

Lolita and The
Mythologies of
Femininity

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Declaration

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Summary

This thesis provides a new feminist perspective of Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Lolita*. It studies the construction and characterisation of the gendered subject in Nabokov's writing and, through a thematic treatment of the text, examines the ways in which the author draws upon various cultural mythologies and hegemonic ideologies to form a composite idea of female gender identity. In turn, it looks at how Lolita herself has become a feminine archetype and how Nabokov's "nymphet" mythology has been coopted and, at times, corrupted by popular culture. While *Lolita* is taken as the dissertation's central text, it is not treated in isolation, but rather as an intertextual work that typifies many of the tropes and themes that run throughout Nabokov's body of work. By employing a deconstructionist theoretical approach, this thesis exposes a tendency toward hierarchical gender dichotomies in Nabokov's writing, whereby man and woman are conceptually opposed as subject and object.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: “Intercourse with Eve”: <i>Lolita</i> and the Mythologies of Corrupt Femininity	20
Chapter Two: Lolita in Fairy Tale Land	63
Chapter Three: Materialism, Materiality and the Feminine	99
Chapter Four: Presentation, Adaptation and Misrepresentation; how Lolita fared in the Real World	142
Chapter Five: Mortal Mothers, Eternal Fathers; Nabokov’s creative hierarchy	186
Conclusion	230
Bibliography	241

Introduction

Overview

This dissertation provides a new feminist perspective on Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Lolita*. While much has been said of the novel's sexual subject matter—its central relationship of middle-aged man and adolescent girl—more complex theoretical questions about the ways in which normative gender ideas are portrayed and perpetuated in and through this relationship remain relatively unexplored. This dissertation aims to fill that critical void by examining the ways in which the author exploits various cultural mythologies and hegemonic ideologies to form a composite idea of female gender identity. In turn, it looks at how Lolita herself has become a feminine archetype and how Nabokov's "nymphet" mythology has been coopted and, at times, corrupted by popular culture. It provides a thematic treatment of the text, deconstructing the tropes and language patterns that inform Nabokov's portrait of femininity. It argues that, despite Nabokov's apparent sophistication, there is a gender dichotomy at the heart of the author's work that places man as supreme subject and relegates woman to a space of muted objectivity.

My understanding and use of the term "feminism" in this context requires some definition, given the breadth of diverse and even discordant ideas that have operated under that banner. Throughout

this thesis, I will make reference to a number of theorists (Cixous, Foucault, Butler, Kristeva to name a sample), but my approach to the literature will remain grounded in the fundamental idea that woman is a cultural construct and that Western culture has been organised around her subjugation to man. The feminine archetypes discussed in this thesis are therefore understood as the narrative mainstays of a patriarchal discursive tradition that defines woman “not in herself, but in relation to himself” as De Beauvoir put it (*Second Sex* 5). Further to this, De Beauvoir’s identification of “a dual aspect” in Western thought—a splitting of “consciousness, will, transcendence [...] intellect” and “matter, passivity, immanence, [...] flesh” (167) is foundational to my central argument. Likewise, my use of the word “deconstructing” in the opening paragraph of this introduction should not be understood in any loose or general way, but rather as it relates to a specific theoretical approach—namely, feminist deconstruction. By defining my treatment of the literature as such, I do not mean to suggest that feminism is in any way equatable to deconstruction; nor do I wish to suggest that there is anything inherently deconstructionist about feminism, or indeed, that deconstruction *belongs to* or *pertains to* feminism in any necessary or unifying way. Rather, my own engagement with deconstructionist theory is specifically feminist, following as it does from the *écriture* of Hélène Cixous, whose treatment of sexual difference and binary opposition will be outlined in Chapter One of this thesis. This feminist

deconstruction seeks to de-naturalise what Derrida called the “essentializing fetishes” (*Spurs* 55) of femininity and female sexuality, and to de-neutralise the underlying modus of phallogocentrism—a fallacy of “male firstness” validated and perpetuated with “the complicity of Western metaphysics” (“Choreographies” 29).

While *Lolita* is taken as the dissertation’s central text, it is not treated in isolation, but rather as a deeply intertextual work that converses with the author’s oeuvre as a whole. *Lolita* is a text replete with cultural references that span from the obscure to the popular, and this thematic treatment of the text is designed to reflect this—guiding the reader from the scriptural to the fairytale, through the disparate discourses of advertising and aesthetics, and attempting to decode the gendered implications that connect these various threads. Nabokov’s thirteenth novel is a fruitful, if seemingly counterintuitive, place to start a study of the author’s narrative constructions and depictions of gender. *Lolita* herself is undoubtedly Nabokov’s most famous creation, and further to this, she exceeds the limits of his text, spilling over into the popular consciousness, where her name has become a signifier for all kinds of ideas about girlhood and female sexuality. *Lolita*—the girl in and out of the text—is hence treated here as both an intertextual and extratextual phenomenon, formed out of borrowed literary, philosophical and mythological concepts of femininity, and becoming herself a new subtype of the figure of the dangerous female called “the nymphet”. Nabokov’s

invocation of these myths and motifs is not to be understood as simple accordance with tradition, nor as unconscious regurgitation of received archetypes. While Nabokov operates within a tacit system of binary opposition (which this deconstructionist analysis of the literature aims to unveil and unfasten from its perceived permanence), the intertextual elements employed by the author are treated here as the component parts of his deliberate design.

Further to this, *Lolita* operates as a converging point for many of Nabokov's dominant tropes and themes. Most obviously, *Lolita* is the text in which Nabokov's seeming preoccupation with men who desire young girls is most fully realised. Instances of paedophilia and hebephilia occur in, or are the direct subject of, five of Nabokov's other novels and novellas, and further instances appear in his poems and short stories. *Lolita* is not only Nabokov's best-known or best-rendered work on this taboo subject, but is perhaps the best-known cultural treatment of the subject matter in existence. The conspicuous recurrence of this theme in Nabokov is generally downplayed by critics in order, I suppose, to avoid making any unintended or unsubstantiated inferences. In the context of this feminist, deconstructionist reading of the text however, relationships between grown men and young girls serve to highlight and dramatise a pivotal imbalance of power and agency between male subjects and female objects in the author's work.

Nabokov's favourite theme of parody is also perfected in

Lolita—a novel that opens with a parody of the “Gothic device of the posthumous manuscript from jail” (Olsen 95) and proceeds to give us a, “Parody of a hotel corridor. Parody of silence and death” (*Lolita* 119), “a pharisiac parody of privacy” (145) and ultimately, “a parody of incest” (287). Likewise, Nabokovian doubles and mirrors resonate throughout *Lolita*’s pages, where Lolita herself is a facsimile of Humbert’s first love, Quilty and Humbert are virtually identical, and one fateful hotel room (the proposed setting for Humbert’s rape of a drugged and unconscious Lolita) contains “a double bed, a mirror, a double bed in the mirror, a closet door with mirror, a bathroom door ditto (...) two chairs, a glass-topped table, two bed tables, a double bed” (119). It is this room of reflections that connects Nabokov’s mirror theme to his theme of calculated coincidence, as the number on its door is the same as the Haze home address. This coincidence—“(342!)” [118]—is announced to the reader by a narrator who shares his author’s delight in shows of narrative contrivance. Art is artifice for Nabokov, and the author routinely reveals the mechanics of his plot at play. Likewise, authorial cameos are commonplace in Nabokov’s fiction, and displays of artifice are essentially shows of authorship, through which Nabokov’s godlike omnipotence and omnipresence are enacted.

What’s more, while *Lolita* epitomises Nabokoviana and acts as something of a thematic centre, Lolita herself becomes a Nabokovian motif, with her name reappearing in the author’s later works. In *Ada*,

Lolita is a town in Texas (19); in *Pale Fire*, she lends her name to a hurricane (49). The fact that Nabokov made a common noun and a calling-card of Lolita's name suggests that *Lolita* is—in ideological and artistic terms—*definitively* Nabokov. As such, this dissertation takes *Lolita* as its touchstone text and as a point from which the author's other works can be accessed and interpreted.

A note on the research materials

The papers of Vladimir Nabokov, including his correspondence, writings, and miscellany, were donated by the author to the Library of Congress Manuscript Division in 1959, under the stipulation that the collection could not be opened until 23 June 2009. During the course of my research, I borrowed some of these materials on microfilm. The Nabokov papers span from 1918 to 1974, and while many of Nabokov's novels (particularly those written in Russian) appear in complete handwritten drafts, the "Lolita" file comprises a partial collection of preliminary research notes on (mostly) unnumbered index cards. Conscious of the inflammatory nature of *Lolita*, Nabokov "blacked out the research notes—on sexual deviation, on marriage with minors—in his diary" (Schiff 167). Other notes were destroyed completely. In the wrong hands and out of context, such materials might seem incriminating; but Nabokov was also (and always) concerned about the end effect of the artistic project. Authorial control and aesthetic integrity were key to this careful edit and

erasure, and the materials donated by the author to the Library of Congress are not complete but curated. Unfortunately for the researcher, the scant remains of preparatory notes for *Lolita* offers little insight into the genealogy and composition of the novel. Due to this scarcity of raw materials, my treatment of the primary text here is largely based on the finished, published work as it appears in Alfred Appel's *The Annotated Lolita*.

Literature Review

Historically, critical responses to *Lolita* have vacillated between the aesthetic and the ethical, often with these two concepts being treated as somehow mutually incompatible. This is due in no small part to the overarching influence of one particular piece of commentary. First published in the 1957 edition of "The Anchor Review" and subsequently included in most editions of the novel, Nabokov's essay, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*", worked to delimit reader interpretation. In it the author stated:

I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss... (*Lolita* 314)

In what might be seen as testament to Nabokov's supercilious brand of authority, many critics from the 1950s and 1960s seemed to take

this formalist manifesto to heart, shirking the text's obvious moral and sociopolitical implications for fear of being subject to the author's derision. And Nabokov's derision was indeed something to be feared. This was the author who famously described Hemingway and Conrad as "writers of books for boys" (*Strong Opinions* 36) and labelled the likes of Camus, D.H. Lawrence and Thomas Mann as "second-rate and ephemeral" (46). Critical writing was subject to the same sweeping scorn from Nabokov, with its practitioners viewed as little more than philistine hacks, seeking out their "own thoughts and throes in those of the author"¹ and preferring "to write about ideas than about words" (35). Nabokov appears to set "ideas" and "words" in opposition in this statement, as if words had nothing to do with the communication of ideas—indeed, as if he himself was not using words to convey a very specific idea². As Frederick Whiting remarked, "Nabokov appears to validate dichotomies such as moral versus aesthetic and literature-of-ideas versus true art in order to explain his life and work, always vehemently eschewing the first term

¹ It could be argued that Nabokov himself was guilty of this type of critical projection, as best exemplified in his interpretation of the mysterious Man in the Brown Macintosh in *Ulysses*. For Nabokov, this recurring figure is none other than Joyce himself; "Bloom glimpses his maker!" (*Lectures* 320). Of course, the authorial walk-on is idiosyncratically Nabokov, making Nabokov's reading of Joyce a very Nabokovian one.

² The quoted passage is taken from an interview with Alvin Toffler that appeared in the January 1964 edition of *Playboy*. Nabokov rarely gave conventional interviews, preferring to submit written responses to interviewers' questions. This was his safeguard against misquotes and misinterpretations; insurance that his precise meaning was conveyed in his precise words. Such vigilance on the part of the author would seem to fly in the face of the notion that words can be somehow divorced from ideas.

and valorising the second” (854). First wave criticism of *Lolita* was as such characterised by what Whiting called a, “general retreat from politics into formalism” (833).

Lionel Trilling’s 1958 review of *Lolita* in “Encounter” typifies this critical trend. Trilling—seeking to praise Nabokov’s artistic achievement while understanding that something must be said about the novel’s scandalous subject matter—found himself overcompensating for Humbert Humbert’s deviant desire. He insisted that he was “plainly not able to muster up the note of moral outrage” (94), and came to the critically unsatisfying conclusion that, “*Lolita* is not about sex, but about love” (95). Trilling’s apparent eagerness to atone for Nabokov’s predatory protagonist results in his condemnation of *Lolita* as an unsympathetic victim. Humbert’s “depravity is the easier to accept when we learn that he deals with a *Lolita* who is not innocent, and who seems to have very few emotions to be violated” (94).

Trilling’s apologist approach set a precedent. Writing in 1978, a full twenty years after Trilling’s review, Thomas Molnar declared that sympathy for *Lolita* was, “impossible”, since, “before yielding to Humbert, the girl has had a nasty little affair with a nasty little thirteen-year-old [...] Besides, she is a spoiled sub-teenager with a foul mouth, a self-offered target for lecherers [...] an object perhaps even to herself” (106). Humbert’s incurable perversity was thus supplanted for Molnar by the girl’s ‘impurity’. Similarly, Page

Stegner's 1967 critical study of Nabokov, *Escape Into Aesthetics* (in which he critiques the notion of aesthetics and morality as being diametrically opposed) writes: "Judging from the come-on that Lolita gives him while he is a boarder in her mother's house, his statement that it is she who seduced him seems very possibly true" (109). In Stegner's reading, Lolita is not a victim but a complicit agent, understood, in banal terms, as a conventional temptress. Of course, the girl who gives "the come-on" is not a conventional temptress, but a twelve-year-old orphan, and this denial of Lolita's victimhood entails a wilful insensitivity to this fact. Those keen to forgive Humbert are often wont to forget such finer details.

John Hollander claimed Lolita is about "Mr Nabokov's love affair with the romantic novel" (83) and that Humbert's brand of sexual deviance was merely a "suburb of heterosexuality" with "no well-known clinically respectable name of long standing" (83), supposedly rendering Humbert's crime spurious if not void. As Frederick Whiting remarked:

Hollander is concerned here not only to suggest that the book is not about pedophilia but that, in effect, there is no such thing as pedophilia for it to be about. Rather, his 'suburb of heterosexuality' offers up the image of a benign peripheral area presumably disarmed in Hollander's mind by its convenient proximity,

hardly commuting distance, to the sexual center of the city.” (Whiting 852).

Indeed, Hollander’s idea of hegemonic boy-girl romance is akin to Lionel Trilling’s mollifying application of the “passion-love” tag to *Lolita*, misreading paedophilia as some as some more generic and more benign form of forbidden love.

As these examples show, Trilling, Molnar and Stegner do not succeed in dispelling moralism for aesthetics. Rather, their readings of the girl in the text are overtly judgemental.³ *Lolita* it seems, became a critical dumping ground for petty moral concerns. In order to preserve Humbert’s aesthetic integrity as narrator, these critics tried first to afford him moral impunity by offering up the girl as a scapegoat. In other words, by privileging “aesthetic bliss”, they

³ In a letter to Filippa Rolf dated 22 March 1966, Véra Nabokov railed against *Lolita*’s unsympathetic treatment by her critics and produced one of the most compassionate and detailed readings of the girl’s character arc in existence.

Lolita discussed by the papers from every possible point of view except one: that of its beauty and pathos. Critics prefer to look for moral symbols, justification, condemnation, or explanation of HH’s predicament...I wish, though, somebody would notice the tender description of the child’s helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her heartrending courage all along culminating in that squalid but essentially sure and healthy marriage, and her letter, and her dog. And that terrible expression on her face when she had been cheated by HH out of some little pleasure that had been promised. They all miss the fact that ‘the horrid little brat’ *Lolita*, is essentially very good indeed—or she would have straightened out after being crushed so terribly, and found a decent life with poor Dick more to her liking than the other kind. (Schiff 236)

privilege Humbert's narrative. Douglas Fowler argued that Nabokov himself encourages this type of reading by structuring the plot so as to rescue Humbert from complete moral condemnation. By having Charlotte killed by a twist of fate and Lolita deflowered by Charlie Holmes, Nabokov lets his "favourite" or fictive proxy, off the hook. Fowler argued that this favouritism has an overbearing influence on how the story plays out. It also asks the reader to accept the unacceptable, both in terms of what one can credit and what one can stomach. And therein lies one of the great shared pitfalls of the critical readings discussed here thus far. The formalist approach at once emphasised the *unreality* of the novel—the unreliable first-person-narrator, the devices of artifice, parody, coincidence, etc., while paradoxically adopting a critical naivety—believing unquestioningly every word Humbert utters when he reports how he was seduced by the girl in the text. Likewise, the reading of *Lolita* as a love story—in which a diabolical narcissist is redeemed by a sudden epiphany of human empathy—entails a rather accepting response to Humbert's self-heroising narrative arc. Humbert's turn towards sincerity at the story's climax is attenuated by the fact that his narrative thitherto had mocked sincerity itself. As Michael Wood put it, "this is a book about a guilt which both glorifies itself and grovels in self-accusation" (107), and the narrator who recounts with nefarious glee his plans to murder and to rape is the self-same figure who affects self-condemnation at the novel's close. Humbert's

belated realisation of his love for Lolita serves only to ameliorate the perpetrator's sense of guilt, for the object of his newfound affection remains just that—an object against which he defines himself—first as a monster, then as a tragic hero.

Kingsley Amis provided an early dissenting voice to such credulous readings of *Lolita* in his 1959 review in 'Spectator'. Unlike Trilling, Amis is not charmed by Humbert, or for that matter, Nabokov (for Amis, the two share the same authorial voice). While Trilling's defence of Humbert rests partially on his moral and personal condemnation of the girl, Amis—being unimpressed by Humbert's linguistic muscle-flexing—holds that the character of Lolita is the text's one redeeming feature. "I have rarely seen the external ambience of a character so marvellously realised" (106) Amis says. Anticipating feminist commentary of the novel by some thirty years, Amis goes on to remark that it is a great shame that this same character is, "devotedly watched and listened to but never conversed with, the object of desire but never of curiosity" (106).

Amis's identification with Lolita corresponds with his rejection of what he calls Humbert's "logomania" (105) or, "the sustained din of pun, allusion, neologism, alliteration, *cynganedd*, apostrophe, parenthesis, rhetorical question" (104). Humbert's narrative for Amis, is sheer artistic self-indulgence, gaudy showmanship collapsing into, "dullness, fatuity and unreality" (105). Lolita then, is appealing to Amis in her relevant understatement and, essentially, in her

underdevelopment. This argument—that Nabokov’s most neglected creation is also his best realised—is Amis’s most pointed dismissal of Nabokov’s heavy-handed literary approach.

Amis’s assessment of Humbert’s indifference to Lolita as an independent agent is echoed in Richard Rorty’s book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, where he argues that Nabokov is concerned with the particular cruelty of incuriosity (158). For Rorty, *Lolita* is a thoroughly moral work in which Lolita is neglected by Humbert but not by Nabokov. Rorty argues that Nabokov, in his creation of a Humbert who pursues his own self-absorbed fantasy of a girl, “wrote about cruelty from the inside, helping us see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty” (146). For Rorty, Nabokov is writing to show us, “that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets” (157), and the quest for artistic perfection might leave the quester morally bereft.

Suddenly *Lolita* does have a ‘moral in tow’. But the moral is not to keep one’s hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering”(164).

Although both Amis and Rorty are concerned with the injustice of incuriosity in Humbert’s treatment and portrayal of Lolita, Rorty’s

reading maintains a definite distinction between author and narrator. In this respect—and in his insistence on Nabokov’s underlying pathos for the girl in the text—Rorty’s interpretation of *Lolita* is perhaps closer to Véra Nabokov’s than to Kingsley Amis’s.

A revisionist reading of Amis might categorise his review as proto-feminist. His refusal to be wooed by Nabokov’s/Humbert’s “fancy prose style” (*Lolita* 9) would be echoed in 1989 by Linda Kauffman, who proclaimed that the biggest challenge for the feminist reader is “to read against the text by resisting the father’s seductions” (133). Kauffman’s reading of *Lolita* is specifically influenced by late-80s debates about child sex abuse and incest. She responds directly to Trilling’s proclamation that “*Lolita* is not about sex, but about love” by stating that, “*Lolita* is not about love, but about incest, which is a betrayal of trust, a violation of love” (131). The problem with Kauffman’s reading is this insistence on treating the novel’s central relationship—its “parody of incest” (*Lolita* 287)—as a real father-daughter incest. Kauffman essentially inverts the hierarchical order of the dichotomy of art and morality that had informed the patriarchal (i.e., privileging the father in the text) line of criticism. By reading the novel as a case study in incest and the literal abuses of patriarchal power, Kauffman omits any consideration of the novel’s clear parodic overtones and sense of play. Her reading is therefore imbalanced and partial. The question posed in the title of Kauffman’s essay—“Is there a woman in the text?”—is however an important one, and one

that marks a watershed in *Lolita's* critical heritage. Kauffman argues that the novel excludes female experience and demands that the female reader identify against herself (135). In the decade following Kauffman's essay, a number of creative attempts were made to write the woman into the text, offering *Lolita* a new voice and identity. These projects will be discussed in full in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

Gladys Clifton, writing in 1982, presented for scrutiny the "grotesque gap" that appears between Humbert's "fantasy of 'bliss' and his life with a flesh-and-blood American teen angel" (104). Clifton, in her will to stress Humbert's demonic acts, characterises his victim as an "angel", a critical turn that is not only unnecessary, but unhelpful. This type of rhetoric works only to reinforce feminine archetypes such as the madonna/whore dichotomy and contributes to a rape-culture rhetoric of so-called 'good victims'. Clifton's attempt to rehabilitate *Lolita's* reputation hence infers the same moral absolutes used by her detractors.

