

Annotations to *Ada* (17)

Part I Chapter 35

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The Kyoto Reading Circle in collaboration with Brian Boyd

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Page and line references are to the Vintage International edition.

Part I Chapter 35

216.6: Mlle Hypnokush: the attractiveness of Ada's hypnotic eyes is augmented by the danger implied in the name—"kush" in Hindu means "killer" and "Hindukush" is the name of a mountain in the Himalayas, sometimes called "the Hindu killer," connected to the phrase, "pierce you" at the end of this paragraph on Ada's eyes.

216.7: Her nose: For Ada's "Irish nose," see 158.17.

216.11: colleenette: recalls Nabokov's story "Collette."

216.14-15: the first cosmetical session of the fall season: Perhaps Ada is 16 and ready for debut to society.

216.27-28: an erratic hatpin—or rather by a thorny twig in the inviting hay: Van hints at Ada's infidelity by his reference to the possible false excuses she might say. We recall the hairpin that Blanche drops into Lucette's cot (67.14). Cf. 293.25-26: "*Monsieur Rack, who once forgot his waistcoat in a haystack.*" (Brian Boyd)

216.32: "trespassers might get shot": Mark Twain made a famous warning at the beginning of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." "*Lolita* has no moral in tow (314), writes Nabokov in *The Annotated Lolita*, and also

comments, “Teachers of Literature are apt to think up such problems as ‘What is the author's purpose?’ or still worse ‘What is the guy trying to say?’ Now, I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book” (311). Cf. 268.31-34: “tell those Gipsy politicians, or Calabrian laborers, that Squire Veen would be *furious* if he discovered trespassers camping in his woods.” (Brian Boyd)

216.33-217.1: Babylonian willows, a fringe of alder, many grasses, cattails, sweet-flags, and a few purple-lipped twayblades: One sense of “Babylonian willow” is the common weeping willow. Another is a type of poplar, supposed to be that of the famous psalm 138, lines 1-2 of which read: “By the river of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. / We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof” (Psalms). (Brian Boyd) The rest of the vegetation can be seen in the photographs below.

Alder



cattail



sweet-flag



twayblade



217.1-2: a few purple-lipped twayblades, over which Ada crooned as she did over puppies or

kittens: Ada shows affection for twayblades because they are a kind of orchid. The common twayblade is called “*listera ovata*,” a distinctive orchid of woodlands and grasslands on a wide range of soil types; it is widespread and generally rather common. A pair of broad, oval basal leaves appear well before the flowering stem, from March onwards. The yellowish green flowers are borne in a loose spike, May-July; the lower lip is deeply-forked.

http://www.tiscali.co.uk/reference/encyclopaedia/wildlife/flowers_common_twayblade.html

217.23: he brought his shaving kit along and helped her to get rid of all three patches of body hair: Flaubert says Harlem women shave hair. This begins references to the ancient Arabian world in this chapter.

217.25-6: “Now I’m Scheher,” he said, “and you are his Ada, and that’s your green prayer carpet”: In *The Thousand and One Nights*, “Shahryar” is the ruler to whom Scheherazade tells her stories. “Ada” is hinted in the last syllable of “Scheherazade.” Cf. 44.23-31: “blue magic rug with Arabian designs . . . his Ada and he.” (Brian Boyd)

218.12: She could still suck her big toe: See 105.29-30. As a child, Ada used to bite her toenails.

218.14: The right instep and the back of her left hand bore the same small not overconspicuous but indelible and sacred birthmark: Van shares the same birthmark (therefore “sacred”) but it is on his right hand. See 105.9-10 in Chapter 17. There are many references in this chapter back to Chapter 17 in which the mirror image motif also runs.

218.21: an ankle chain: Harlem women often wear ankle chains.

219.8: the terrological part of psychiatry: See 18.22+ for the first mention of terrology and a discussion of distorted doubling and incest.

219.9: a “pet” he found “pat” in her case: The primary meaning of “pat” here is *trite*. Van has never been impressed by Marina’s role as an actress or her general staginess. (Brian Boyd) The “pet”-“pat” change of vowel is indicative of the distorted mirror images that reflect Van’s incest with Ada, but since “pat” refers to “stalemate” in chess (cf. note 224.15), this may also refer to what Ada admits as her “acarpous destiny” (219.2), her hopeless forbidden love for Van.