorod Social Security Administration and his wife in “The Twelve Chairs:”

Завхоз 2-го дома Старсобеса был застенчивый ворюга. Всё существо его протестовало против краж, но не красть он не мог. Он крал, и ему было стыдно. Крал он постоянно, постоянно стыдился, и поэтому его хорошо бритые щёчки всегда горели румянцем смущения, стыдливости, застенчивости и конфуза. Завхоза звали Александром Яковлевичем, а жену его Александрой Яковлевной. Он называл её Сашхен, она звала его Альхен. Свет не видывал ещё такого голубого воришки, как Александр Яковлевич.

The Assistant Warden of the Second Home of Stargorod Social Security Administration was a shy little thief. His whole being protested against stealing, yet it was impossible for him not to steal. He stole and was ashamed of himself. He stole constantly and was  constantly  ashamed  of himself, which was why his smoothly shaven cheeks always burned with a blush of confusion, shame, bashfulness and embarrassment.  The assistant  warden's name was Alexander Yakovlevich, and his wife's name was Alexandra Yakovlevna. He used to call her Sashchen, and she used to call him Alchen. The world has never seen such a bashful chiseller as Alexander Yakovlevich. (chapter 8 “The Bashful Chiseller”)

Alexey Sklyarenko