Nabokov's biographer, Brian Boyd, called the novel, "A case study in child abuse," which "also manages against all odds to be a passionate and poignant love story" (*American Years* 227). While Boyd was critical of "inattentive readers" (233) who are lured into complicity with Humbert's villainous behaviour, he himself took a rather lenient stance on the abuse the novel portrays. In seeming accord with Trilling and Molnar, Boyd adopted what critic Michael

Wood characterised as “lazy tolerance”⁴ (140). He argued that since Lolita is not a virgin when she and Humbert first “make love” (231)—a dubious choice of phrase that Boyd uses without the slightest hint of irony—Humbert “seems far more self-accusatory than the case warrants” (231) when, at the novel’s close he professes, “Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges” (*Lolita* 308).

Boyd did however, call Humbert a “moral monster” (233) who, in words that are reminiscent of Rorty and Amis, is “brutally indifferent to other lives” (231). Also Boyd noted, the girl in the text, “proves unforeseeably real and independent of (Humbert’s) imaginings,” (247) defying his attempts to confine her to his chosen narrative. Humbert, “prides himself in transforming and holding Lolita according to the dictates of his imagination” (248).

Much of Ellen Pifer’s work on Nabokov is concerned with this particular issue of Lolita’s existential subservience to Humbert’s fantasy image of her. She writes about “Humbert’s mental usurpation of Lolita’s identity” (164) and his “physical and psychic invasion of Lolita’s privacy” (165). Pifer’s reading of *Lolita* centres on what she sees as the novel’s fundamental trade-off between the sublime and the reprehensible. “By elevating himself to the status of ‘pure’ poet, Humbert understandably desires to remove his actions from the

⁴ Michael Wood, in *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the risks of fiction*, summed up the critical history of *Lolita* as, “after the outrage, the lazy tolerance—and after that, the vigilantes again” (140).

ethical sphere of life and consider them only as art" (*Nabokov and the Novel* 166). Nabokov's dogma of "aesthetic bliss" worked to the same end—setting the novel apart from and above moral consideration. Pifer reinstates ethics without upending the art/morality dichotomy. She achieves a balanced and integrated reading that qualifies ethical concerns with questions about the ontological status of the work of art and its inhabitants, asking "What claim to reality have characters who exist in a world of declared artifice?"(ii). The artistic and artificial status of the novel are integral to Pifer's reading. Humbert's greatest transgression for Pifer, is his artistic use of Lolita, "as though she were the mere instrument of his will. Like an author dreaming up a character, Humbert despotically transforms the twelve-year-old American kid into an aesthetic mirage" (164).

For Olga Hasty, "Humbert's sexuality is emblematic of a distinctly modernist response to the perennial question of how to counter temporal passage and the inevitable loss attendant on it" (Hasty 225). The problem with Hasty's allegorical reading is that it objectifies the girl in the text in an absolute and irretrievable way. As pure symbol, Lolita's rape by Humbert becomes a toothless philosophical exercise in which the twelve-year-old American kid is transformed (to paraphrase Pifer) into a mnemonic mirage, and Humbert's lust is reframed as a romantic desire to arrest time. Of course, Humbert's eagerness to project the image of lost love,

Annabel, onto the living girl, Lolita—encapsulates Nabokov’s preoccupation with the themes of time, loss, and memory. But his obsession with youth is not merely a psychic but a *physical* one, and his attraction to young flesh is at least in part a symptom of his abhorrence of grown women’s bodies (more on which in Chapter Three, Part VII). Which is to say that the context and content of Humbert’s actions need to be retained in any reading, and that the particulars and personhood of his desired object should not be sacrificed for the sake of some general theme.

Humbert’s narratorial creation of Lolita is a common concern for critics in the post-formalist era. The reader never meets Lolita first-hand; she remains always at one remove. As Martin Amis said, “We tend to forget that this blinding creation remains just that: a creation, and a creation of Humbert Humbert’s. We have only Humbert’s word for her” (x). Dana Brand, in his study of the themes of aesthetics and consumerism in the novel, argued that, “The intention of Humbert’s aestheticism is apparently to reduce American reality to the status of a photograph”(17). Brand argued that Humbert does the same with his American girl, ultimately treating her as an object— a surface with no substance.

For Michael Wood, reading is a process of excavation, where this surface image of a girl gives way to a wealth of discoverable meaning. For Wood the act of reading *Lolita* is “a textual game” (103) and a quest to find the girl in the text amongst Humbert Humbert’s

puzzling web of words.

Lolita is Humbert's obsession and what escapes it, she is its name and its boundary. The 'actual' Lolita is the person we see Humbert can't see, or can only see spasmodically. In this sense she is a product of reading, not because the reader makes her up or because she is just 'there' in the words, but because she is what a reading finds, and I would say needs to find, in order to see the range of what the book can do. (117)

Reading, for Wood, becomes "a modest mode of creation", through which narrative gaps are bridged, blanks filled, and a partial sketch of a girl becomes complete. Lolita, though under-represented and obscured, remains discoverable and must be discovered. To Kauffman's seminal question—"is there a woman in the text?"—Wood offers the affirmative response that she is there because "She needs to be 'there'" (117). Lolita, though dependent upon Humbert for her reality, is nonetheless a "(fictional) fact" of his created narrative.

The idea of the subjugation of female personhood to aesthetics—common to Amis, Rorty, Kauffman, Pifer and Wood—is essential to my own reading of the novel, and forms in part the central argument of this thesis: that Nabokov's novel is premised on

hierarchical gender dichotomies. I believe, as Christine Clegg has said, “that difficult questions can be asked about what happens to the girl in the text (and the book will still be literature)” (13). Likewise, I believe that the theoretical approach taken in this dissertation will work to elucidate rather than reduce the novel’s myriad themes by offering a hitherto neglected perspective. Nabokov’s outspoken and oft-reiterated rejection of critical ideologies was itself an ideological standpoint, and one rooted in a personal need to have the last word⁵. The interpretative void proposed by Nabokov—a space of pure aesthetic contemplation, free of implication—is intellectually improbable. Language can be used for aesthetic effect, but its effects are not wholly or exclusively aesthetic. That is to say that language employed in the service of art still retains its integral utility as a systematic means for the communication of ideas. Nabokov’s request that we admire the words without asking what they signify hence seems disingenuous, especially when we consider the sheer breadth of coded inferences and bookish allusions that dot *Lolita*’s pages. What the author really required of his readers was compliance with his *authority*. Hence, Vladimir Nabokov remains one of the most cited commentators on the works of Vladimir Nabokov.

⁵ Speaking of the last word, Nabokov’s obituary in the July 5, 1977 edition of *The New York Times* included a clumsy cut-and-paste error with unintentionally apt effect. It read: “Mr Nabokov did employ pseudonyms. ‘My main pseudonym, Sirin, thrived from 1920 to 1940,’ he said in an interview for this article” (Whitman, n.pag). The thought of Nabokov being interviewed for his own obituary is so perfectly Nabokovian as to bring to mind a line from *Pale Fire*: “Life Everlasting—based on a misprint!” (53)

First he wrote the books; then he wrote the instructions for how they should (and should not) be read.

Moreover, I believe the dichotomy of art and morality that Nabokov promoted is itself highly gendered. While Humbert undoubtedly stands for his author's aesthetic principles, the women Nabokov draws represent exactly the kind of petty, philistine moralism that the author condemned. This diametric gendering of art and morality is evident in the sample of critical texts provided above, where those on the side of aesthetics feel an onus to atone for Humbert's obvious depravity, while some of those who defend *Lolita* do so while critiquing Nabokov's florid style.

The pivotal dichotomy to be treated in this dissertation however, is the one implied in Nabokov's opposition of the masculine act of artistic creativity and the female act of procreation. Essentially it is an opposition of mind and body, form and matter—the transcendent and the transient. The novel's veritable graveyard of dead mothers and dead babies speaks to this. While artistic creation works to immortalise masculine experience, woman, in her life-giving capacity, recalls to Nabokov mortality. While Humbert, whose narrative speaks to us from beyond the grave, represents the intellectual, the aesthetic, and the infinite, the women Nabokov renders in print are irreparably tied to their base corporeality, and as such, are denied an inner life. As Kauffman stated, Nabokov presents his readers with “a compendium of definitions of woman” (110). He constructs his fateful

nymphet out of a mesh of mythologies and cultural stereotypes. Lolita is archetypal. In her corruptness she is Eve; in her innocence she is the fairy princess; in her conventionality she is the all-American teen; in her materiality she is that which nymphets metamorphose into—mortal women. Yet, her subjective reality is rarely glimpsed. While our picture of Humbert in all his vivid subversiveness is very specifically realised, Lolita remains more of a general impression of American adolescence and the archetypal feminine.

This thesis breaks from the historical critical split between the aesthetic and the moral-political by addressing the ideological implications of this dichotomy, specifically the ramifications for the gendered subject in such a model where the aesthetic is rigidly aligned with the masculine and art expresses his experience alone. I believe the words of Susanne Kappeler to be true; there are, “no sanctuaries from political reality, no aesthetic or fantastic enclaves, no islands for the play of desire” (147). The myth of “aesthetic bliss” and the fallacy of ideological neutrality are critically unsustainable. The politically conscious reader must own up “to one’s gender and the history of that gender [...] giving up the fantasy of the literary androgyne” (Kappeler 147). Nabokov was not a neutral writer; the title of his collected interviews, *Strong Opinions*, speaks to this. Neither were his characters neuters, and any discussion of Nabokov’s writing on sex and sexuality is incomplete without giving

due consideration to the underlying concept of gender.

Throughout this thesis, I will look at how “Humbert Humbert’s use of language and lore” (Appel xi) works to subjugate the feminine—thus rejecting the notion that the novel exists in an artistic vacuum. The literary work is treated here as a site where the cultural construction of gender is made visible. Literary interpretation hence offers the opportunity to deconstruct what convention and repetition work to naturalise. Nabokov’s literature—with its emphasis on intertextual referencing and repetition—lends itself well to this type of analysis. The borrowing and building of gendered mythologies across and between texts is readily evident in Nabokov, and yet it is something that has gone largely unremarked upon. The research carried out here represents an original contribution to the literature on Nabokov by specifically addressing his literary compositions of gender and their genealogical and generic ties to literary and cultural conventions.

The Structure of the Thesis

The five chapters of this thesis are divided thematically.

Chapter One examines Nabokov’s thematic interactions with the Garden of Eden creation myth, with particular focus on the implications for the gendered subject within this narrative framework.

I argue that the author’s Miltonic vision of Paradise works to promote

a hierarchical gender dichotomy that naturalises the Otherness of woman, affirms her secondariness to man, and denounces her as vile temptress and origin of sin. Furthermore, Nabokov's authorial presence via the devices of heightened narrative coincidence, wordplay, and anagrammatic masks, places him as the god figure in the "small Eden" (22) of the novel, where he creates Humbert Humbert, displaced European intellectual, in his image, and has him straddle the roles of Adam – the innocent and beguiled victim of feminine corruption, and Satan—master rhetorician. Chapter One also serves to introduce my central thesis of the Nabokovian analogy of artistic creation with the divine, whereby maternal, biological procreation is undermined and supplanted by a patriarchal, intellectual concept of creation—of a masculine god or masculine author creating something out of nothing.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the novel's profusion of fairytale images and allusions. Expanding on the ideas of inherited character types and gender archetypes introduced in Chapter One, this chapter examines how Nabokov uses the motifs of a literary genre that dictates gender ideals in a uniform and highly stylised manner. Nabokov's use of the fairytale is also specific to his subject matter. *Lolita* is a novel about a girl who is kidnapped and raped by her step-father, and fairytales abound with little girls in peril, as well as abusive step-parents. While the fairytale is commonly accepted as a children's genre, its apparent formal simplicity obscures a thematic

complexity that Nabokov works to exploit. Tales of pure and docile princesses are often underpinned with a dread of impending sexual awakening, making such narratives apt parallels to the story of Humbert Humbert's adolescent fairy princess. This chapter works to show that Nabokov is not only interested in the fairytale as a shorthand for age-old gender conventions, but also as a subversive genre loaded with connotations about childhood sexuality and child abuse.

Chapter Three looks at the novel's depictions of contemporary consumer culture, and focuses on Nabokov's treatment of Lolita as a product of a post-war America marked by rampant commodity fetishism. It argues that Nabokov's opposition of superficial American Lolita and sophisticated European Humbert works to create a high/low cultural dichotomy that is expressly gendered. The diametric opposition of intellectual Humbert and materialistic Lolita hence becomes one of mind to body, form to matter. The chapter also examines the commodification of Lolita herself, as well as looking at the recurring figure of the prostitute—the woman who is literally for sale—in the author's body of work.

While Chapter Three focuses on Humbert's commodification of the girl in the text, Chapter Four examines the ways in which *Lolita* the book has been marketed and sold, and how the commodification of Nabokov's novel has worked to distort its perceived meaning. This chapter looks at *Lolita's* incarnations in print, on screen, and in

popular culture and studies the titular girl's uses and misuses as sex icon, marketing tool and by-word for child pornography. This chapter also looks at a number of recent attempts to rehabilitate Lolita's image through rewrites and reboots, and asks what version of Lolita prevails in the twenty-first century.

The fifth and final chapter turns to the problem of the muse in Nabokov. It deconstructs the explicitly gendered relationship of artist and muse and critiques the ways in which this dichotomy works to mark artistic genius as a male proclivity, while delimiting the possibilities for female agency. The chapter goes on to argue that Nabokov's aesthetic ideology is underpinned and informed by a dichotomous gender concept that positions man as god/artist/genius and woman as creation/muse/matter. This model works to deify the male subjective voice at the expense of the feminine. I will argue that the author thematically opposes the masculine act of artistic creation, and the feminine act of biological procreation. A comparative study to Nabokov's unfinished, posthumously published novel, *The Original of Laura*, will work to support this theory. The author's final work, in which a male narrator-protagonist uses the power of his will alone to erase his physical being from the toes up, reads as a treatise on the transcendent power of masculine consciousness; a demonstration of the dominance of the male faculty of mind over female matter. The fifth and concluding chapters of the thesis also introduce Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. In the deconstructionist context of the

thesis as a whole, the idea of the abject offers a means to finally challenge or upset phallogocentric mind/body dualism by positing an *embodied* identity.

Chapter One: “Intercourse with Eve”: *Lolita* and the mythologies of corrupt femininity

Part I: The Inherent Moralism of Convention

In a lecture on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Vladimir Nabokov professed that, “There is nothing more tedious than a protracted and sustained allegory based on a well-worn myth⁶ (*Lectures* 288). Such sweeping dismissals are characteristic of Nabokov’s rather austere brand of literary criticism. Moreover, the object of these dismissals was often literary criticism itself. This was the author who in *Pale Fire* constructed an entire novel around the premise of the corrupt annotator—the literary critic with ulterior motives. Critics were advised to “Ignore allegories”, to “Remember that mediocrity thrives of ‘ideas’” (*Strong Opinions* 57). For Nabokov, allegory was akin to fable insofar as it inferred some moral message, and didacticism was akin to philistinism. Myth meanwhile was the stuff that ‘ideas’ were propped upon, and the arch-mythist was Freud—a vulgarian quack whose followers believed that “all mental woes [could] be cured by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts” (56).

Myth and moralism coincide however, in Nabokov’s *Lolita*. For

⁶ The “well-worn myth” in question is Homer’s *Odyssey*.

much of Part One of the novel, the author engages the reader with a Garden of Eden creation myth trope. As one of the very tenets of Western culture, the story of first man, first woman and original sin provides a powerful vehicle for meaning. Nabokov's claims to ideological secularity are tainted by his evocation of this "well-worn myth". As origin story, its formative influence on thought—specifically on matters of gender, morality, and the intersection of the two—pervades our cultural and literary heritage. The novel that Nabokov claimed had "no moral in tow" (314) is steeped in an Edenic imagery that is so hermeneutically loaded as to taint his claims to artistic self-containment. In his employment of this literary device, Nabokov encourages certain moral preconceptions. His treatment of the gendered subject within this allegorical framework works to reinforce rather than subvert convention. It works within the parameters of a model where Nabokov's first man, his Humbert-Adam, is primary, and his Lolita-Eve is derivative and secondary. The author exploits the trope's universality; its unambiguous commonality of meaning—that woman is condemnable and because of her we are all condemned. As Phyllis Tribble summarises:

It proclaims male superiority and female inferiority as the will of God. It portrays woman as 'temptress' and troublemaker who is dependent upon and dominated by her husband. Over the centuries this misogynous

reading has acquired a status of canonicity so
 that *those who deplore and those who applaud*
the story both agree upon its meaning. (72,
 emphasis added)

Moreover, the moral and misogynistic essence of the Eden story is integral, rather than incidental to Nabokov's allegorical interplay. At its core, the tale is about blame assignment: explaining away the woes of a world whose creator is apparently omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent. Man, created in God's image, must resemble this perfection to a lesser degree, and must be inherently good. The existence of the dark elements of sorrow and sin in a world that God imbued with light (the Problem of Evil), is supposedly resolved in this simple parable by the creation of woman. Fashioned from some surplus flesh and bone, Eve is naturally ancillary to Adam, her father/brother/husband. She is the Other. Distinct in her sex from both her heavenly and earthly fathers, she is an aberration, what Milton called a, "fair defect of nature" (*Paradise Lost*, IX. 891-892). Intrinsically imperfect, it is Eve who acts as evil's vessel in Paradise.

Humbert, the displaced European academic with a way with words, is undoubtedly created in his author's image. Lolita, made manifest of Humbert's wanton lust rather than his rib, is somewhat supplementary to the man who imagines her as a corruptive force comparable to Eve. Nabokov initiates this association of ideas from the very beginning of Humbert's first person narrative, and rather

typically, he does so with a flourish:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin,
my soul. Lo-Lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking
a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at
three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta. (9)

There it is, in the second sentence of Humbert's rhapsodical opening paragraph; the equation of Lolita with sin, the notion of her as *his* sin, made incarnate. Thus the tone is set, in a novel supposedly devoid of any moral design. Humbert's introduction is also loaded with the language of ownership. In a two sentence sequence of thirteen words, the personal possessive adjective appears four times. We are given a sense of authorial ownership, as Humbert speaks his lover into being by lyrical incantation: "Lo-Lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta." This very tactile, sensory verbalisation of the name places Lolita as a poetic emanation of Humbert's physical being; of his tongue, palate, and teeth. The carnality of Humbert's obsession is demonstrated here; infused with the senses of touch and taste, the very speaking of the name is eroticised. Indeed, the novel as a whole could be read as Humbert speaking Lolita into being, for she is composed entirely of his words and his subjective imaginings—a fantasy girl in every sense of the word.

Even the naming of Lolita—girl and novel—speaks to her existential subjugation to Humbert. The female forename in isolation

as title harkens to a patriarchal literary tradition. Titles such as *Pamela*, *Justine*, *Evelina*, *Clarissa*, and *Roxana* (as opposed to *David Copperfield*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Jones*, *Joseph Andrews* etc.) tells us that, provided the narrative is morally successful, the lady in question will begin her tale with her father's surname and end up with that of a husband, perhaps changing her name two or three times if the tale is particularly tragic. The case differs slightly but significantly with *Lolita*, as the titular girl is born Dolores Haze and dies as Dolly Schiller. Lolita, the name on the book's cover, is thus also an acquired name, one bestowed upon her by a man who straddles the position of both patriarch and lover. It is *his* name for her, nobody else's, and thus has a branding function. She is *his* Lolita. Lolita also differs from her eighteenth-century counterparts in that it is her name alone on the cover. For instance, Richardson's *Pamela* is subtitled *Or Virtue Rewarded*, whereas Sade's tale of unrelenting ravishment is *Justine: The Misfortunes of Virtue*.⁷ *Lolita* is however, offered the alternate title "Confession of a White Widowed Male" (3) in John Ray Jr's foreword, which is appropriate, as this is certainly not a book that fetishises virtue, and is arguably not even one about a girl called Lolita. Rather, it is a narrative of male desire in

⁷ *Justine* is an erotic parody of *Pamela*. Richardson's wildly popular epistolary novel shares a certain thematic coincidence with *Lolita*. In *Pamela*, the male author's rendering of how a beautiful, almost hysterically virtuous teenage servant girl relates her master's repeated and increasingly menacing attempts on her virginity smacks slightly of titillation masquerading as something exemplary. The novel was accused by some of moral hypocrisy, something that de Sade's *Justine* and Henry Fielding's *Shamela* work to satirise.

which *Lolita* is represented as an aesthetic mirage of Humbert's sexual fixation.

The Edenic framework of the novel supports and informs this subjugation of female experience as it promotes a gender hierarchy. Nabokov specifically evokes Genesis as a metaphor for his own creative process. The apologue of a male God creating a whole universe out of nothing is the very apotheosis of the work of the artist for Nabokov. In this model of Creation, the male mind is the origin of everything, he is father of all invention. Essentially, the dominant concept of creation is one where woman's primary biological function, her maternal capacity, is undermined and supplanted by a bloodless, patriarchal idea of creation. This concept will be elaborated on over the course of this chapter, and will form one of the central tenets of this entire thesis: the idea that Nabokov's aesthetic ideology is based on an implicit philosophical dualism that works to reify male artistic creativity while negating female biological procreation. His employment of the Eden narrative sets a precedent for this ideological framework, aligning his own preeminent creation—his *Lolita*—with a Western patriarchal cultural heritage.

Part II: Humbert, the 'American Adam'⁸

⁸ In R.W.B. Lewis' study of the history of ideas through American literature of the Nineteenth Century, he identifies the titular "American Adam" as "a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (7).

The Edenic theme that Nabokov adopts also communicates with the historical and literary context of the novel's American setting. The Paradise motif takes on particular significance in this tale of young, American Dolores Haze and middle-aged European *émigré*, Humbert Humbert. It makes for an especially American theme in this, Nabokov's great American novel. For its Puritan settlers who fled religious persecution in Europe, the New World represented a new beginning—Paradise regained. The vast American wilderness itself assumed the likeness of an unspoilt utopia, a Garden of plenty where nature (and indeed the natives⁹) remained innocent of man's civilising touch. Such romantic hyperbole characterises Arthur Barlowe's report of 1584, where the captain describes an American soil that, "bringeth forth all things in abundance as in the first creation without toil or labour" (Smith 129). This American Eden was promoted as a god-given promised land for the displaced, a place for redemption and rebirth where purity might be recaptured, and a link to a "once perfect, now absent, human innocence" (Daemmrich 3). As Henry Nash Smith wrote in *Virgin Land*, "the society of the new nation was a concrete embodiment of what had been in Europe but a utopian dream" (129).

⁹ There is of course, a colonial dimension to the rhetorical fallacy of America as Eden, wherein native people are dehumanised in order to preserve the myth of white European entitlement to an undiscovered and uninhabited paradise. Nature and Native are hence collated to serve a Eurocentric notion of alterity.

This notion of a pilgrimage for a lost state of prelapsarian bliss¹⁰ has clear parallels with Humbert's own American expedition. As critic G.M. Hyde has noted, for Humbert, his nymph represents something like "the last American frontier", and his pursuit of her is an effort to, "unlock the gates of space and time and enter again his 'first world', where Annabel Leigh, who never grows up, is playing still on her 'intangible island of entranced time'" (118). The yearning for Eden is a nostalgia for the uninhibited freedom and security of childhood. Humbert's quest for Lolita is an attempt to reincarnate his seaside lover in another, to retrieve something of the past and return to the Paradisiacal Riviera setting of his thwarted sexual encounter with young Annabel.

The Annabel history itself is of multifarious symbology. It is firstly and most obviously a reference to Poe's "Annabel Lee" and, as Appel notes, even Lolita's name, or rather the name Humbert calls her (Lo. Lee. Ta.) is constructed to recall Poe's maiden in her "kingdom by the sea" (*Lolita* 328). In fact, Humbert's entire narrative seems to interact with Poe in a type of thematic affinity. As Dale E. Peterson has remarked, Humbert's "quest to repossess a vanished eidolon (Lolita) and the pursuit of a hallucinated, hidden double (Quilty) replicate central features of Poe's lyrics and detective stories"

¹⁰ Incidentally, the notion of an "American Eden" is revisited in Nabokov's posthumously published manuscript of *The Original of Laura*, in which we are told that the titular muse's grandfather "emigrated in 1920 from Moscow to New York with his wife Eva and his son Adam" (43).

(96). Ultimately however, it is biographical detail that underlines Humbert's interactions with Edgar.¹¹ Poe married his cousin Virginia when he was twenty-seven and she only thirteen. Humbert and Poe are thus two of a literary fraternity of "nympholepts", that also includes Dante and Petrarch (*Lolita* 19). In drawing these lines of comparison, Humbert contextualises his sexual predilection as a quirk of literary genius. As Haegert wrote, Humbert, "is not merely establishing ample erotic precedent for his own misconduct. He is also identifying himself as one of a noble company of spiritual explorers whose illustrious peregrinations throughout human history he can liken to his own" (146).

For Haegert, *Lolita* is essentially a chronicle of Humbert's attempt to recapture Paradise, in which he views himself, "as a kind of *émigré* quester in an alien wasteland, seeking the coveted grail of his European past amid the resplendent ruins of America" (145).

Lolita then belongs to a long literary tradition of male-oriented narratives of adventure and conquest, where the object of the quest—the Paradise landscape—takes on the characteristics of the perfect female desire object—hard-found and hard-won, and all the more covetable for it. In her study of the paradise motif in literature, *Enigmatic Bliss*, Ingrid G. Daemmrich lists the characteristics that

¹¹ Humbert registers as "Edgar" when checking in to the Enchanted Hunters with *Lolita*. (118) According to Appel, Poe is referred to more than twenty times in *Lolita*, outnumbering Mérimée, Shakespeare and Joyce (*Lolita* 330).

typify the male quester. According to Daemmrich, he is marked by “persistence, arrogance, nostalgia, the unwillingness to accept the confining conditions of reality, a love of adventure, and a willingness to deceive or be deceived”¹² (108). Interestingly, Humbert Humbert exhibits most, if not all of these attributes. Certainly, his persistence reveals itself in his rabid determination to have Lolita at all moral costs, and it is arrogance that underlines his contempt for his perceived inferiors. Nostalgia of course, propels Humbert’s entire narrative—the trauma of lost love initiating his fetishistic quest— and his narrative style—all spectacle, seduction and sleight of hand— speaks both to his willingness to deceive and be deceived, and to his refusal to allow the “confining conditions of reality” get in the way of a good story. However, the most constant characteristics of the adventurer-hero are undoubtedly his maleness and his *activity*. He is a conquering hero, his conquest a feminised landscape that is marked by *passivity*. As such, the rhetoric of the quest narrative is one of female submission to male desire, and in this aspect, Humbert’s narrative also follows suit.

As the title of Smith’s *Virgin Land* suggests, the mythology and symbolism of the new frontier was inextricably tied to ideas of sexual

¹² Daemmrich also provides a list of recurring features of paradise narratives: “(1) emblematic names; (2) author or narrator intrusions, often signalled by intentional references to other texts; (3) intertextual references; (4) an overemphasis of seemingly insignificant details; and (5) humor” (Daemmrich 23). At least four of the above five could be included in a list of dominant themes in *Lolita* (perhaps excluding the fourth, as Nabokov uses emphasis and coincidence specifically to alert the reader to significance).

purity and femininity. Annette Kolodny calls this trope, “America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy” (4). It is a fantasy of a communion between man and nature, and of a land that is untouched yet fertile—at once virginal and maternal, “the total female principle of gratification” (4). Edenic America laid herself out before the frontier settler in silent acquiescence. In this figurative discourse, the practice of cultivation of the rich virgin soil was depicted as raping and deflowering, what Kolodny describes as, “a bold exercise of masculine power over the feminine” (22).

Of course, Humbert’s particular American pilgrimage is one of lust, the object of his rapacious venture an assumedly virgin American girl, and not the soil of American “virgin land”. The metaphorical is replaced with the literal. However, in some readings, including Haegert’s, a version of the pastoral metaphor persists, having its tenor and vehicle transposed: Lolita the girl comes to represent some overarching principle of Americanness. In this respect, Haegert’s reading is akin to Hyde’s and indeed to other critics’, including Dana Brand’s and Rachel Bowlby’s (which will be further discussed in Chapter Three) who treat the novel as representing a clash of Old World and New World ideologies. Nabokov himself seemed to warn against such interpretations, stating in his afterword to the novel that, “an otherwise intelligent reader who flipped through the first part described *Lolita* as ‘Old Europe debauching young America,’ while another flipper saw in it

‘Young America debauching old Europe’ (314). He then goes on to defend the novel from accusations of anti-American sentiment, stating, “I chose American motels instead of Swiss hotels or English inns only because I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights that other American writers enjoy” (315).

The Paradise motif that dominates Part One of the novel does however, seem to communicate with its New England setting, if only for caustic ironic effect. Humbert describes himself as, “a brand-new American citizen of obscure European origin” (105) and this obscureness becomes the subject of much curiosity and anti-semitic innuendo¹³ among the Puritanical citizens of Ramsdale. There are “dark doubts” about Humbert “not Humberg” (118) Humbert in this New World utopia, this supposed “land of the free”.¹⁴

¹³ John Farlow complains to Humbert that Ramsdale has too many Italian tradespeople, adding, “but on the other hand we are still spared—,” at which point his wife Jean, suspecting that Humbert is Jewish and that John is about to embarrass himself, tactfully interrupts (*Lolita* 79). Jean’s suspicions may have originated with Charlotte, who, Humbert relates, told him that, “if she ever found out I did not believe in Our Christian God, she would commit suicide” (75). Humbert is met with similar suspicions in *The Enchanted Hunters* (118), an establishment whose note paper declares “NEAR CHURCHES” and “NO DOGS”, (261) code, as Andrea Pitzer points out, for Gentiles only: “No Dogs, No Coloreds, No Jews’ was still used in the United States into and beyond the 1960s” (Pitzer 250). Perhaps, Humbert muses, the “silky cocker spaniel” Lolita had petted on their visit to the hotel had been “a baptized one” (261). Even Quilty, in his final showdown with his doppelgänger-rival announces; “This is a Gentile’s house, you know. Maybe, you’d better run along” (297).

¹⁴ As D.H Lawrence derisively remarks in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*:

“Freedom anyhow? The land of the free! This the land of the free! Why, if I say anything that displeases them, the free mob will lynch me, and that’s my freedom. Free? Why, I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject

The division of the novel into two parts is significant here. While Part One, with its Edenic trope and hazy Riviera memories, works to mythologise Lolita as ethereal nymphet and demonic temptress, Part Two, which navigates the vast American landscape, logging its motels and motor courts, gift stores and diners, represents something of an expulsion from Paradise. It is a division of myth and material reality. Indeed, this recalls another feature of the virgin land motif: the very ephemerality of bliss. As Daemmrich notes, “Familiarity with paradise destroys its purity and attractiveness” (114). It is Humbert’s ‘seduction’ by his Lolita-Eve at the close of Part One that sees her transformed into a “disgustingly conventional little girl” (148) in the first chapter of Part Two. This, Daemmrich says, is typical of paradise narratives: “Once the moment of sexual union has passed, Eden slips into a remote, irretrievable past” (134).

While Humbert is somewhat disillusioned by the base materiality of his nymphet (the subject of which will be fully explicated in Chapter Three) the fabled American landscape itself is demythologised in the novel’s second part. Humbert reflects on the beauty of the “lyrical, epic, tragic, but never Arcadian American Wilds” (168). His language at first is reminiscent of the Renaissance travelogues that sung the praises of an anthropomorphised American landscape that was wild but innocent, unkempt but unspoiled: “They

fear of his fellow countrymen. Because, as I say, they are free to lynch the moment he shows he is not one of them”(42).

are beautiful, heart-rendingly beautiful, those wilds, with a quality of wide-eyed, unsung, innocent surrender that my lacquered, toy-bright Swiss villages and exhaustively lauded Alps no longer possess.”

However, Humbert laments that the American landscape is no sanctuary for a naked Adam and his Eve. Rather it treats, “the open-air lover” with distinct hostility:

Poisonous plants burn his sweetheart’s
 buttocks, nameless insects sting his; sharp
 items of the forest floor prick his knees, insects
 hers; and all around there abides a sustained
 rustle of potential snakes—*que dis-je*, of semi-
 extinct dragons!—while the crablike seeds of
 ferocious flowers cling, in a hideous crust, to
 gartered black sock and sloppy white sock
 alike. (168)

Both Humbert’s American Eden¹⁵ and his American Eve prove more mundane than mythopoeic. This is because his vision of paradise—his fabled “Kingdom by the Sea”—is thoroughly his own construction. As such, Humbert’s fantasy of a Lolita-Eve is as detached from the reality of its object—from conventional Dolores Haze—as the pilgrim’s dreams of a land of milk and honey were from the New England soil they settled on. The paradise quest narrative is marked

¹⁵ In *Lolita*, America can be a heaven or a hellscape, as encapsulated in a quip from Quilty: “Any Place. Paradise, Wash., Hell Canyon. Who cares?”

by a willing delusion as to its object's concrete being. Humbert involves the girl in his Eden narrative without her knowledge or participation. Somewhat paradoxically however, it is precisely when Lolita appears to perform her assigned role of temptress that the narrator's use of the Paradise motif expires. Specifically, it is her *active participation*—her seduction of Humbert in the Enchanted Hunters—that spoils Humbert's illusion of bliss. This is because, in accordance with the rules and conventions of the quest narrative, the desired object is traditionally and ideally inert. Even Milton's Eve is marked by her "beauty and submissive charms" (*Paradise Lost*, IV 498). It is when Eve displays initiative— when she becomes a thinking, conniving, active consciousness—that hell, quite literally, breaks loose.

But Lolita is not Eve, and is in fact, happily oblivious to her role in Humbert's fantasy: "There she would be, a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a newspaper, as indifferent to my ecstasy as if it were something she had sat upon" (165). Humbert, "the enchanted traveler" (166) strives only for an illusion of the girl. The fact that having possessed her she proves to be not an ethereal temptress or creature of paradise ultimately does not matter, because he continues to construct her as he wishes. We are told:

She had entered my world, umber and black
Humbertland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed

it with a shrug of amused distaste; and it
 seemed to me now that she was ready to turn
 away from it with something akin to plain
 repulsion. (166)

Humbert on the other hand, “still dwelled deep in my elected
 paradise—a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames—but
 still a paradise” (166). This is Humbertland, *his elected paradise*, his
 conscious creation. Lolita herself is his conscious creation. What’s
 more, she is not even an original, but a copy, a derivation of an
 “original girl-child” (9) who herself is derived from Poe—not a girl-
 child but a literary allusion, a replica of a replica.

Part III: Of Nice Girls and Nymphets

“All our sorrows, are virgins or whores.” (Nabokov, *Ada* 288)

In John Ray Jr.’s foreword to Humbert’s narrative, we are told that
 one unfamiliar sounding Mrs. Richard F. Schiller, “died in childbed,
 giving birth to a stillborn baby girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Gray
 Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest” (*Lolita* 4). This tragic
 figure, it transpires, is our Lolita, dead at seventeen, a mere five
 weeks since the death of Humbert Humbert of coronary thrombosis.
 It is *how* she is portrayed in death that is interesting. In this morbid
 Christmas nativity scene, where a gloomy gray star substitutes for
 the star of Bethlehem, Dolores Schiller is framed as the Virgin
 Mary—the *mater dolorosa*. And so, the girl who at twelve years of

age was compared to the originator of sin becomes, in death, something akin to the Mother of God. Lolita's characterisation straddles two absolutely disparate feminine archetypes; she is a contradiction born of a Western discursive tradition that neglects to navigate the spaces between extremes. The consequent problematisation of female sexuality gives rise to the oxymoronic idea of the Virgin Mother, which reifies a biological impossibility as the ultimate feminine ideal. As Mary Ellmann eruditely pointed out, "Christ honored only the woman who conceived without intercourse, and the prostitute who resigned from it" (179). Reverence of motherhood is undercut by a hypocrisy that demonises female sexuality. Misogyny is presented as morality. Motherhood is a mark of impurity and the Virgin Birth is Christian mythology's answer to this. However, even the Virgin Mother presented at the temple forty days after the birth of Jesus to be purified in accordance with Jewish tradition (Luke.2:22-40), and the derivative Christian practice of "churching"—where new mothers were blessed by a priest before re-entering the church, continued into the late twentieth century¹⁶.

¹⁶ The churching ritual was defined as a thanksgiving for the survival of the mother and the birth of her child (Houlbrooke vii). In this respect, the Christian ritual differentiated itself from the Jewish purification ritual outlined in Leviticus (12:1-8) with its emphasis on blood and sacrificial offerings. In practice however, churching was a ritual cleansing shrouded in superstitions of bad luck and notions of shame (Houlbrooke 1). The underlying idea taken from Leviticus was that a woman was contaminated in the act of giving birth and would remain unclean for a total of forty days after the birth of a boy child, or eighty days if the child was a girl. In the Catholic ritual, the new mother would await the priest at the church door after Mass, sometimes veiled. "She is sprinkled with holy water, and

Where sexual reproduction itself is taboo, sexual abstinence remains the single sanctioned form of female sexuality within the Christian framework that Nabokov evokes.

The Madonna/Whore dichotomy is a thematic constant in literature. Its prevalence lies in its familiarity, with repetition lending it false validity. Its persistent resonance also owes something to the appealing simplicity of binary opposition. Thus, in narratives driven by male perspectives, female characterisation is regularly reduced to categorisation along sexual extremes. This is an entirely patriarchal treatment of femininity, one in which woman is defined by her sexual availability to men. It is also a distinctly capitalist one. Historically, in marriages pertaining wealth or royal bloodlines, the bride had to be a virgin in order to guarantee the legitimacy of the heir. On the other extreme, the figure of the whore occupies the precise point of intersection between sex and capital. Between these two archetypes, we see how women's bodies are commodified. The virgin, in her exclusivity, is of premium value, while the woman who gives too generously of her sexuality decimates her perceived worth. In *The Purity Myth*, Jessica Valenti unravels the essential message in modern culture's reverence of chastity: "A woman's worth lies in her ability—or her refusal—to be sexual" (Valenti 10). This distinction

handed a lighted candle. After giving thanks to the Virgin, the mother kisses the hem of the priest's robe, and lets herself be led to the alter, where she deposits an offering" (Shorter 289). The Catholic Church officially discontinued the practice in 1966.

alone designates what we infer about a woman's moral character. She is defined simply by what she does, or more importantly does *not* do: "You can be vapid, stupid, and unethical, but so long as you've never had sex, you're a 'good' (i.e., 'moral') girl and therefore worthy of praise" (24).

Mary Ellmann suggests that the cultural prevalence of one side of the dichotomy over the other oscillates over time. Collective fantasies are historically defined; they are a response to the sociopolitical zeitgeist:

Two tastes seem to alternate in time.

Imagination veers away from sexual agreement or contract, substituting either *fantastic resistance or fantastic acceptance*. The first perhaps belongs especially to cultural periods of energy, as Freud emphasises feminine retreat and masculine force, the dream of rape; the second to languid periods like our own; the dream of total compliance. (Ellmann 126, emphasis added)

Writing in 1968, a little over a decade after *Lolita* entered the public consciousness and became a byword for that "dream of total compliance", Ellmann argues that the figure of woman as she exists in the imaginary sphere, or indeed, the sphere of narrative fiction, has come to replace actual woman. With her untidy compendium of

personality traits, moods, vices and virtues contending for prominence within the body of a real-life human being, the “actual woman, probably marked by neither extraordinary virtue nor extraordinary vice” (103) seems somewhat unappealing. Rather, a polarised and abbreviated portrait of woman comes to dominate in popular discourse; one that can be reduced to the neat little formula of girls who will and girls who won’t. “When imagination insists upon a form in opposition to reality, the effect must perhaps always be one of simplification. Actual variations are ignored in the effort to dream of *consistency*” (132). A streamlined picture of a fictitious ‘woman across the ages’, uncomplicated by the idiosyncrasies of individuality, thus serves to placate a desire for absolutes.

Nabokov’s treatment of Lolita plays on the fluidity of the virgin/whore divide. While Humbert is by no means a Christian moralist, he does seem irked by concerns for Lolita’s purity. Although Humbert insists that the girl exudes a peculiar sexual magnetism, his fantasies are preoccupied with plots to sate his desire whilst ensuring that, “the young lady’s new white purse” remains intact (62). Essentially, much of Humbert’s (supposed) sense of guilt derives from his assumption that the girl is a virgin, and thereby, in fulfilling his lubricious objective, he will deflower and defile an innocent. Fortuitously, he finds himself relieved of both the task and the burden on his conscience: “Did I deprive her of her flower? Sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover” (135). The

shift here exposes the inadequacy of a definition of innocence that rests entirely in a physical state. The girl “had been debauched” (135), and thus degraded. Of course, as Nabokov allies Lolita with Eve from the very beginning of the text, her susceptibility to corruption is presupposed; she is destined to fall from the offset. What alters after the Enchanted Hunters ‘seduction’ scene is her perceived moral state — this Eve has already tasted the forbidden fruit. This in turn repositions Humbert in the prelapsarian allegorical framework of the text: relieved of his role as nefarious serpent by thirteen-year-old Charlie Holmes (Lo’s debaucher), Humbert immediately assumes the more benign, and infinitely less responsible role of Adam, the beguiled.

Part IV: Adam’s Other Woman

By creating an Edenic backdrop for his novel, Nabokov automatically encourages an association of Humbert as Adam and Dolores Haze as Eve. The association also encompasses Clare Quilty as Satan, and Nabokov himself as the divine creator, who cannot resist revealing his authorial omnipotence by flaunting artifice, pointing out narrational coincidence, and infiltrating the text in the anagrammatic guise of Vivian Darkbloom.¹⁷ In his aforementioned essay “On a

¹⁷ In his introduction to *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov identifies the “mysterious intruder” who infiltrates the novel with his own “peculiar code message”, as “an anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me” (xiv). Nabokovian proxies appear in several of the author’s works. *Pnin* for instance is narrated by one Vladimir Vladimirovich N., and *Look at the Harlequins* is the fictional

Book Entitled *Lolita*”, Nabokov rejects allegory as something for the Freudians and generalists, something unworthy of art, “devised by literary mythists and sociologists” (*Lolita* 314). As such, *Lolita* does not present us with a straightforward transposition of the Genesis story with like-for-like character arcs and plot points. *Lolita*’s Edenic framework is self-interrupting and self-subverting, with Humbert interchangeably presented as Adam and Satan, while Quilty the doppelgänger acts as a more perfect manifestation of the latter’s characteristics. Such is Nabokov’s commitment to the theme of doubles and mirror images that he even offers an alternate to Eve in the figure of Lilith, and thus confuses our simple impression of Eden: “Humbert was perfectly capable of intercourse with Eve, but it was Lilith he longed for” (20). In one remark, Humbert adds multitudinous layers of interpretation to his rendition of Paradise.¹⁸

Lilith, in the Rabbinic tradition, was Adam’s first wife. Her inception is revisionist—Lilith comes to be out of a discrepancy

autobiography of Vadim Vadimovich N.—an American author of Russian extraction whose life and life-works bear striking resemblance to Nabokov’s own. Even in his essay “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”, Nabokov seems to speak to the absurdity of the notion of an authentic authorial voice, saying, “After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may might strike one—may strike me, in fact—as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book” (*Lolita* 311).

¹⁸ In *Look at the Harlequins*, the protagonist becomes enthralled by an eleven-year-old girl, the conspicuously named Dolly Von Borg. He encounters the “little tramp” again thirteen years later and describes her as having “Lilithan long eyes” (138). At the end of their meeting he remarks, “Paradise is a Persian word. It was simply Persian to meet again like that” (138). The *Lolita* that Nabokov pays homage to here is the Edenic one—the sexualised image of Lilith in the Garden.

between versions of Genesis (1:27 and 2.22)¹⁹. Unlike Eve, she was created equal to Adam, from the same clay as he rather than of his spare rib.²⁰ Lilith refused to submit to her husband's will and to lay beneath him in coitus and left him for a self-imposed state of exile beside the Red Sea, where she persisted as a type of siren figure. Echoes of Humbert's young seaside lover, Annabel Leigh are the most immediate inference here. Lilith was Adam's first as Annabel was Humbert's. Lilith's mythology extends far beyond mere insubordination, however. Hers is a murky past, far more complex and in many ways, more interesting than that of her successor, Eve. Her history is capricious and elusive and so are the ways in which Nabokov employs it. Unlike Eve, whose condemnation is rooted in one momentary act of transgression, Lilith is explicitly demonic in nature.

Lilith's mythology is ancient (predating the Torah) and diverse.

¹⁹Gen.1:27 "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (ESV). This depiction of the sexes' equal origin, both created equally in their maker's image, is contradicted in the account of Gen. 2.22: "And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man." The legend of the rib works as what Joseph Campbell calls "a patriarchal inversion (giving precedence to the male) of the earlier myth of the hero born from the goddess Earth" (30). Rabbinical tradition developed the Genesis I version of creation to indicate that God made Adam and Lilith from dust at the same time—some say as twins joined back to back (Dame, Rivlin, and Wenkart, 7).

²⁰Some versions, such as the one cited by Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, have Lilith formed of a poorer quality clay than her male counterpart: "God then formed Lilith, the first woman, just as He had formed Adam, except that He used filth and sediment instead of pure dust" (*Hebrew Myths* 65). Thereby, some modicum of the idea of male supremacy is maintained. The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* however, makes no such distinction, simply stating that, "He then created a woman for Adam, from the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith" (Stern and Mirsky 183).

She is “mentioned in the Talmud, elaborated on in Midrash and in Kabbalah, whispered about in stories, passed down orally, often from mother to daughter” (Dame, Rivlin, and Wenkart xv). Her most well known appearance is in the eleventh-century Hebrew text, *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, in which she is a voracious procreator, giving birth to one hundred demon children daily (Stern and Mirsky 184). In medieval Europe, she becomes the envious estranged wife and bereaved mother who jealously steals other women’s children. In the Kabbalist bible, the Zohar, she is a wife of Samael, the Jewish counterpart to Satan, and is the harlot queen of the underworld.²¹

The same source has her subvert her allegiances, becoming a mistress to God while the Shekhinah, mother of the House of Israel, goes into exile with her children. In 3rd Century versions, Lilith visits women in childbirth and strangles their newborn babies. She also appears as a succubus, coming to men in their sleep and robbing them of their seed for use in the production of her monstrous offspring (Dame, Rivlin, and Wenkart xvi).

²¹ There are a total of fifty-six direct references to Lilith in the Zohar, making it the most abundant source of Midrash on the subject (Biggs 111). The Zohar maintains the main facets of Lilith’s legend (her creation at the same time as Adam, from the same dust), however, it also makes interesting elaborations about her relationship to evil: stating that Lilith and Samael (Satan) were one and the same; male and female facets of a united being or force. It states that upon her creation, Lilith’s body “came to host the defective animating spark of life that was Samael’s, whereas Adam’s body came to host the animating spark of Jehovah’s perfect light” (111). It also teaches that she is the Serpent who deceived Eve, calling her a “snake”, “female of Samael” and a “wife of harlotry” (Zohar 1:148a-148b). The Zohar also links Lilith to the death of children, punishing the young for the sins of their fathers, and specifically associates her with the spread of diphtheria (Zohar 2:264b).

Though the particulars of her legend vary from text to text, promiscuous sexuality is a constant of her character. As Lilly Rivlin states, her myth serves as:

a carrier of social values, as a boundary for straying females, and as a convenient totem for men and women frightened by their inner desires. Lilith, in her many guises, was a scapegoat for instinctual (and thus evil) drives.

(Dame, Rivlin, and Wenkart 10).

It is in this capacity that Humbert invokes her; an embodiment of monstrous, nymphaean sexuality; an apt substitute for his Lolita, her rapacious allure absorbs the blame for his perverse compulsion.

There are however more implicit allusions to Lilith at work in the novel. Dead babies and death in childbirth is one of the more troubling tropes in *Lolita*. From the tragic nativity scene of Mrs. Richard Schiller and her stillborn girl, (4) through Valeria's death in childbed, (30) Jean Farlow's two miscarriages (104), Charlotte Haze's "blurred, blond male baby", of which she seldom spoke (80), Mona Dahl's baby who "alas, did not live!"(223), and the grotesque, lonely image of stillborn babies in motel toilets (146), Lilith's infanticidal presence reverberates through the text, marrying the naturally opposed ideas of birth and death. Lilith thus represents man's fundamental horror with feminine sexuality; that aspect of her ability to bring forth life that reminds him of his own mortality, of his

fleshiness. Woman presents to him two voids; that before he existed and that to come with death. Nabokov begins his autobiography, *Speak, Memory* as follows; “The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness” (5). He goes on to tell of a “young chronophobiac” who, when presented with old home movies taken a few weeks before his birth, was horrified by the sight of

a brand-new baby carriage standing there on
the porch, with the smug, encroaching air of a
coffin; even that was empty, as if, in the reverse
course of events, his very bones had
disintegrated. (5)

The correlation Nabokov draws between birth and death is central to this thesis as it epitomises the author’s hierarchical treatment of man’s intellectual propensity to create over woman’s biological function of procreation. This theme will be expanded upon in Chapter Five. However, the negation of female biological procreation is integral not only to Lilith’s demonic mythology, but to the Judeo-Christian creation myth itself—where God is father of all creation, and the role of the mother is rendered defunct. While woman’s reproductive function serves to tie her to matter and ultimately, to mortality, Godly or godlike creativity—that is, creation that emanates from the masculine mind—signifies transcendence and immortality.

Another prevailing facet of Lilith’s legend in Nabokov’s

invocation of her is her role as succubus. It is neither Annabel nor Lolita that acquire this monstrous attribute, but “Humbert the Cubus” who “schemed and dreamed” (71), of his own nocturnal visitation upon an unconscious Dolores Haze. Here, the seemingly simple analogy of Lilith with Lolita is subverted as Humbert takes on shades of her fiendish attributes. This subversion exposes the fallacy of Humbert’s myth-making, disavowing his attempt to portray his victim as a demon child by revealing his intention to violate her.

Interestingly, this is not Nabokov’s first rendering of Lilith; she is the subject of a 1928 poem that remained unpublished until *Lolita* had garnered the author fame. For this reason, we can suppose that Nabokov never intended a reading of one to influence the meaning of the other, and when an English translation of the poem appeared some forty years after its inception, Nabokov was quick to its defence, stating that, “Intelligent readers will abstain from examining this impersonal fantasy for any links with my later fiction” (*Poems and Problems* 50). Although it is unlikely that Nabokov had anything of that earlier work in mind when he decided to bring Lilith into *Lolita*, the fact is that the poem does exist and there is more than a little thematic crossover between the two texts, inconvenient as that may have been for the author. It ought also to be noted that it was not uncommon for Nabokov to put an affront to the intellect of critics who saw unintended themes arise in his work. It would be negligent, however, to ignore blatant similarities and maintain that the two

works are mutually exclusive of one another. The Lilith of the poem is, after all, “a naked little girl” (52).

The poem is more definitively sexual than anything that appears in *Lolita*. It is narrated by a dead man who finds himself in what he believes to be heaven. There he encounters young Lilith; “She had a water lily in her curls/and was as graceful as a woman.” She is portrayed here as the girl child with the woman’s wiles, what Nabokov would later christen the “nymphet”, characterised by “fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering insidious charm” (*Lolita*, 17). The symbolic and phonetic bond of Lilith with the lily is echoed in *Lolita*, where Charlotte Haze announces to Humbert, “That was my Lo, [...] and these are my lilies” (40). In her article, “Lolita, ‘the most mythopoeic nymphet’,” Christine Raguet identifies other possible interpretations of this passage, in which Humbert finds the perfect reincarnation of his “Riviera love”. Raguet notes that the lily commonly acts as, “the emblem of purity, which also happens to be the flower of love” (19). It is also associated with water, and this is a passage of text drenched in allusions to the “princedom by the sea” (*Lolita* 9) that haunts Humbert’s fantasies. Raguet finds one such allusion that linguistically ties that seaside locale to *Lolita*: “Humbert being bilingual, the homophony between Lo and the French word for ‘water’ cannot have escaped him”, she states, suggesting that this reinforces the link that ties “little Lo, Annabel Leigh, his first love, and Edgar Allan Poe’s Annabel Lee” (19).

It would make a good deal of sense if the Lilith that Nabokov created in 1928 was the same figure Humbert references in *Lolita*. The Lilith of the poem is young and sexually licentious. She is a femme fatale and a siren-type belonging to the monstrous female tradition. She lures our narrator with the promise of erotic pleasure but ultimately leads him to eternal damnation. In such ways she is the perfect nymphet, for she is perfectly guilty of seduction: "Without inducement, without effort/Just with the slowness of pert glee,/like wings she gradually opened/her pretty knees in front of me" (*Poems and Problems* 52). There is, our narrator delights, no need for force as she wilfully gives herself to him, and we are reminded of the scene in the *Enchanted Hunters* where Humbert recounts, "it was she who seduced me" (132).

What's more, it is revealed that this Lilith is in fact another Nabokovian phantasm of memory, for she is made in the image of "an unforgotten child" of the narrator's youth, recalling to him, "the miller's youngest daughter as she stepped/out of the water, and she was all golden/ with a wet fleece between her legs." The young beauty emerging from water evokes another recurring icon in Nabokov's fiction; that of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. As an image it has monumental resonance; it is etched in the collective consciousness, instantly and eternally recognisable. Its symbology is unequivocally sexual, Venus being the goddess of physical love, and it is in this capacity that Nabokov evokes her when he makes his

crass allusion to a fictitious Freudian doctor, one “Dr. Kitzler, Eryx, Miss” (*Lolita* 250), Kitzler being German for clitoris, Eryx being the cult of Aphrodite, Venus’ Greek equivalent.

The subject matter of Botticelli’s depiction of Venus is more specifically, sexuality on a threshold, an ethereal rendering of the mundane passage of adolescence. The Venus of the painting is born pure, emerging from nature’s emblem of purity—water. In the painting, a nymph beckons the goddess to the shore—a new frontier of sexual maturity. In her hands, the nymph holds a pink cloak to cover Venus’s naked body; its loops and folds clearly reminiscent of the vulva and labia. In *Lolita*, Humbert repeatedly equates his nymphet with Venus, and marks the specific resemblance of plump, pregnant Dolly Schiller to, “Botticelli’s russet Venus—the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty” (270). She even has “Florentine breasts” (274). Lolita with bronchitis becomes his, “Venus febriculosa” (198), her resistance to his unrelenting advances weakened by fever. This Latinate lyrical decoy is a typical Humbertian contrivance, devised to dilute our sense of revulsion with a dose of verbal wit. The use of the Venus metaphor alone has much the same appeasing function. It elevates our image of Lolita to a celestial plane above her grim reality. By positing the girl as a goddess of love, Humbert again makes her a complicit agent in their unsavoury affair. In this respect the Venus analogy works in much the same way as that of Lilith or Eve; it speaks to the girl’s inherent

lustfulness, reifies her sexual ripeness, and thus alleviates the blame we might rightly place with her captor. Lolita however, is not a sex goddess but the gaudy and tragicomic semblance of “a plaster replica of the Venus di Milo (*sic*), half buried in sand” (58). She is a counterfeit copy made to resemble something priceless—composed of plaster and not marble, the prosaic likeness of something precious. The statuette also represents the girl’s state of helplessness—the Venus de Milo being famously armless, and her legs in this instance being submerged in sand—she is a crippled beauty and a perfect object—entirely incapable of action. The concurrence of the image of the Roman goddess in the Liliith poem exemplifies how Nabokov’s model for the feminine is both conservative and prescribed, in this instance depending upon a confluence of Classical mythology and Early Renaissance aesthetics.

Part V: Populating Eden

“And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.” (Gen.2.22)

Although Humbert dots his narrative with Venus’s name, its total effect has less impact than his single mention of Liliith, for the shadows of her demoniac mythology haunt the text as nocturnal invaders and stillborn babies. She is however, superseded by another. Conceding that Humbert is perhaps more capable of

intercourse with Eve than he originally thought, Dolores Haze adopts the mantle of Adam's second, more notorious companion. The most important difference between these two women from a hermeneutic perspective is that Eve, unlike Lilith, requires no introduction; her sullied reputation precedes her. This is something that Nabokov is happy to exploit; for if his isolated allusion to Lilith was devised to bother those seeking to reduce his novel to straightforward allegory, his multiple echoes of Eve exist specifically to simplify Humbert's portrait of Dolores Haze. Eve as a signifier is more accessible than Lilith, what she represents is more defined and universal. While the varied facets of Lilith's backstory create a somewhat mercurial character, Eve is ever more consistent in how she is portrayed. The reader comprehends without question what Eve denotes.

That is not to say that Eve's mythology has been free from historical misrepresentation. As Carol Meyers illustrates in her book on the subject, *Rediscovering Eve*, translation and interpretation have contributed their share of idiomatic debris to the Eden narrative. One of the most striking examples of this is that the word 'sin', to which the Eve of Humbert's narrative is intrinsically bound, simply does not appear in Genesis 2-3. Yet in Ecclesiasticus, or The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach—a second century BCE Hebrew text—we have the following: "Woman is the origin of sin, and it is

through her that we all die” (Ecclus. 25:24).²²

Along with sin and the second rung on the ontological ladder, Eve owns the rights to the concept of temptation. Perhaps unsurprisingly however, this is another example of intertextual embellishment, as Eve did not ‘tempt’ Adam in the Hebrew text. Rather, “she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (ESV, Gen. 3:6) Adam participates without any enticement or witchery. As Phyllis Tribble observes, “the narrator quickly reports their disobedience, omitting any theological judgement, psychological analysis, or moral evaluation. Simply put, the serpent has tempted both the woman and the man” (129).

Yet the Eve that we know is synonymous with seduction, and it is that Eve that Humbert harkens to in his model for *Lolita*, for it is from Eve that we acquire the perpetual cliché of the *femme fatale* and of malicious female sexuality. This trope recurs with such

²² Similarly, Meyers points out that the idea of man’s primary creation and woman’s necessary secondariness is a product of translation bias, borne out of the fact that Hebrew is a gendered language without any neutral nouns. In the Hebraic text, God forms ‘adam, which is almost invariably understood as ‘man’, perhaps because it is a masculine noun. Meyers refutes this supposed proof of man’s ontological priority: “The translation “man” ignores a striking and significant wordplay between ‘adam and the substance used to form ‘adam, namely ‘adamah, [...] a term designating cultivable land” (71). This etymological echo speaks to the organic connection of humanity to the earth, and does not distinguish a gender for this first being. Rather, Myers argues, “the ‘adam created by God in Genesis 2:6 likely represents a sexually undifferentiated first human. More specifically, given that the surgical procedure of Genesis, 2:21-22 produces two gendered beings (Woman and Man), the prior ‘adam is androgynous” (72). Yet, the prevailing discourse around Adam and Eve is always dichotomous; he being first, she being second. She is understood to be essentially derivative and thus deficient. Misinterpretation of the origin story has thus become what Meyers calls, “the repressive norm” (62).

regularity that it has been incorporated into the collective consciousness as a truth *a priori*. Its origins are not in the Hebrew Bible, but arise in later variants as validation for preexisting misogyny, as the following passage from Meyers illustrates:

In an early third-century CE work, Eve
'persuaded' Adam to eat the forbidden fruit
(Tertullian, Or. 8.8). By the next century, she
beguiles him. And it gets worse, as the words
'wicked', 'temptress', 'deception', and other
pejorative terms enter theological discourse.

(64)

With each incarnation, Eve the Everywoman takes on the biases of the era that recreates her. She is in this sense, a phenomenon of the folklore tradition; for the common ideas that permeate through Western thought about Eden are not all aspects of one definitive text, but rather products of cumulative storytelling, of centuries worth of slight mutations and modifications. In his own evocation of Eden, Nabokov also contributes to this literary heritage. The story as we understand it today has evolved into something similar to, but significantly different from its already murky Hebrew origin. What was essentially a simple story, neutral in tone, has gained emphasis where none was implied. It is now apparently a tale of temptation and sin, whereby its original inception is exceptional for its exclusion of such ideas. Similarly, the term "fall" with which the Eden narrative is

synonymous is simply anachronistic to the primary Hebraic text, and likely enters Western discourse with Plato's *Phaedo*²³. The notion of The Fall of Man becomes truly indoctrinated into the literary canon and popular thought with *Paradise Lost*. In fact, Milton can be held accountable for the proliferation of quite a few accepted truisms regarding Genesis 2-3 that are rather elaborations of his own, the most obvious example being the common acceptance in the Western imagination that the forbidden fruit was an apple—something that the source material leaves unspecified.

Nabokov's rendering of Eden is doubtless informed by Milton's. It is hard to imagine a more Luciferian hero than enlightened European, Humbert Humbert—the transgressor; himself confused which character in the Edenic template he more honestly represents. In Quilty as Satan proper—the unapologetic embodiment of Humbert/Adam's dark side, we are offered a typically Nabokovian devil; a cunning rogue adept in the trickery of wordplay, despicable but still of considerable wit. He is “the red fiend” (*Lolita* 247). Even his physicality belies his devilish affinity, as Humbert describes his final confrontation with a Quilty who was, “naked and goatish under his

²³ During “The Argument from Recollection” (72e-78b) Socrates cites “recollection” as a proof of the soul's immortality. To illustrate this, he uses the example of two sticks, apparently equal in size. Socrates asks, “Do they seem to us to be equal in the sense of actual equality, or do they *fall short* of it in so far as they only approximate to equality?” (74d, emphasis added) This idea of the material world *falling short* of some previously experienced realm where abstract concepts are realised in their absolute form (Plato's theory of the Forms) is repeated throughout the dialogue. The application of the term “fall” to the Eden narrative is thus not too far removed from its Greek origins, as both evoke a prior state of perfection.

robe” (299). Here, Nabokov recalls images of the Sabbatic Goat or Baphomet; a figure that has morphed into the modern, cartoonish image of the horned devil with cloven hooves. The prevalence of this image of Satan stems from the horned gods of ancient Celtic and Greco-Roman mythologies; early Christian art often adopted pagan deities and inverted them, transforming the divine into the demonic (Luck 7). The iconography of goat-man Satan thus derives from that of Pan, the god of nature; a virile conjugator, often depicted with prominent genitals and—just like Quilty—a companion of the nymphs.

However, Nabokov does not subscribe to a monochromatic Christian morality that makes Satan a simple emblem of evil. For him, it is far more interesting, and indeed more poetic, if protagonist and antagonist are facets of one another; if black and white blurs into grey, challenging the reader’s allegiances. Milton’s Satan is the embodiment of such spirit; at once courageous and corrupt. He is the literary anti-hero *par excellence*, a master rhetorician and leader of his troops, a bold political rebel with the gall to make an enemy of the Almighty. As Raleigh puts it, “His very situation as the fearless antagonist of Omnipotence makes him either a fool or a hero, and Milton is far indeed from permitting us to think him a fool” (47).

The question over Satan’s heroic status is largely dependent on whether one chooses to read Milton as a Puritan didacticist or a republican agitator. The character Milton draws however, is

undeniably attractive in his comparative vibrancy and three-dimensionality when studied against the poem's other players. As Kaiter and Sandiuc have pointed out, it is Satan's very ambivalence that makes him attractive. He is the only "non-transparent" character in *Paradise Lost*. Unlike God, Adam and Eve, he "seems to adopt dissimulation as an 'art de vivre'" (453). By contrast, Milton's Adam, in his neutral, obedient state prior to the text's epic event, reads as naive or even simpleminded in light of Satan's sophistication. Furthermore, it is tempting to read Milton's God as the autocratic bully that Satan himself portrays him as. What Satan rails against is God as a prohibiting force; a misanthropic despot who denies his creatures their right to progress and flourish. He is a resentful ruler who undermines his creatures' free will with petty regulations. In light of this image of God, we might subscribe to Satan's recalcitrant manifesto, "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven" (l. 263). However, this would be to fall too wholeheartedly for Satan's ploy, for he himself is despotic; his motivations entirely egotistical and self-aggrandising. As Roland Frye wrote; "He affects the role of liberator, of deliverer from oppressive tyranny, but the freedom he offers to others is the freedom to be enslaved to himself" (36).

The temptation to follow Satan into the depths of Hell is precisely what Milton wished to illustrate. The problem is that he demonstrates this with a tad too much poetic aplomb (or indeed, "aesthetic bliss"), leading to the Romantic reinterpretation of Satan as

champion of libertarian spirit. C.S. Lewis argued that such readings fail in historical context, as John Milton wrote for a readership that:

still believed that there really was such a person
as Satan, and that he was a liar. The poet did
not foresee that his work would one day meet
the disarming simplicity of critics who take for
gospel things said by the father of falsehood in
public speeches to his troops. (96)

Lewis' acerbic critique might have had in mind William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a triumphantly eccentric piece that subverts the uniform ideas of Heaven and Hell, making the former synonymous with authoritarian reason and repression, and the latter home of uninhibited Dionysian energy, the fuel of creativity. "Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy./ Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell" (Blake, Plate 3). In Blake's Romantic vision, the divine is not a separate entity, but rather a facet of the human faculty of imagination. While this particular philosophy does not explicitly present itself in Milton's text²⁴, which despite its shades of ambiguity is nonetheless definitively monotheist and

²⁴ One might argue the case for Milton's profession that, "The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (*Paradise Lost*, Book I, 254-255), being one possible starting point for Blake's subversive theology, where Good is Evil, Heaven is Hell, and human consciousness itself is godly. However, regardless of how provocative Satan's politics are, Milton does not seek to use his epic to overthrow the Christian deity. Ultimately, God prevails. What's more, Milton's understanding of God is staunchly traditional. Unlike Blake, for whom, "All deities reside in the human breast" (Plate 11), Milton depicts God as distinct from and superior to humanity.

absolutely Christian in its origins, Blake insists that Milton's true allegiances are exposed in his art: "Note: The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Blake, xvii).

Following Blake's model for inference, I will suggest that Nabokov, who championed the very Dionysian notion of "aesthetic bliss", is perhaps of Humbert's party without knowing it—despite his postscript condemnations of the "vain and cruel wretch" (*Strong Opinions*, 81). In fact the author himself admits some sympathy for his Humbertian devil in his foreword to *Despair*, where he states that, "there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann" (xiii). The implication is that Humbert, unlike Hermann, is not entirely irredeemable. Nabokov cannot bring himself to wholly condemn his foremost creation—his Adam/Satan. Humbert embodies the idea of the Nabokovian "equivalent", a constant figure in the author's fiction, identified by Douglas Fowler in his editorial introduction to *Reading Lolita* as the male genius, usually of European extraction, "whose capabilities, humor, and taste are such that [...] he could have conceived and written not only the work in which he appears but the rest of the canon as well" (14). Fowler argues that Nabokov's commitment to the perfection of this favourite, "severely limits the possibilities of narrative development" (14). Similarly, one could

argue that Milton's artistic investment in his Satan works to the detriment of the poem as a whole; certainly to the success of its other characters, who seem somewhat secondary to Milton's great antagonist. There is, after all, a lot more *of* Satan in the text, as Frank Kastor points out: "The amount of space allocated to each role in *Paradise Lost* is unequal. The Prince of Hell occupies more space than the other two roles combined (about 3½ books to 1½ each for the other two)—which indicates, along with other evidence, that Milton was stressing this role" (Kastor 49).

Humbert and Satan are the stars of their respective shows, and for similar reasons. Both are charismatic, both cunning, and both are (in their own estimations at least) intellectually superior individuals. Moreover, both would, in a more simplistic rendering of their respective tales, devoid of these compelling characteristics, be understood plainly as the villain. C.S. Lewis said that, "To admire Satan [...] is to give one's vote not only for a world of misery, but also for a world of lies and propaganda, of wishful thinking, and of incessant autobiography" (98). The same could be said of Humbert Humbert, master of the self-indulgent and self-promoting first person narrative.

Essentially, what Satan and Humbert share is a particular talent for sophistry. Rhetoric, eloquence, and linguistic spectacle are crucial to Nabokov's construction of his magnetic antihero. *Lolita* is a novel about seduction, not, as stands the popular misconception, of man

by girl, but of reader by narrator²⁵. Whenever Nabokov exposes the mechanisms of his “fancy prose style” (*Lolita* 9), it is to alert us to our susceptibility to Humbert’s rhetorical razzle-dazzle in order to momentarily jolt us from our trance. Humbert is the Satan-serpent, whispering sweet deceptions in our ears. It is because of this trickery, that in his 1958 review of *Lolita* in ‘Encounter’, Lionel Trilling found himself in shock, not of the novel’s subject matter, but at the realisation that, “in the course of reading the novel, we have come virtually to condone the violation it presents”²⁶ (93).

Humbert, like Satan, lures us with language. However, unlike

²⁵ It is pertinent to note that notions tying eloquence to seduction are gendered. For example, John Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* equated eloquence with the deceitful allure of feminine beauty:

“all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *ideas*, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgement, and so indeed are the perfect cheat [...] It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation [...] *Eloquence*, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving wherein men find pleasure to be deceived” (III. XI. 34).

²⁶ Trilling seems completely convinced by Humbert’s ruse, and finds himself supposing that, “we naturally incline to be lenient towards a rapist—legally and by intention H.H. is that—who eventually feels a deathless devotion to his victim” (94). If Trilling’s apologetic qualification of his use of the term ‘rapist’ were not enough, we later find the critic heartbroken at Humbert’s treatment by his perpetually “cruel mistress; even after her lover has won physical possession of her, she withholds the favour of her feeling, for she has none to give, by reason of her age, possibly by reason of her temperament” (99). Trilling’s world of literary romance is apparently one in which kidnapped children owe a debt of affection to their abductors. A twisted logic emerges that is reminiscent of Humbert’s warning to his captive Lolita that, “A minor female, who allows a person over twenty-one to know her carnally, involves her victim in statutory rape” (150). Trilling’s sympathies are entirely for the devil.

Milton, who perhaps found himself unwittingly, “in the service of the Devil” (Raleigh 95), Nabokov is willing to let us in on the ruse, lacing Humbert’s narrative with inconsistencies and sudden tonal changes. Humbert is the Satanic shape-shifter, one moment a monster, the next the apologetic poet. He alternates between personas before our eyes, then carries on as if we might not have noticed. One such turnaround occurs in the space of a fourteen line paragraph. It opens: “So Humbert the Cubus schemed and dreamed” (71). Here, the protagonist openly equates himself with the demonic. He is the Cubus, a mythical figure (recalling Lilith), who rapes its victims while they sleep. In context, this is Humbert’s plan for Lolita, his best plan for preserving the child’s innocence while stealthily violating her. Mid-paragraph, however, Humbert regrets being quite so forthright with his demonic fantasies, and tells us parenthetically,“(…I was drunk on those visions by then and underrated the gentleness of my nature)”. By close of paragraph, his metamorphosis is complete; he is “as helpless as Adam at the preview of early oriental history, miraged in his apple orchard” (71). His demonic guise is traded for that of the first man, the “helpless Adam” of Milton’s epic, blissfully unaware of what fate has in store for him. Thus the reader is assumed appeased.

Such manoeuvres are typical of Humbert, who eludes simple allegorisation by his refusal to be fastened to one metaphorical vehicle. He is at one moment of the devil’s party, and the next made

in God's own image. His symbolic synthesis with Adam works as a counter-balance to his undeniably devilish thoughts and actions. Sporadically, he dons this guise because we, his jury, accept that plain old Adam was no wily seducer, but rather the innocent foil of a woman-seductress—"all Adam's apple and heart" (*Lolita* 193). Humbert thus insists that he is not the "hunter", but the "enchanted", the hapless victim of our Lolita-Eve.

Part VI: Nabokov's Miltonic Gender Hierarchy

Milton's Eve is rather less idiosyncratic than his Satan, the rebelrous sophisticate. While artistic majesty overrides purported didactic function in the poet's composition of his great antagonist, the mechanics of parable are all too visible in his construction of Eve. Beautiful to behold, yet dim-witted and duplicitous, she is the stereotype at the butt of every sexist joke. Much is made of her construction from Adam's rib, and of her categorically subordinate nature. Sexual equality and unity of essence are dogmatically denied:

Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;
 For contemplation he and valour formed,
 For softness she and sweet attractive grace,
 He for God only, she for God in him. (IV. 296-
 300)

Milton's Eve is very much the 'little woman'; her inferior mind

supplemented only by her physical appeal. Her very eroticism is defined in terms of her submissive nature. This is a quality Milton invites us to admire vicariously through Adam:

So spake our general mother, and with eyes
Of conjugal attraction unreproved,
And meek surrender, half embracing leaned
On our first father, half her swelling breast
Naked met his under the flowing fold
Of her loose tresses hid: he in delight
Both of her beauty and submissive charms
Smiled with superior love, as Jupiter
On Juno smiles, when he impregns the clouds.

(IV. 492-500)

Sexual submissiveness is supposedly one of Eve's few positive attributes in Milton's depiction of her. This Eve is "Sin-bred" (IV. 315), and her incitement to sin by the glaringly phallic serpent is the inevitable outcome of her deficient intellectual faculty. Her sinfulness is caused by her stupidity, hence rendering both characteristics inherent faults of womankind: "our general mother" is woman in general. Although Adam follows Eve into sin, it is not, Milton marks, because he has been conned, as this would reflect some mental weakness on the part of the male. Rather, Adam is, "not deceived, but fondly overcome with feminine charm" (IX. 975-1011). As C.S. Lewis explained, "Adam fell by uxoriousness. [...] His sin is, of

course, intended to be a less ignoble sin than hers” (Lewis 121). Simply put, Adam is seduced, for man’s one pitfall in this gendered model of morality is his attraction to woman. Man’s moral rigour is debased by his attachment to the female. This narrative prototype forms the precise image of sin that Humbert Humbert wishes us to accept. It is one in which he is innocent of everything but a fondness for the fairer sex and the simple, forgivable, folly of desire.

For Milton, sexual difference is definitively hierarchical.

Prelapsarian harmony does not imply gender equality, but rather the happy coexistence of man and nature. In this instance, man denotes the masculine rather than mankind. Nature therefore denotes all of God’s other creations, including woman, for in Milton’s scheme, man and woman are opposed as mind and body, civilisation and nature. This dichotomous treatment of gendered subjects was expounded by Hélène Cixous in her landmark essay “Sorties”, in which she identifies a dominant tendency towards binary division in thought and language. Cixous identifies an implicit hierarchy within these pairs, whereby the first term, by virtue of being first, assumes a position of perceived privilege over the second. Day/night, life/death, good/evil: in each couple, the first term is deemed positive and primary. It thus follows that the second term, in accordance with its supposed opposition to the first, is understood as being negative and secondary in nature.

Of course, the most common binary pair in human thought and

speech is that of man/woman.

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized. If we read or speak, the same thread or double braid is leading us throughout literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflection. (Cixous 63).

In much the same manner as Carol Meyers' study of the creation myth illustrates how the false supposition of Adam's ontological priority creates and vindicates a "repressive norm" (Meyers 62), Cixous argues that logocentrism "subjects thought—all concepts, codes and values—to a binary system, related to 'the couple', man/woman" (64), so that the logic of dual opposition compels us to infer a gender for concepts that need not have any. Mind/body, culture/nature, thought/feeling: in everyday use, these pairs form implicit prejudices of what we understand to be typically male or female in nature. Western philosophical heritage is grounded in notions of duality.²⁷ Aristotle's *Metaphysics* perfectly exemplifies how

²⁷ Joseph Campbell in *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, describes this tendency to dualism as one of the distinguishing characteristics of patriarchal (as opposed to matriarchal) belief systems: "The patriarchal point of view is distinguished from the earlier archaic view by its setting apart of all pairs-of-opposites—male and female, life and death, true and false, good and evil—as though they were absolutes in themselves and not merely aspects of the larger entity of life. This we may liken to a solar, as opposed to lunar, mythic view, since darkness flees from the sun as its opposite, but in the moon dark and light interact in the one sphere" (27).

such notions gain gendered significance. He identifies the constituent parts of substance as form and matter; marking the first as the active and, most importantly, male element, and the second as passive and female. Matter (female) must be *acted upon* by (male) form in order to become substance. As the philosopher states in his *Generation of Animals*, “The female always provides the material, the male provides that which fashions the material into shape” (185). Woman is thus rendered inert, and dependent on her male counterpart for meaning.

By positioning male and female in opposition, they inevitably come to represent opposing positive and negative ideas. In the Aristotelean model, the binary hierarchy invariably places the male in a position of primacy, so that the man/woman dichotomous pair transpose as actuality/potentiality, soul/body, active/passive, ability/inability, form/matter etc., with woman forever in ideological second place. It is this bias that Cixous recognises as a cornerstone of logocentric treatments of gender. “Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organisation subject to man. Male privilege, shown in opposition between *activity* and *passivity*, which he uses to sustain himself” (64). Language promotes binary opposition, and opposition encourages moral judgement, so that that which comes first is presumed male and superior or right, and that which comes second, female and inferior or wrong. “Philosophy is constructed on the premise of woman’s abasement. Subordination of the feminine to

the masculine order, which gives the appearance of being the condition for the machinery's functioning" (65). So language is inherently phallogocentric for Cixous.

Literature too, Cixous claims, follows philosophy in its rigid adherence to these principles. It is, Cixous states, "the same story. It all comes back to man—to *his* torment, his desire to be (at) the origin" (65). Certainly, Milton's text is *about* man being both *the* origin, and *at* the origin. It is a definitively patriarchal tale, as any piece depicting Christian mythology is preordained to be. Milton emphasises and reiterates Adam's superiority and Eve's relative inferiority. Adam is first and, "Pre-eminent by so much odds" (IV. 447). Eve, by very definition of her derivation from Adam's flesh, is secondary and as such, a lesser reflection of her heavenly maker's image. She is further removed from the divine.

For well I understand in the prime end
 Of nature her the inferior, in the mind
 And inward faculties, which most excel,
 In outward also her resembling less
 His image who made both, and less expressing
 The character of that dominion given
 O'er other creatures (VIII. 540-546)

Eve, bearing little of the masculine faculty of intellect, is a degree

closer to the animals than Adam.²⁸ Thus, Milton imposes a hierarchy on his harmonious garden paradise.

A similar dualism underlines Nabokov's treatment of the gendered subject. The deific metaphor that permeates a number of the author's texts speaks to the male artist's godlike transcendence. Nabokov's creation of a fictional universe offers him a certain claim to immortality, and the author's First Man protagonist carries this metaphor through in a novel where Humbert's narrative speaks to us from beyond the grave. If man represents the immortal mind for Nabokov, then woman represents the finite body. As previously mentioned, woman's defining biological purpose—her ability to bear children—is negated in the patriarchal mythology that Nabokov employs, where a masculine god/author imagines the world into being and women's bodies are destroyed in the process of procreation. Something of a creational hierarchy reveals itself, where the intellectual and the corporeal are set in opposition, and the privilege of mind over body translates into one of masculine dominance and feminine subjugation. What's more, the characters that inhabit the novel are stacked hierarchically, descending in importance from their authorial overlord. In this model, Nabokov

²⁸ Robert Graves in *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*, imagines Eve's relative baseness in particularly unflattering terms; "Eve herself seemed like an ape when compared with Adam, whose heels—let alone his countenance—outshone the sun! Nevertheless, though Adam was made in God's image, yet he too seemed like an ape when compared with God" (62). Ben Sira also professes Adam's incomparable sublimity: "beyond that of any living being was the splendour of Adam" (Ecclus. 49:16).

himself is the deity that speaks from behind the clouds. He is the creator who calls upon us to admire his handy work, deliberately interrupting our suspension of disbelief to reveal his presence via wordplay and marked coincidence, announcing rather than concealing narratorial artifice. His proudest creation is Humbert, who, like Adam, is made in his creator's likeness. Any supposed distaste Nabokov has for his protagonist is offset by his desire to show off. For all of Humbert's despicable activity, Nabokov shields his creation from antipathy by imbuing him with his own mischievous verbal dexterity. Humbert may be an aberration but he is also, in definitive terms, the hero of the piece, the protagonist, and the only character with whom Nabokov invites us to identify.

It is Humbert who gives us Lolita. Her creation, like Eve's, is secondary. While Eve was created of Adam's rib, Lolita is the manifestation of Humbert's lust. Even in this sense she is existentially undermined, for Lolita is not a Humbert Humbert original but rather a replica of the Annabel prototype, the ghost of lust past that almighty Humbert dispels "by incarnating her in another" (15). Dolores Haze in essence is rendered inaccessible to the reader, the twelve years she preexists her first encounter with Humbert nullified so that he can recreate her as a mythological female. Lolita is thus the modified Dolores Haze, reimagined by Humbert as a phantasm of memory. The specifics of her character are replaced by generalisations, so that the individual girl is sacrificed for a type. Like

Eve, who substitutes for the innate wickedness of womankind, Lolita is presented as the exemplary specimen of a defined species of the feminine; the nymphet. Humbert realises for the purposes of his defence that the nymphet is best understood as a subcategory of a broader set. This is why he places her in Eden; a habitat that is rife with sex, the perfect setting for a seduction. It is no coincidence that Humbert first beholds half naked Lo in a garden. Eden itself is erotically charged for Nabokov. The first instance of the name in the novel is in the “small Eden” (22) of the young prostitute, Monique’s boudoir, before Humbert has met his Eve proper. Picturing Eden in a brothel, Humbert’s vision of Paradise is rather burlesque. Humbert, made in his creator’s image, bears no hallowed reverence for the vehicle of this metaphor. This is a secular rendering of Eden, the Eden used in advertisements to suggest that temptation is something the consumer can afford to succumb to. Eden is for Humbert about naked primal desire and the fulfilment of forbidden appetites.

This erotic template of Eden is replicated in Nabokov’s *Ada or Ardor*, where the Tree of Knowledge acts as the site of the ultimate taboo breaking act (a literal incest as opposed to *Lolita*’s parodic one). Not only does Ada herself call the tree by that name, she tells Van that it was imported “from the Eden National Park” (78). However, Van and Ada revise their narratorial setting immediately, arguing that the tree did not perhaps truly bear apples and that no such national park existed at that time. Artistic artifice is exposed and

deconstructed in typically Nabokovian fashion. However, although the vehicle for meaning is debunked, its intended effect remains. By highlighting the construct of Eden as a fallacy, Nabokov invites the reader to decode its implications, to question his reason for employing this device only to undermine its verisimilitude. He thus makes the reader consciously examine the Tree of Knowledge as a symbol, and address forthrightly the associations they have already made unconsciously. By this process, meaning is reinforced. Of course, any interpretation of the passage in question must be coloured by the fact that it describes an incestuous tryst between siblings. The tree whose branch Ada straddles is clearly phallic, so much so that it irks Van's sense of ownership, and has him protest, "I refuse to share the ardor of your little canicule with an apple tree" (78). By positing it as the Tree of Knowledge—a tree that bears forbidden fruit, Nabokov makes it the perfect site for transgression. For Ada, however, it also represents transition and sexual awakening, for the implication is that Ada's "favourite limb" which she mounts without pantalets, is a source of stimulation for the adolescent girl. The 'knowledge' offered by the tree is thus that of erotic pleasure, offered in part by the tree itself and partly by illicit kisses between the thighs from her big brother.

Sin does not enter this portrait of Eden. Nor does Ada as Eve deliberately entice her brother to taste the proverbial forbidden fruit. Rather it is Van who could be accused of trespassing, with said fruit

falling on his head an all too easy metaphor for what is ripe and ready to be tasted. Eden here denotes a sexuality that is prohibited but not explicitly moralised. In fact, ideas of right and wrong hardly surface in the novel, at least not in the esoteric musings of the protagonists, and perhaps the Tree of Knowledge here is a reminder of convention and taboo—concepts that are otherwise absent from the siblings' telling of the tale. Van and Ada's tree that may or may not have existed, hence becomes a symbol for arbitrary social and moral codes and the constructed narratives that hold them in place.

Incidentally, the Tree of Knowledge episode in *Ada* is preceded in the narrative by two unrelated allusions to Eve. She appears first as the subject of a Parmigianino painting, recalling a naked Marina (17), and secondly, when she inhabits the bathing Ada and becomes the object of Van's curious voyeurism, "as both the reptile and he stopped to watch Eve" (53). In both instances, Eve is objectified; in the first she is literally placed on a canvas for the scrutiny of the male gaze, where her very purpose is to arouse desire. Indeed, this image of Eve harkens back to the soft sexuality of Botticelli's *Venus* that Nabokov evokes in his construction of *Lolita*. Meanwhile, Ada's representation as Eve places her as a passive desire object, framed like a painting by the open door through which Van spies on her, and supposedly oblivious to her audience. Eve, as she is posited in *Ada*, is nothing more than a tableau. She is inactive—a mere projection of primordial lust—not a sinner, insofar as she is innocent of activity, but

an object so desirable as to incite sin.

Lolita as Eve is overtly sexual, but she also serves a hermeneutic purpose. Eve is supposed to be read as possessing “nymphean evil” (*Lolita* 124) of biblical proportions. Eve is the instigator of sin, she is a corruptive force, condemnable for her breach of sacred trust. Eve implies the simplistic idea of the ‘bad girl’ but, as feminine prototype, she also implies something about the shared nature of women. Nabokov’s characterisation of Lolita thus invokes general ideas and prejudices in order to save time and narrative space. While Humbert narrates his specific subjective experience in verbose and vivid prose, Lolita is to be understood in only the most general terms. She is a secondary character in this book that bears her name. What’s more, when Nabokov has Lolita hold, “a banal, Eden-red apple” (58), or gives her jeans the smell of orchards (92), or puts her in a dress, “with a pattern of little red apples” (111), he evokes Eve but emphasises the forbidden fruit. As such, Eve and the apple are conflated in the figure of Lolita; she becomes the very embodiment of Humbert’s temptation. A more subtle allusion to Eve comes with Lolita’s recital of her girl scout’s motto, in which she professes; “My duty is—to be useful. I am a friend to male animals. I obey orders. I am cheerful [...] I am thrifty and I am absolutely filthy in thought, word and deed” (114). Here, Eve’s creation by God as an offering to Adam as a “help meet” and companion is recalled. Eve was purpose built because God, having

presented Adam with all his animals to name, conceded that man should not be alone. Eve's creation was thus secondary and utilitarian, she was indeed, created "to be useful" and a friend to God's favourite male animal. The "I obey orders" part ostensibly speaks to Eve's subservience to Adam, but it was precisely Eve's disobedience that led to her, and humanity's, downfall.

Therein lies one of the most discouraging aspects of the Everywoman's story; that failure to follow patriarchal instruction will be her ruination. It was, after all, simple curiosity and inquisitiveness that Eve was guilty of; attributes considered as marks of an aspiring anti-hero when expressed by Milton's Satan. The last part of Lo's statement, her proclamation of her filthiness "of mind, word and deed", is simple childish exhibitionism. She is showing off for Humbert in just the same way as she will by 'seducing' him in the Enchanted Hunters in two chapters' time. What this passage exposes is that rather than being the wily jezebel intent on seduction, Dolores Haze is a typical adolescent, looking for a reaction from her elders, trying to act grown up. It is precisely when she tries on the role of the temptress that the emptiness of this impression is exposed. With all her crude impersonations of adult sexuality, Lolita reveals herself to be merely a girl playing dress up. Christine Clegg called it a "schoolgirl performance of what she knows about sex" (27) and drew the important distinction between the nature of the seduction enacted by Lolita and the foiled seduction (nay rape)

planned by Humbert. “It is this difference of context and meaning that problematises the way in which the one term is used to describe what she does to him, and what he does to her, as if those events had an equivalence” (Clegg 28). Yet the success of Humbert’s narrative and—moreover—the success of his seduction of the reader, are dependent upon his or her willingness to accept his portrayal of the pre-teen girl as a paragon of primordial vice.

It is difficult to determine whether the vacuous depiction of Eve as a simple icon of lust that appears in *Ada* is preferable to the one that surfaces in *Lolita*—where Eve’s allure is decidedly less inert. The Eve that Humbert harkens to has a purpose to serve; she is to act as a scapegoat. For Humbert’s employment of the Eden trope climaxes at a very specific juncture in the narrative, after which Eve’s use is exhausted and a fresh theme is assumed. All of Humbert’s Edenic myth-building was mere foreshadowing to the moment he tells his “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury”, that despite what we might have expected, “it was she who seduced me” (132). Without the scriptural precursor of Eve, without that first woman who like her Greek antecedent Pandora, unleashed all evil upon the world, we might not accept what Humbert calls “the perilous magic of nymphets” (134) as a credible defence in a case of statutory rape and abduction. *Lolita*, whose name itself has become a common noun variably defined as a “young girl who has a very sexual appearance or behaves in a very sexual way” (Cambridge English Dictionary), or “a sexually

precocious young girl” (Collins E.D.), becomes assimilated into the patriarchal discourse as just another example of the trite old figure of the harlot. Her mythology as such is reinforced by heritage, for if misogyny has anything going for it, it is antiquity. Conversely, the success of *Lolita* in print and on film and her subsequent assimilation into pop culture as an emblem of narrow concepts that are reductive and even misrepresentative of the novel, works to reinforce the misogynist clichés from which she was created, so that Lolita and Eve now inform one another’s bad reputations.

If only “Eve would revert to a rib” (264), Humbert could revert to a state of benign happiness—innocent of desire; indeed, innocent of kidnap, statutory rape, and murder. Incidentally, this quote from the text brings to mind one from D.H Lawrence’s *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, a book in which the author intertwines Freudian concepts with his personal philosophy of mind.

Fight for your life, men. Fight your wife out of her own self-conscious pre-occupation with herself. Batter her out of it till she’s stunned. Drive her back into her own true mode. Rip all her nice superimposed modern-woman and wonderful-creature garb off her. Reduce her once more to a naked Eve, and send the apple flying. (191)

Lawrence’s language is explicitly violent; in fact it is a war cry. He

calls upon men to “fight”, “batter”, “rip” and “reduce” their women, to strip her of the cosy trappings of modernity and leave her “a naked Eve”; to “send the apple flying”, keeping her ignorant, primitive, uncivilised forever and ensuring man’s sadistic dominion over her. The entire passage is laden with a vitriolic misogyny. While Nabokov, in having his Eve “revert to a rib” bears nothing of Lawrence’s malignant tone, both writers work from a common starting point: Eve eats an apple and man is afflicted. Diminish or destroy Eve and man prospers. Humbert thus dissociates his crimes from himself. Christian discourse promotes this projection of lust, whereby the object of the male gaze is held to shame for seemingly inviting desire. Tertullian, in his 3rd Century A.D. treatise “On the Veiling of Virgins” pleads with women to cover themselves out of sympathy for their menfolk:

I pray you, be you mother, or sister, or *virgin*-daughter [...] veil your head: if a mother, for your sons’ sakes; if a sister, for your brethren’s sakes; if a daughter for your fathers’ sakes. All ages are periled in your person.” (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV. III: xvi)

The Christian aversion to sex necessitates this displacement of male desire, this reallocation of blame whereby the onus is placed on the woman to prevent the onset of male (in this case, incestuous) desire. She must veil herself in order to *protect him* from desire. This type of

rhetoric brings to mind the victim-shaming practiced by defence lawyers in rape cases, where much is made of the victim's attire—the insidious suggestion being not only that the victim invited the attack, but, perhaps more alarmingly, that men cannot be held accountable for their actions once aroused by the sight of a bare thigh. Humbert, in his address to us, the jury, pulls a similar manoeuvre. He presents himself as a poet and admirer of beauty: what defence had *he* against the unveiled temptress? We are to believe that Lolita possesses an ownership over her sexuality that exceeds her years, that she displays herself to him in a way that is both self-aware and deliberate, and ultimately conniving. He thus may be perfectly “guilty of killing Quilty” (32), but he cannot be held accountable for falling prey to the seductress' bait, to the ethereal power of the daemon child: Eve's daughter. The challenge for we, the jury is to guard ourselves against Humbert's rhetoric, to resist what Kauffman called “the father's seductions” (133). This is easier to do when we identify and deconstruct his machinations. The employment of the Eden trope is of course, entirely about seduction. It is based on the dogma that woman destroyed man through seduction. The reader is thus given license to be seduced by Humbert: we may forgive him and detest Eve instead, for she is the very embodiment of transgressive desire. Humbert's wayward lust thus becomes not his own but something that begins and ends with lust's chosen object—with his Eve: with Lolita.

Chapter Two: Lolita in Fairy Tale Land

Part I: Melding Mythologies

Two major themes dominate Part One of *Lolita*. The first, discussed in the previous chapter, concerns Eden and its inhabitants. The second, to be discussed here, concerns fairy tale lore and characterisation. These two themes coexist happily; in fact, as Bruno Bettelheim explains, they even corroborate: “Fairy tales [...] abound in religious motifs; many Biblical stories are of the same nature as fairy tales” (13). Indeed, the fates of Eve and Snow White are sealed with the bite of an apple. In the following passage from *Lolita*, a suffusion of the novel’s Edenic and fairy tale tropes is initiated by Lo’s eating of that fateful fruit. The passage illustrates both the polyvalence of the apple as mythic symbol and Lo’s dual position in this metaphorical schema, for while she is the consumer of the fruit, she is also, in Humbert’s gaze, the forbidden fruit itself. Additionally, the seamless progression of imagery that connects the Edenic and fairy tale mythologies here propounds their mutual erotic potency.

Humbert narrates:

She was musical and apple-sweet. Her legs
twitched a little as they lay across my live lap; I
stroked them [...] Lola the bobby-soxer,
devouring her immemorial fruit, singing through
its juice, losing her slipper, rubbing the heel of

her slipperiness foot in its sloppy anklet [...] and every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty—between my gagged, bursting beast and the beauty of her dimpled body in its innocent cotton frock. (59)

The apple, the lost slipper, the beastly metaphor: this is the thread by which *Lolita*'s two dominant mythologies come together. However, while the themes overlap, they remain distinct, and there is an observable shift in their prevalence as the novel's first part reaches its conclusion. While Edenic references are most abundant in the first third of Part One—that is, in the sections leading up to and including Humbert's first encounter with Lolita— they are almost completely superseded by fairy tale allusions and images in the final third of Part One—demarcated, for reasons that will be explained presently, by Charlotte Haze's death, and Lo and Humbert's subsequent journey towards the novel's fairy tale epicentre—The Enchanted Hunters hotel. In this part of the novel—between chapters twenty-three and thirty-three of Part One—we hear of “stardust” (109) and “magic potion” (122), a “fairytale vampire” (139), “Prince Charming” (109) and “Beauty's Sleep” (122). As Humbert's ploy to cast his spell on his fairy princess reaches its conclusion, Nabokov douses his narrative in fairy dust. Even his adjectives allude to the mythical: Humbert

meets an “impish lad” (110), has an “elfish chance” (126). What’s more, the author’s peculiar use of German—a language for which he professed no great fondness or mastery²⁹—when he has Humbert suggest he might find, “a pretty little *Magdlein*” (111) reveals a conscious interplay with the European folk tale tradition, specifically with the Grimms tales, which are filled with *mädchen* and *mägdlein*.³⁰

Following the Aarne-Thompson folk tale classification system³¹, we might identify *Lolita* as a type AT510b: that of the persecuted heroine, who is abused or neglected by her (step-)mother, and flees from her father who wants to marry her. The most well-known form of this type of tale is that of Cinderella, a girl who is famous for “losing her slipper”—much like Lo in the cited scene.³² However, Nabokov also variably frames his heroine as Sleeping Beauty (AT410) and

²⁹ This is despite a fifteen year residency in Berlin from 1922 to 1937. Nabokov expressly rejected all things German. The polyglot’s claim to ignorance of the language is dubious and doubted by some (Maar 11), but Nabokov’s Germanophobia was both political and personal—his wife Véra was Jewish.

³⁰ *Mädchen* in German means simply “girl”. This is the noun most commonly used by the Grimms to describe their female protagonists. However, Nabokov uses the less common *mägdlein*, which means a damsel or young maiden. Nabokov’s choice of noun is hence a significant one, for it carries with it connotations of the girl’s youth and sexual innocence.

³¹ The Aarne-Thompson classification system comprises indices used by folklorists to classify folktales, organising them by motifs or tale type. Tale types are identified within the system by the letters AT followed by numerals.

³² Barbara Wyllie identifies the Cinderella motif as one of the major themes in Nabokov’s *Pnin*, and notes that it is her slipper that links this motif to the novel’s recurring image of the squirrel (*Vladimir Nabokov* 126-127). When one of Pnin’s party guests remarks that the glass bowl he has been gifted is reminiscent of “Cinderella’s glass shoes”, Pnin replies that Cinderella’s slippers were “not made of glass but of Russian squirrel fur—*vair*, in French” (*Pnin* 138). Squirrels appear in each one of *Pnin*’s eleven chapters and seem to act as harbingers of misfortune.

Little Mermaid. It might also be argued that *Lolita* is ultimately a type AT500—that is, a tale concerning “The Name of the Helper”— where the reader’s, and indeed, Humbert’s mission, is to follow the clues that lead to Q; but more on that later.

While the application of folk tale classifications to a nuanced and lengthy novel is necessarily reductive, Nabokov’s thematic engagement with the fairy tale genre—in *Lolita* as in several other texts—suggests an appreciation on the author’s part of the generic nature of *all* storytelling. While *Lolita* is not a fairy tale, it is a novel that makes overt and repeated reference to that genre, drawing its own comparisons between itself and the folk tale, and insisting the reader do the same. There are meta-fictional overtones to *Lolita*; it is a self-aware text, where unreality is foregrounded and ancestral lines of literary influence are everywhere evident.

What’s more, while standalone references to tales like “Hansel and Gretel” and “The Emperor’s New Clothes” (201) might not appear to be weighted with any particular significance, other tales, such as “The Sleeping Beauty”, are so integrated into the narrative fabric of *Lolita* as to inform the novel’s plot beats. In his lengthy annotation on the fairy tale theme in *Lolita*, Alfred Appel suggests that the novel’s apparent complexity is underpinned by a foundational simplicity that lends itself well to fairy tale analogy. He notes that its plot, “may be paraphrased in three sentences—and the themes of deception, enchantment, and metamorphosis are akin to the fairy

tale” (346).

Of the three themes Appel lists here, it is the last that most informs Nabokov’s fairy tale characterisation of his nymphet. Lolita herself is the novel’s body in metamorphosis, her development from nymphet to adult woman a tragic inevitability—so tragic, in fact, that the full fruition of her womanhood in maternity kills her. Burgeoning childhood sexuality is a preoccupation of the folk tale tradition. For psychoanalyst folklorists like Bruno Bettelheim, narratives like “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White” present the girl’s sexuality as a potency, whereby the heroine’s enchanted sleep signifies a dormant sexual energy, and the act of waking its irrepressible resurgence³³. Fairy tale sleep is thus a metaphor for what the psychoanalyst calls the “latent” period in the female child’s development, that lull in sexual motivation that constitutes a gap between the phallic and genital psychosexual stages. As Bettelheim explicated in *The Uses of Enchantment*, “During the months before the first menstruation [...] girls are passive, seem sleepy, and withdraw into themselves” (225). The Sleeping Beauty’s awakening at Prince Charming’s kiss hence signifies the onset of puberty, and her consequent readiness for

³³ Maria Tatar notes how the Grimms renamed Sleeping Beauty “Dornröschen” or “Briar Rose” because, “the word sleeping contains within it the possibility of an awakening fraught with danger, as in the phrase *sleeping giant* [...] Little Briar Rose, as the Grimms’ heroine is called, yokes together in her name pain and beauty, suggesting stasis rather than the potential for action” (147). Tatar’s reading is in line with Jack Zipes’s observations about increasing sexual and political conservatism in the literary fairy tales of the nineteenth century (*Fairy Tales and The Art of Subversion* 64-67).

sexual intercourse.

Of course, as *Lolita*'s extended parodic interplay with psychoanalysis shows, Nabokov was familiar with the Freudian model of child development³⁴, and almost thirty years before Bettelheim's seminal text was published, seemed to suggest a symbolic link between Lolita, "emprisoned [*sic*] in her crystal sleep" (123) and "a dreaming and exaggerating Dolly in the 'latency' period of girlhood" (124). Both cited examples are taken from chapter twenty-eight of Part One, the part in the plot after Humbert has administered Lolita his magic potion of sleeping pills, and is biding his time while the medicine gets to work. This is significant because in the chapter that follows, Nabokov completely subverts the Sleeping Beauty plot he has thus far worked to build.

While Humbert, using the same ploy as "Snow White"'s wicked Queen, tricks his fairy princess into taking the poison by pretending to do so himself, his pills turn out to be placebos prescribed by a suspecting doctor. As a result, Lo's sleep is not the perfect manifestation of feminine passivity glorified by necrophiliac narratives like "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty". This is important, as Humbert's desire for a slumbering Lo is partially a type of necrophilia by proxy; a will to consummate his love for dead Annabel. However, Lo is not corpse-like but physically active in her sleep: she jerks and

³⁴ Lo's teacher, Miss Pratt, expresses her concern to a bemused Humbert that young Dolly, "is still shuttling [...] between the anal and genital zones of development" (194).

jolts, and even speaks (128). Lo's fitful sleep hence sabotages Humbert's plan while subverting one of the narrative mainstays of the fairy tale genre. A psychoanalytic reading might conclude that Lo's disturbed, unwieldy sleep is symbolic of the fact that she has already been "awakened"—something that Humbert is yet to discover at this juncture in the text. Passivity is impossible where sexual activity has already been initiated. Lo's latency has passed.

For Bettelheim, "the central theme of all versions of 'The Sleeping Beauty' is that despite all attempts on the part of parents to prevent their child's sexual awakening, it will take place nonetheless" (230). In this schema, Humbert is the pseudo-parent who wishes to rape his step-daughter in her drug-induced coma with the inverse design of upholding her innocence. Here, a certain ideological confluence between *Lolita's* Edenic and fairy tale themes comes to the fore, for in both instances ignorance and innocence are conflated, so that the accession to a state of knowing represents an irreversible loss. In fairy tale parables of adolescence, sexual knowledge marks an irrevocable departure from childhood innocence. Likewise, in Eden, ignorance was bliss until the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge made Adam and Eve aware of their own nudity, and hence, of their sexuality. The sin is in the knowing.

A certain narrative rubicon is crossed in *Lolita* once Humbert and Lo have sex. The fairy dust that is sprinkled throughout Part One is markedly absent in Part Two. In fact, it dissipates the moment

Humbert and Lo leave the Enchanted Hunters. Sporadic references to the fairy tale genre persist however in jarring juxtapositions such as this one in the third chapter of Part Two, where Humbert describes his parental efforts:

I did my best; I read and reread a book with the unintentionally biblical title *Know Your Own Daughter*, which I got at the same store where I bought Lo, for her thirteenth birthday, a de luxe volume with commercially 'beautiful' illustrations, of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*.
(174)

Here, the related ideas of knowledge and sexual guilt are tied together neatly in the euphemistic title of Humbert's parenting manual. The mention of *The Little Mermaid* works to underline Humbert's self-deluding hypocrisy. He has already *known his own daughter* in the sense implied, making his gift of a quaint illustrated children's book seem malapropos. Humbert, having made the girl his lover, wishes to keep her as a child. The seeming contradiction here is a product of his unnatural desire—for Humbert wants, and has always wanted, a lover who is a child.

Humbert's choice of *The Little Mermaid* here is not random. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov talks of being read the story by Miss Norcott, his "lovely, black-haired, aquamarine eyed" governess who, he says, "was asked to leave at once, one night at Abbazia", leaving

the child “inconsolable” (59). Brian Boyd claimed that Miss Norcott was dismissed because she was a lesbian (*The Russian Years* 52). Because of this, Emily Collins concludes, *The Little Mermaid* represented to Nabokov, “the loss created by the intrusion of sex into an apparently innocent child’s world” (79), a reading that seems all the more apt in the context of *Lolita*. Furthermore, there is plenty in the content of Andersen’s tale itself to recommend such an interpretation. In the story, the Little Mermaid sacrifices her tail, her family, and her voice to know what it is to be human, to have a human soul, and to love a human man. To achieve this, she strikes a deal with a sea witch, who warns the Little Mermaid of the considerable hardships she must endure:

your tail will then disappear and shrink up into what mankind call legs; and you will feel great pain, as if a sword were passing through you [...] at every step you take will feel as if you were treading upon sharp knives, and that the blood must flow. If you bear all this, I will help you. (Andersen 136)

Here, Andersen analogously describes the pain of first sexual penetration and menstruation respectively. There are echoes here of the passage in Genesis where God prescribes Eve a punishment specific to her female biology, saying: “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children” (ESV Gen.

3:16). Of course, “Eve’s curse” is a euphemism for menstruation, and Andersen’s tale is characteristic of his wider oeuvre in its treatment of Christian self-sacrifice and penances which are exacted on the body. As such, *The Little Mermaid*’s path to sexual maturity is a far more arduous one than the transition from sleep to consciousness common in the fairy tale canon. For Andersen, to be a human woman is to suffer.

Andersen’s treatment of female adolescence has echoes in *Lolita*, when, in the chapters immediately following *The Enchanted Hunters* incident, Lo’s pain becomes a talking point. At the beginning of Lo and Humbert’s car journey, we are told, “an expression of pain flitted across Lo’s face” (140). Lo asks to stop at a wash room, “complaining of pains, said she could not sit, said I had torn something inside her” (141). When they eventually find a gas station, Lo is “a long time away” and comes back asking for money to phone her mother. It is at this juncture that Humbert drops the bombshell that her mother is dead. In the next chapter—a single paragraph that brings Part One to a close—Humbert provides an inventory of items purchased for Lo “in the gay town of Lepingville”, among them “a box of sanitary pads” (141). In his own subtly scheming way, Nabokov initiates Lo, his fairy tale nymphet, into biological womanhood³⁵.

³⁵ Nabokov’s index card notes for *Lolita* include what read like passages from girls’ sex education literature on the topic of the menstrual cycle, which suggest that the topic of Lo’s first menstruation was one that he carefully researched, and would further support the idea that this scene

That this is Lo's first period is hinted at by her unfamiliarity with the pain she is experiencing, and by her eagerness to speak to her mother having visited the wash room. That this milestone is immediately preceded by "strenuous intercourse" (140) with Humbert Humbert is highly symbolic, not least since our narrator previously described himself as being in possession of "all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl" (43). In all scientific likelihood, there is no causal connection between the two events, and their sequential occurrence represents an uncanny coincidence. However, within the fairy tale schema that colours the narrative in the lead up to this episode, the progression from Humbert's planned "enchantment" of Lo's slumber, to her proverbial awakening and the subsequent onset of menstruation accords with the genre's thematic preoccupation with female pubescence. There is one *prior* event however, that instigates this chain reaction. In the fairy tale tradition as in *Lolita*, one plot point sets in motion all other narrative action: the death of the mother.

Part II: Of Monster-mothers

Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi said that the "fairy tale is a story in which there are no accidents. The coordination of events is not

depicts the occasion of Lo's first menses. One card, with a confusing use of pronouns reads: "you started snatching up crumbs of information about how they (older girl friends) had just 'fallen off the roof' or how 'Grandma was visiting'. Probably, though we hope not, you heard references to 'the curse'...Then on the morning before our thirteenth birthday, it happened. We were simply menstruating" (*Nabokov Papers*, Box 2, Reel 2).

accidental but precise” (Jacoby 6). Equally, in Nabokov, every apparent coincidence or moment of chance synchronicity is the result of meticulous plotting. The ‘accident’ that befalls Charlotte Haze is no accident at all, but rather the pivotal plot point on which “McFate’s” fairy tale narrative turns. As Bettelheim observed, “many fairy stories begin with the death of a mother or father; in these tales the death of the parent creates the most agonizing problems” (8). Of course, even before Charlotte’s (un)timely demise, *Lolita* has experienced the death of a parent. In fact, Harold Haze’s absence is the single most important precondition to the novel’s plot development, as the absence of a paternal figure clears the way for Humbert’s entrance. For Humbert to possess Lo in the way he desires, however, it is not enough to keep her mother close and appeased. She must be destroyed. In fairy tale terms, the witch must die.

Charlotte is perhaps *Lolita*’s most archetypal main character. While Humbert is variably beast to Lo’s beauty (59), “Prince Charming” (109) or “old ogre” (186), Charlotte remains throughout the wicked (step-)mother³⁶. Humbert’s multiplicity speaks to his

³⁶ In her article “Quantifying the Grimm Corpus”, Jeana Jorgensen analyses discrepancies between descriptions of male and female characters in the Grimms’ fairy tales. Jorgensen observes that “beauty, blood, hair and skin descriptions” dominate for women, while “size, age, violence and transformations” characterise the Grimms’ men. Jorgensen argues that these differences “uphold a dichotomous view of the sexes that correlates to mind-body dualism, trapping women in their bodies and skins while men are free to transcend their bodies through transformations” (128). Humbert, as narrator and hero of his own fairy tale, consistently takes on different forms in much the same way as he shifts between diabolic and Adamic guises. This is the benefit of masculine self-authorship and artistic

refusal to be pinned-down; he is not an archetype, but a subject.

Charlotte, on the other hand, is a Humbertian confection of woman's fairy tale *predictability*; her characterisation hits every note. Sexually jealous of her daughter who, she rightly imagines, is a rival for Humbert's attention, Charlotte seeks to eliminate the competition by sending Lo away, first to camp, then, she proposes, to boarding school (83). In the fairy tale allegory of Humbert's narrative, Charlotte becomes the narcissistic Queen of "Snow White" who, rapt with envy of the young girl's superior youth and beauty, sets out to destroy her. Humbert tells us, "Oh, she simply hated her daughter" (80), and was entirely incapable of seeing the child's positive attributes, instead characterising her rival as, "aggressive, boisterous, critical, distrustful, impatient, irritable, inquisitive³⁷, listless, negativistic (underlined twice) and obstinate" (81).

As Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of "Snow White" shows, such competition between women is an unfortunate consequence of the social structures that fairy tales work to naturalise: "female bonding is extremely difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against

transcendence—the thematic undercurrent that pulsates throughout Nabokov's works.

³⁷ It is telling that "inquisitive" makes this list of apparently negative personality traits (as opposed to those Charlotte leaves unmarked: "cheerful, co-operative, energetic, and so forth"), especially in the context of the novel's dominant Edenic and fairy tale themes. It is female inquisitiveness specifically that is the subject of such cautionary tales as "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Bluebeard", as will be discussed in Part V of this chapter.

each other” (38). For Gilbert and Gubar, the fairy tale form shares with religious mythology a fondness for archetypes and dichotomies:

If Lilith’s story summarises the genesis of the female monster in a single useful parable, the Grimm tale of “Little Snow White” dramatises the essential but equivocal relationship between the angel-woman and the monster woman. (36)

For Gilbert and Gubar, the Queen’s monstrosity correlates to her activity. While Snow White represents an obedient and domesticated “sweet nullity”, the Queen is by contrast, “a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily” (39). Now, much to Humbert’s chagrin, all of Charlotte’s plot-making activity pertains to his separation from Lolita. In one instance, Humbert adopts the tone of the browbeaten husband, asserting himself against Charlotte’s brash announcement that, “In the fall we two are going to England” (90). Humbert’s scolding response causes Charlotte to submit, adopting the deferential posture of what she must imagine good wives looks like:

She had come to my side and had fallen on her knees and was slowly, but very vehemently, shaking her head and clawing at my trousers. [...] She said I was her ruler and her god. She said Louise had gone, and let us make love

right away. She said I must forgive her or she would die. (91)

Naturally, this amuses Humbert, whose scheme to attain Lolita would be made manifestly easier with Charlotte's wifely acquiescence. Subordination does not come naturally to the new Mrs Humbert however, who, Humbert laments, can be neither physically nor mentally beaten like her predecessor, Valeria (83). It is Charlotte's acute possessiveness of Humbert, mixed with her sheer irrepressible curiosity (that fabled feminine flaw) that leads to her discovery of Humbert's diary, and consequently, to her fatal accident. As is always the case in tales of persecuted princesses and their rescuer princes, the wicked witch or meddling mother must die. For young love to prosper, the older woman must be removed. For the coming-of-age beauty, the mature, sexually experienced woman represents a threat and an adversary so that the two cannot coexist. One generation flourishes as the other is diminished or destroyed. The new sexual availability of the younger woman renders the older woman obsolete. Charlotte, undoubtedly schooled in the narrative beats of fairy tale romance, anticipates her inevitable fate. Framed this way, Charlotte's resentment towards her daughter seems only rational: hers is a survivalist's instinct.

However, while Charlotte fits Gilbert and Gubar's description of the archetypal, "monster woman", *Lolita* seems to lack an opposing "angel woman", for, as we have already seen, despite Humbert's

best efforts, Lolita lacks the idealised docility of the traditional fairy tale princess. In fact, by chapter three of Part Two, Humbert has “dubbed her My Frigid Princess” (166). What was once an interesting experiment in grown-up behaviour for Lo, quickly loses its novel appeal under the auspice of Humbert’s enforced guardianship, and the “persecuted heroine”, true to literary historical form, wishes to escape her father’s unwanted advances. Hence, it is not Lolita, but her Riviera predecessor, Annabel Leigh, that best resembles the passive, delicate femininity fabled in the fairy tales that dot Humbert’s narrative. Of course, Annabel is dead: her passivity is absolute. In the fairy tale tradition of tales like “Snow White” and “Sleeping Beauty” however, this is hardly a problem. Rather, as Elisabeth Bronfen notes, “striking in the example of Snow White is that she becomes the prince’s desired object only after she has become a ‘seemingly’ dead body” (100). Placed atop a hill in a glass coffin to be surveyed, admired, and desired by all that behold her, Bronfen argues that the ostensibly dead girl becomes an object for eroticised aesthetic viewing.

as auto-icon, Snow White performs the apotheosis of one of the central positions ascribed to Woman in Western culture; namely that the ‘surveyed’ feminine body is meant to confirm the power of the masculine gaze. (102)

Again, Humbert’s necrophiliac longing for love lost comes into the

picture. Humbert uses this, his unnatural but poetic desire for a dead girl, to explain away his more immediate unnatural desire. His attraction to little girls is presented as a tribute or remembrance.

The unnatural is itself a prevalent theme in fairy tales, and one that is pertinent to Humbert's characterisation of Charlotte in *Lolita*. As already mentioned, the peril that besets fairy tale protagonists is often a direct consequence of the death of a parent; that is, of a biological, or *natural* parent. In "Cinderella" as in "Snow White", it is the step-parent, or *unnatural* parent, who victimises the heroine. If *Lolita* is a tale of a persecuted heroine then it bears identifying her persecutor. As Jack Zipes explicates, "'Cinderella' reveals and explores the propensity of stepparents or substitute parents to abuse, abandon, neglect, or kill their nonbiological children" (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 131). While Charlotte is spiteful and resentful of her daughter's hold on Humbert, she is, importantly, Lolita's *natural* mother. It is also worth noting that Charlotte is mourned by her daughter in nocturnal sobs (142, 176), revealing a relationship between child and parent that is not governed by the Manichean binaries that characterise children's stories. Conflict between parents and their adolescent children is not atypical in the real world.

Importantly, all of this is underlined by the fact that it is not Charlotte but Humbert who is the story's true unnatural parent. Following this logic, Humbert is the abusive stepparent of fairy tale lore: he is the evil interloper, the one who succeeds the dead natural

parent, and the force that must be eradicated for the heroine to find her “happily ever after”. As such, it is half-deaf, benign Dick Schiller that is Lolita’s true Prince Charming.

And yet, there is much evidence in Part One of the novel to suggest that Lolita *chooses* Humbert—the unnatural parent—over her mother. Of course, the same can be said of Charlotte who excludes her own child, first from her home and then from her wedding. Female familial relationships are sacrificed, the maternal bond broken, so that heterosexual bonds—be they marital or paternal—can be secured³⁸. Relationships with men are more beneficial than those with women in the patriarchal schema that governs *Lolita* as it governs the fairy tale. In *Happily Ever After; Fairy Tales, Children and The Culture Industry*, Jack Zipes talks about this turning away from the mother on the child’s part in Oedipal terms. The child wishes to ally themselves with the father’s autonomy and power. While the mother represents the nurturance of womb and domicile, the father is the child’s gateway to the world at large.

The child, fearing the mother’s omnipotence,
turns to the father for help. This turn toward the
male, however, is a concession and will enable

³⁸ The transference of the female protagonist from her paternal to her spousal family is a common fairy tale theme, leant strong emphasis in Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid”, where the mermaid’s decision to swap her tail for human legs means she is permanently severed from her father and sisters. What’s more, she is told that to win the prince’s heart and thus share his immortal soul, he must love her so much “that he is willing to forget his father and mother for your sake” (136).

the male authority to dictate the child's life on his terms. Once the male has the child in his power, he can be benevolent or sadistic; it does not matter, but he is in control, and it seems *reasonable* that he remain in control. (59)

The tyrannical power of the father that Zipes speaks about here is chillingly realised at the close of *Lolita's* first part, where the sobbing child, newly cognisant of her orphanhood, crawls into bed with her stepfather-captor (142). For Zipes, the stepparent motif recurs with such regularity in fairy tales in order to "readdress the dilemma of stepparents and stepchildren, for there are multiple ways to live harmoniously in 'unnatural' relations" (*Why* 131). Zipes's choice of words here in his appraisal of Cinderella-type tales has unintentional resonance with *Lolita's* plot, where "unnatural relations" between stepparent and stepchild have very specific connotations. This leads to an important point about Nabokov's use of fairy tale motifs and imagery, for while Freudian folklorists preoccupy themselves with the repressed sexual symbols they claim lurk beneath the surface of popular fairy stories, Nabokov's own texts are more likely to employ surface innuendo than psychological ciphers. Indeed, as we shall see presently, Nabokov has more interest in the grotesque than in the repressed.

Like its titular character, *Lolita* had “a precursor” (9). *Volshebnik*, the short story that Dmitri Nabokov would eventually translate from its original Russian to English as *The Enchanter*, was *Lolita*’s literary prototype. Nabokov provided the following plot synopsis in his afterward to the latter:

The man was central European, the anonymous nymphet was French, and the loci were Paris and Provence. I had him marry the little girl’s sick mother who soon died, and after a thwarted attempt to take advantage of the orphan in a hotel room, Arthur (for that was his name) threw himself under the wheels of a truck.³⁹ (*Lolita* 312)

Lolita takes after *The Enchanter* in more than basic plot, however. Reading *The Enchanter* in retrospect of its more famous descendant feels like sifting through a concise summary of *Lolita*’s dominant motifs. On the very first page, for instance, Edenic temptation is evoked in the image of “Euphrates apricot”, which, Dmitri informs us in a footnote, is thought to have been the true identity of Adam and

³⁹ The idea for what would become *Volshebnik* and later evolve into *Lolita* actually first appears in Nabokov’s 1938 novel *The Gift*, in which the character Shchyogolev, stepfather of protagonist Fyodor’s girlfriend Zina, talks about an idea he has for a novel “From real life” (251) in which a middle-aged man marries a widow in order to gain access to her daughter. In words that anticipate Nabokov’s nymphet mythology, Shchyogolev describes the female protagonist of his twisted love story as, “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” (251).

Eve's forbidden fruit (3). Given the novella's title however, it is perhaps unsurprising that fairy tale images are doubly abundant as Edenic ones. *The Enchanter's* entire plot runs more or less parallel to *Lolita's* first part. It ends after the protagonist attempts to rape the sleeping orphan in a hotel room. In *The Enchanter* and *Lolita* alike, the girl wakes to thwart the protagonist's plans. However, while *The Enchanter* ends with the girl screaming, the hotel's guests alerted, and the protagonist's death by suicide, *Lolita* presents a crucial plot twist. The girl is not ravaged in the night time, but rather gives herself willingly come morning, and so begins the second part of the novel and our two protagonists' tour of America as fugitives in faux incest.

Essentially, there is a shift in emphasis between what we might call the source text and the final draft, whereby the tale of the *Enchanter* becomes the tale of the *enchantress*. In *Lolita*, the would-be victim wakes up and asserts herself as a seductress, or, more accurately put, the narrator of the story *tells us* that she seduced him.

Interestingly, of all the fairy tales alluded to in *Lolita*, there is no direct reference to the genre's most famous rape parable—the tale of “Little Red Riding Hood”. The closest Humbert comes to aligning himself with the wolf in grandma's clothing, is when he muses a ploy to infiltrate the boarding cabins at Camp Q:

Should I disguise myself as a somber old-fashioned girl, gawky Mlle Humbert, and put up my tent on the outskirts of Camp Q, in the hope

that its russet nymphets would clamor: 'Let us
 adopt that deep-voiced D.P.' and drag the sad,
 shyly smiling Berthe *au Grand Pied* to their
 rustic hearth. Berthe will sleep with Dolores
 Haze! (66)

As Jack Zipes hypothesises in his *Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, Perrault's literary version of the tale worked to transform, "a hopeful oral tale about the initiation of a young girl into a tragic one of violence in which the girl is blamed for her own violation" (7). Red Riding Hood as feminine archetype has thus fallen victim to the same cultural mutations as Lolita, whereby the sexualisation of the girl in popular representation—particularly in images⁴⁰—have exposed her to moral judgement. It is surprising that Nabokov did not draw the comparison himself, firstly because the author admits to a childhood preoccupation with the tale in *Speak, Memory* (10), and secondly, as Zipes' description of the fairy tale girl illustrates, because Red Riding Hood has come to be known as something of a nymphet:

What attracted me to Little Red Riding Hood in
 the first place was 'her' commodified
 appearance as a sex object, and how I was
 socialized to gaze at her gazing at me [...] RRH

⁴⁰ Issues surrounding *Lolita's* illustration, representation and misrepresentation are discussed at length in Chapter Four.

has become an iconic sign of the seducer, the
 femme fatale, who lures men and thus must
 bear the consequences of her heedless acts.

(8)

Indeed, Zipes' historicist reading of Perrault's tale suggests that Humbert and the wolf have even more in common than is initially apparent. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there are recorded instances of male child murderers being tried as werewolves in French-speaking and German-speaking regions of Europe. Zipes surmises that Perrault may have been influenced by one such trial he witnessed as a child (*Trials and Tribulations* 19-20). It is of course more likely that these child-murderers were pedophiles than werewolves, making the preying wolf in the woods a seemingly natural avatar for lurking, leering Humbert⁴¹.

We might surmise that Nabokov was put off by the sheer obviousness of the metaphor. The Big Bad Wolf does show up in *The Enchanter* however, first as, "the lone wolf was getting ready to don Granny's nightcap" and then as "Mr White-Tooth in the bed, the

⁴¹ Zipes comments on a notable disparity between the endings of Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" and the Grimms' more widely circulated version. In Perrault, the Hunter saves RRH and her grandmother by cutting the wolf's stomach open and refilling it with stones. The wolf dies. But the Brothers Grimm added another wolf after the event, who Red Riding Hood is fooled by again. She escapes when her grandmother helps her trick the wolf so that he drowns. The Grimms reiterate Red Riding Hood's ineffectuality and victimhood. She lacks the ability to learn and has to be rescued twice (33). I mention this here because *Lolita* features not one preying wolf, but two. However, while *Lolita* is seduced by a second wolf in the form of Quilty, she is able to escape him unaided.

hoodlum brothers with their little red rifles”(58). The description of the assailant brothers’ rifles here doubles as a reference to the fairy tale source and as a scurrilously phallic image. There is a manifest relationship between sexual and fairy tale imagery in *The Enchanter* that is never made so explicit in all of *Lolita*. The effect is at times crude, even grotesque, as the use of fairy tale imagery is framed as the titular Enchanter’s method for grooming the unwitting child:

she would be entertained only with storybook images (the pet giant, the fairy tale forest, the sack with its treasure), and with the amusing consequences that would ensue when she inquisitively fingered the toy with the familiar but never tedious trick. (43)

Later, when the girl is deep in her “enchanted slumber” (54), the fairy tale metaphor develops in the same coarse vein, descending into what looks like a campy parody of pulp erotic fiction:

he began passing his magic wand above her body, almost touching the skin, torturing himself with her attraction, her visible proximity, the fantastic confrontation permitted by the slumber of this naked girl, whom he was measuring, as it were, with an enchanted yard-stick. (56)

If Nabokov’s “uses of enchantment” in *Lolita* are in accord with the novel’s themes of unreality, parody, deception, and metafiction, his

use of the same devices in *The Enchanter* have a different effect entirely. In short, the effect is one of repugnance. The juxtaposition of fairy tale imagery and sexual content is as disquieting as that of child-victim and adult-rapist. It is, to recall a term from earlier in this chapter, *unnatural*. The closest *Lolita* comes to a comparable juxtaposition is in the instance cited at the beginning of this chapter, where Humbert's "bursting beast" encroaches on "the beauty" of Lo's body (59). Naturally, the long-form novel can afford more subtlety than its short-form antecedent, and there is ever the possibility that the text's nuances have suffered in the process of translation. Certainly, Dmitri's notes on the text suggest that this might be the case, and he specifically cites "the telescoped Little Red Riding wordplays" as an instance where a literal rendering of the Russian would have been "meaningless in English" (63). Of course, another likely scenario is that Nabokov's taste for mischief had simply grown more refined by the time he wrote *Lolita*, for that novel is by no means devoid of innuendo; its narrator is simply a more sophisticated vulgarian.

Nabokov could be said to be generally taken with the theme of seducer-storytellers whose aberrant personal compulsions are offset by linguistic wizardry. The fairy tale universe—where the sinister and the spectacular co-exist symbiotically—provides an apt forum to explore this theme. Such characters do also exist in the material world, however, and one favourite Nabokovian example

holds the especial credential of being the author of one of the best-loved children's books of all time. Of Charles Lutwidge Dawson, Vladimir Nabokov said, "I always call him Lewis Carroll Carroll because he was the first Humbert Humbert" (*Lolita* 381). Nabokov, having translated *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into Russian while at Cambridge (*Speak Memory* 204), laced his works with allusions to the author. In *Lolita*, we have "a breeze from wonderland" (131) and the image of a "half-naked nymphet stilled in the act of combing her Alice-in-Wonderland hair" (264).

This second image reveals a key to Nabokov's interest in citing Carroll here, in *this* text. Carroll was an accomplished photographer whose favourite subject was little girls. Many of his photographs feature the Liddell children, including Alice—the real girl behind Carroll's most famous creation. While half of Carroll's photographs have been lost or destroyed at his behest, a large number of those that do remain depict little girls, many of them in states of partial undress⁴². They appear as street urchins or beggar maids, with loose rags hanging off their small frames to reveal their shoulders and chests. Perhaps by coincidence, one of Nabokov's first explicit mentions of the fairy tale theme in *Lolita* conjures a fantasy image reminiscent of an Alice Liddell portrait, when, beholding Lo for the first time, Humbert likens himself to "the fairy tale nurse of some little

⁴² A small number of child nudes remain, despite Dodgson's will that they all be destroyed upon his passing.

princess (lost, kidnapped, discovered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds)” [39]. As Morton N. Cohen’s biography of Lewis Carroll states, “we cannot know to what extent sexual urges lay behind Charles’s preference for drawing and photographing children in the nude. He contended the preference was entirely aesthetic” (228). Of course, the irony in this contention is clear to any student of Humbertian aesthetics. In a letter to the illustrator A.B. Frost, Carroll requested a drawing for his personal use. His aesthetic specifications were unambiguous:

As it is *not* for publication, you need not put an atom of drapery on it, and I can quite trust you, even if you made it full-front view, to have a simple classical figure. I had rather not have an adult figure (which always looks to me rather in need of drapery): a girl of about 12 is *my* ideal of beauty of form. (Cohen 229)

However, Cohen’s biography of Carroll does stress that there is nothing to suggest that he ever sexually abused his photographic subjects, many of whom speak of him as a beloved friend (189).

Nabokov himself however, suggested that he was kinder to Carroll’s legacy than he might have been, stating:

(Carroll) has a pathetic affinity with H.H. but some odd scruple prevented me from alluding in *Lolita* to his wretched perversion and to those

ambiguous photographs he took in dim rooms.

He got away with it, as so many other

Victorians got away with pederasty and

nympholepsy. His were sad, scrawny little

nymphets, bedraggled and half-undressed, or

rather semi-undraped, as if participating in

some dusty and dreadful charade” (Appel and

Nabokov 141-142)

Although Nabokov goes on in this interview to deny that he had Carroll in mind when devising what Appel calls *Lolita's* “photography theme”, *Alice* turns up again in *Ada*, a novel with overt references to both pedophilia and photographic child pornography. It is difficult to accept this as an innocent coincidence, given the fairy tale precision of Nabokov’s plotting. In *Nymphetland* and *Terra*, as in every other fairy tale kingdom far, far away, coincidences are never mere coincidences.

Nabokov’s wry hat-tips to Lewis Carroll are exemplary of how the author’s engagement with the tropes of children’s fairy tale literature often converse directly with one of his own favourite themes—that of men who are attracted to girls. One might say that many of Nabokov’s protagonists share with the fairy tale form a preoccupation with youth and the young. In fact, it is in Nabokov’s short story, “A Nursery Tale” that he introduces his first hebephile antihero. The story concerns Erwin, a sexually-frustrated and

pathetic man whose hobby is watching and mentally “collecting” young women to be part of his fantasy harem. He encounters the Devil in the guise of a middle-aged woman named Frau Monde, who offers him the chance to make his fantasy a reality: Erwin can have as many women as he can collect by midnight, provided they total an uneven number. The twist in the tale comes when Erwin, having collected what he thinks are thirteen different women, discovers that the last of his picks is the self-same as his first. His proposed harem thus numbers twelve women—an even number—and the deal with the devil is off. Odd and even numbers have special significance in the fairy tale tradition. There are seven dwarves, and seven fairies present at the princess’s christening in Charles Perrault's “Sleeping Beauty”. When an eighth, evil fairy enters the narrative, the curse is set that will induce the princess’s hundred year sleep. Again, this motif has origins in Judeo-Christian tradition. The idea of lucky number seven, for instance, derives from Hebrew gematria (a form of numerology) where the number is seen to have special power in scripture. It is the Divine number of completion or perfection; the Sabbath falls on the seventh day. By extension, odd numbers in the Bible are considered lucky, while even numbers, particularly pairs, are thought to bring misfortune (Frankel and Teutsch 121). The devilish doubles and misleading mirrors that recur throughout Nabokov’s oeuvre correspond to this mythological trope of unlucky pairs.

Importantly however, the girl who doubles as Erwin's first and thirteenth pick in "A Nursery Tale" is described as "a child of fourteen or so" (*Tyrants Destroyed* 57), thus creating an overlap between two of Nabokov's favourite narrative motifs. The self-mirroring object of Erwin's double desire and the reason for his fairy tale undoing, is not a woman, but a *child*. It appears that Nabokov—although usually, an outspoken opponent of didacticism—had provided his nursery tale with a moral. Erwin is punished however, not merely because he is attracted to a young girl; in fact, her age is never mentioned when he selects her in the first instance. Nabokov seems rather to pass judgement on Erwin's unconstrained sexual avarice: after all, the devil herself advised him to stop at just five women. Erwin is disgustingly eager; a man whose lust is self-defeatedly greedy, his desire for the young girl so fervent that he wants her *twice*. Of course, while uncharacteristic of the author himself, the tale's moral lesson is a formal convention of the narrative mode that he adopts. Indeed, in his brief foreword to the tale's first appearance in print in English, Nabokov makes apologies for the "rather artificial affair, composed a little hastily with more concern for the tricky plot than for imagery and good taste" (*Tyrants Destroyed* 43). "A Nursery Tale" does however, exhibit the hallmark of the Nabokovian fairy tale; that being its thematic intersections of sex, the grotesque, and the childlike or whimsical. In fact, as the aforementioned "storybook images" (43) that appear in *The Enchanter* illustrate, Nabokov was

not so concerned with “good taste” as to exclude the repugnant.

“A Nursery Tale” is also interesting insofar as it works to almost synopsis the Nabokovian spectrum of female characterisation. The desirable young girl is the most immediately recognisable recurring character here. However, it is Frau Monde, the she-devil that straddles the familiar archetypes of femme fatale and hag. This incarnation of the devil uses her feminine corporeal form to destroy men: first she makes them fall in love with her, then she makes them commit suicide (48, 60). She seduces to deceive, and, like Eve, leaves sin and sorrow in her wake. Most pointedly, Frau Monde is the only female that Erwin encounters who *wants* to seduce him. At one point, Erwin even almost mistakingly adds her to his harem, something that delights and amuses the scheming devil. All of the other women that Erwin leers at or accosts are offended by his approaches. However, Frau Monde tells Erwin that, “Being a woman has its points but being an aging women is hell” (49)—a statement that suggests that young women should perhaps appreciate their moment at the centre of male attention while it lasts. Age divests women of their sexual power. The devil, knowing this, tells Erwin, “Next Monday I plan to be born elsewhere. The Siberian slut I have chosen shall be the mother of a marvellous, monstrous man” (49). The devil—afforded with his fairy tale ability to transmogrify⁴³—

⁴³ Again, as Jeana Jorgensen’s analysis of Grimms’ fairy tales (see footnote 36) showed, male characters transcend their bodies through

decides to inhabit a vessel with better long-term prospects.

The figure of the ageing female is antithetical to what Max Lüthi described as “the depthless world of the folktale” that, “lacks the dimension of time. There do exist young and old people, of course [...] But there are no aging persons, and no aging otherworld beings either” (19). There is of course, an element of truth to Lüthi’s observation, particularly with regard to his own example of Sleeping Beauty rising from her century-long sleep “just as young and beautiful as she was before” (19). But Lüthi’s description of a fictional universe untouched by time completely excludes one of the genre’s most famous characters: the Queen in “Snow White”. The Queen is a woman acutely aware of her own advancing age, her depleting beauty, and her encroaching obsolescence. She knows, as Nabokov’s punning she-devil knows, that, “being an aging woman is hell”. The ageing female poses an inconvenient exception to Lüthi’s rule, as she embodies a contradiction in the atemporal fairy tale universe. The tale’s very equilibrium, along with its eventual “happily every after”, hence rest on her removal.

This fairy tale logic extends to Humbert’s imagined “nymphetland” (*Lolita* 92). It is a place where enchanting little girls never grow old: rather, they die of typhus (13), or in childbirth (4)—the indignity of withered beauty never to befall them. Humbert’s

transformation in fantasy narratives. While Nabokov’s devil here assumes a female form, Erwin somehow recognises that the wit and wiles behind the female guise are those of Satan *himself*.

characterisation of Charlotte Haze as harridan (that which Samuel Johnson's dictionary defined as "a decayed strumpet" [103]) connotes that the young female corpse, as prefigured in the comatic trances of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, is more desirable in "death" than her mature female counterpart is in living. Had Charlotte died younger, she too might have been the mythologised object of some man's phantasy, as Humbert's mental efforts to fulfil his spousal duty illustrate:

I kept telling myself, as I wielded my brand-new large-as-life wife, that biologically this was the nearest I could get to Lolita; that at Lolita's age, Lotte had been as desirable a schoolgirl as her daughter was, and as Lolita's daughter would be some day. I had my wife unearth from under a collection of shoes [...] a thirty-year-old album, so that I might see how Lotte had looked as a child; and even though the light was wrong and the dresses graceless, I was able to make out a dim first version of Lolita's outline, legs, cheekbones, bobbed nose. Lottelita, Lolitchen. So I tom-peeped across the hedges of years, into wan little windows. (76)

The temporal scope of Humbert's "tom-peeping" is bi-directional, as later in the novel he indulges the fantasy of playing patriarch to future

generation Lolitas:

I might have her produce eventually a nymphet
with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the
Second, who would be eight or nine around
1960, when I would still be *dans la force de
l'âge*; indeed the telescoping of my mind, or un-
mind, was strong enough to distinguish in the
remoteness of time a *vieillard encore vert*—or
was it green rot?—bizarre, tender, salivating Dr.
Humbert, practicing on supremely lovely Lolita
the Third the art of being a granddad. (174)

Far from resembling that depthless, timeless dimension that Lüthi described, Humbert's fairy tale universe is one where the passing of years is keenly observed; and while a fantasy of atemporality and agelessness are central to Humbert's nympholepsy, *circularity* is the best that he can realistically hope for. The past Charlotte whose image Humbert tries to summon, was superseded by her daughter, who, in turn, Humbert hopes, will be superseded by her own progeny, and so on, and so forth. While "nymphancy" (*Lolita* 222) is fleeting, there will always be new nymphets. The *fantasy of agelessness* however, is integral to the fairy tale narrative landscapes into which Nabokov writes his hebephile protagonists, for in these imaginary fairy tale universes, young girls never grow old, and ageing women are written out of the plot.

Part IV: Fairy Tale in the American Context

Much of this chapter has been concerned with the ideological implications of Nabokov's "uses of enchantment", for fairy tales have always been used to transfer ideas and perpetuate social norms. However, folk tales and fairy tales have always evolved with the societies that produce and recreate them, and this is nowhere more evident than in Nabokov's contemporary America, where the medium of animated film had translated the European fairy tale corpus into an arm of the culture industry. At the time of *Lolita's* publication, "Little Red Riding Hood", "Snow White", "Cinderella", *Alice in Wonderland*, and "Sleeping Beauty" had each already been adapted for screen by the Walt Disney Company. Since Nabokov's death, several more of the tales referenced in *Lolita* have been made-over in Disney's unmistakable style. Indeed, Disney's brand was then, and is now a cultural megalith with global (and globalising) influence.

Nabokov, always being acutely aware of how purveyors of ideas operate, specifically name-checks Disney in the passage where Humbert goes to Camp Q to retrieve Lolita following her mother's death. It is here that the camp mistress informs Humbert and the reader that the boarding cabins are "each dedicated to a Disney creature" (110). This is Nabokov's single reference to Disney; it could easily be read as a titbit of scene-building, a passing irrelevance. Camp Q is a summer camp for children, after all: Disney's target demographic. Camp Q is also, however, the site

where Lolita loses her virginity. It is the site where she and her friend Barbara, take turns behind the bushes with Charlie Holmes and some recycled contraceptives, fished from the aptly named Lake Climax (137).

Thus, Disney's presence at this scene might be something of a wry joke by Nabokov, for while the author's use of fairy tale motifs specifically draws on the genre's subtextual preoccupations with themes of childhood sexuality, pubescence, and sexual awakenings, Disney's treatment of the genre worked specifically to mute these elements. Indeed, Zipes called Disney "that twentieth-century sanitation man" (*Fairy Tales* 65), claiming that the overwhelming ethos of Disney's films was one of purification. The more subversive elements of the popular European⁴⁴ fairy tales that would become synonymous with Disney's brand, were hence erased. In Zipes's words, Disney's "revolution was a major regression and caused many of the liberating aspects of the fairy tale to be tamed and to turn in against themselves. The Disney civilizing process leads to the denigration of utopia" (191). Disney's "purifying" presence on the walls at Camp Q then speaks to a desexualisation of the space in which the girls sleep. It speaks to a puritanical desire to cleanse the space, hence cleansing the minds of its inhabitants, and it speaks to

⁴⁴ The differences between European fairy tale tradition and Disney's American animated films speaks to a broader theme in *Lolita* concerning the contrasts between Humbert's high-brow cultural origins and Lolita's low-brow, pop-culture interests. This theme is addressed in Chapter Three.

an obstinate denial of burgeoning childhood sexuality: a well-intentioned exercise in self-delusion on the part of American adults. The insipid cuteness projected by the Disney characters that adorn the walls at Camp Q is at complete odds with the pictures of older men that Dolores Haze has tacked to her bedroom walls at home. That this is also a camp exclusively for girls, brings to mind Foucauldian ideas about the organisation of the adult world and its institutional spaces around the sexuality of minors⁴⁵. The segregation of the sexes reveals an acute yet ineffable awareness among adults of children's sexuality. That Lolita manages to have sex with the one male child present at this girls-only camp would seem to prove such fears justified. As would her lurid claims about her classmates.

Well, the Miranda twins had shared the same bed for years, and Donald Scott, who was the dumbest boy in the school, had done it with Hazel Smith in his uncle's garage, and Kenneth Knight—who was the brightest—used to exhibit himself wherever and whenever he had a chance, and— (137)

The seemingly innocuous Disney murals at Camp Q are later contrasted in bravura style by the imaginary composition Humbert creates for the walls of *The Enchanted Hunters*. In the chapter

⁴⁵ Chapter Four of this thesis provides more discussion on the topic of childhood sexuality, its regulation, and difficulties with its conceptualisation. For this reason, I have limited my development of the subject here.

immediately following his “seduction” by Lo, Humbert paints the reader a vivid mental picture. He says, “There would have been a lake” (134). Lakes are important in *Lolita*. It was at Hour Glass Lake that Humbert’s half-hearted attempt at murdering Charlotte was spied by Jean Farlow, and of course, lakes with innuendo-heavy names are a major feature of Camp Q. Humbert goes on:

There would have been nature studies—a tiger
pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake
sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat.
There would have been a sultan, his face
expressing great agony (belied, as it were, by
his molding caress), helping a callypygean
slave child to climb a column of onyx.

The mention of onyx here reiterates the reference to Camp Q and its lakes—Onyx, Eryx, and Climax. The heavy-handed sexual symbolism in Humbert’s prospective painting acts as a humorous counterpoint to the benign, doe-eyed innocence projected by Camp Q’s Disney creatures. Here, sexual intercourse between child and adult is presented in ornate visual metaphors. It goes on:

There would have been those luminous
globules of gonadal glow that travel up the
opalescent sides of juke boxes. There would
have been all kinds of camp activities on the
part of the intermediate group, Canoeing,

Coranting, Combing Curls in the lakeside sun.

Here, we are firmly back at Camp with a capital C, as Appel notes, “H.H. is still in Volume *C* of the *Girl’s Encyclopedia*” (*Lolita* 383). The juke box with its “gonadal glow” harks to the era’s teen culture and to American teenagers’ dating customs (or mating rituals)—precisely the type of activities that Camp Q’s walls’ cartoon eyes work to surveil. Humbert concludes:

There would have been a fire opal dissolving
within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last
dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh,
a wincing child. (135)

Along with the fire opal, Humbert’s succession of tawdry graphic symbols dissolve away to reveal what has been behind them all along—a crass portrayal of a man’s fleeting sexual ecstasy and a child’s resultant pain. Again, Nabokov confronts the grotesque head-on. Humbert’s florid metaphors work not to conceal his unsavoury meaning, but rather to augment it. Unlike the saccharine Disney characters that cover the walls of Camp Q, Humbert’s imaginary mural is designed to provoke. While American Walt whitewashes, European Humbert pollutes and defiles. The same can be said for the contrasting ways in which Disney and Nabokov use the fairy tale in their respective media. Disney’s pedagogical adaptations desexualise the tales; Nabokov’s perform in just the opposite way, working to *re-sexualise* where Disney had censored or erased. In

Lolita's American context, this might be read as the European author's will to reclaim the fairy tale by reinstating some of its original grisliness. However, Disney's sanitation project can be regarded as part of a process that began in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, where, "fairy tale writers had learned to rationalise their tales and to incorporate Christian and patriarchal messages into the narratives to satisfy middle-class and aristocratic *adults*." (Zipes, *Happily* 5)

Nabokov's revolt then, is less against Disney specifically, and more against the suppressive moralism that his signature, as company logo and cultural icon, emblematises.

Part V: Cue's Clues: Quilty and The Name of the Helper Motif

I wish to briefly revisit the motif of "wrong" numbers that Nabokov's "A Nursery Tale" takes as its narrative crux; most specifically, its relationship to Nabokov's pet trope of doubles, doppelgängers, mirrors, and false reflections. While in "A Nursery Tale", Girl Thirteen is actually Girl One, in the novel *Despair*, Hermann believes Felix to be his doppelgänger even though the latter sees no resemblance. In *Lolita*, Humbert is pursued by a man, perhaps, he surmises, a detective who "looks exactly like a relative of mine called Trapp" (219), never for a minute supposing that, "another Humbert was avidly following Humbert Humbert and Humbert's nymphet" (217). Humbert fails to recognise his own double, and from this, his tragedy ensues.

Unlike *Lolita's* more direct references to fairy tale titles and themes, the mystery of the identity of Humbert's follower operates at a subtextual level, depending on a network of wordplay and repeated consonant sounds⁴⁶. Carefully and covertly Nabokov develops a narrative arc that resembles what Aarne and Thompson classify as the tale concerning the protagonist's quest to decipher "The Name of the Helper". The best-known version of this type of tale is Rumpelstiltskin, a tale in which, it bears noting, the protagonist must guess the titular antagonist's name *lest he take her child away*. Of course, Quilty is the helper who aids the fairy tale nymphet's escape from her ogre-daddy. The mystery of his name is thus Humbert's to solve. As we know however, because Humbert fails to recognise his own double, he loses Lo (his child) to Quilty. As such, the theme is not fully realised until the climactic chapters of the novel when Lo reveals to Humbert the identity of her helper-lover; a riddle that Humbert is certain "the astute reader" (272) has long since decoded.

In the tale of "Rumpelstiltskin" the queen never succeeds in guessing the little man's name herself. Instead, she sends a messenger in search of exotic names and he happens upon a figure in the woods, dancing around a camp fire and singing to himself:

⁴⁶ Cs and Qs abound whenever Quilty's presence can be felt. For instance, the opening paragraph of chapter eighteen in Part Two begins, "The reader must now forget Chestnuts and Colts" (216). Humbert goes on to explain why: "we could not shake off detective Trapp: for it was during those days that the problem of the Aztec Red Convertible presented itself to me, and quite overshadowed the theme of Lo's lovers". There is then a paragraph break, followed by the emphasised clue-word: "Queer!" (217)

Today I brew, tomorrow I'll bake,
Soon I'll have the queen's namesake.
Oh, how hard it is to play my game,
For Rumpelstiltskin is my name! (Grimm et
al.255)

The story ends with Rumpelstiltskin so outraged that the queen has discovered his name and thwarted his plans that he literally tears himself in two, violently pulling limb from limb.

Compare this sequence of events to those in the closing chapters of *Lolita*, starting with Humbert pressing a pregnant Dolly Schiller for the name of the man with whom she betrayed him:

“Come, his name!”

She thought I had guessed long ago. It was

(with a mischievous and melancholy smile)

such a sensational name. I would never believe

it. She could hardly believe it herself.

His name, my fall nymph.

It was unimportant, she said. She suggested I

skip it. Would I like a cigarette?

No. His name.

She shook her head with great resolution. She

guessed it was too late to raise hell and I would

never believe the unbelievably unbelievable—

I said I had better go, regards, nice to have

seen her.

She said really it was useless, she would never tell, but on the other hand, after all—“Do you really want to know who it was? Well, it was—”

(271)

Lolita’s apparent delight in this game of suspense and denial is clearly evocative of the Grimms’ mischievous goblin and his protracted naming game. That it is *she* who mocks and taunts Humbert for not already having guessed the name himself underlines her allegiance with Quilty. When all is finally revealed, Humbert departs to find his nemesis. It is when the action moves to Quilty’s mansion that Nabokov’s theme of doubles and mirrors reaches its crescendo, and we are left with a scene that looks like one man quarrelling with himself, or indeed, tearing himself in two: “I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us” (299).

Quilty’s status as a second Humbert—a real or perhaps psychic reflection of Humbert’s loathsome, bestial self has definite echoes in fairy tale lore, where the splitting of good and bad⁴⁷, hero and villain, is always absolute. Humbert becomes the moral hero of his own

⁴⁷ Bettelheim talks about the tradition of two mothers in fairy tales. There is the good mother, who dies at the beginning of the story, and the evil step-mother who takes her place. For Bettelheim this “splitting” of the mother figure into separate good and bad entities “serves the child well” by offering a focal point for his/her ambivalent feelings towards their own mother: “The fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one’s angry thoughts and wishes about her” (69).

narrative only after his discovery of Quilty's identity, and this is because Quilty is at once a facsimile of Humbert, and an objectified Other against which Humbert can distinguish himself. By no coincidence, Humbert becomes his most sympathetic self after learning the identity of Lo's second abuser. It is then that that he insists "the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child" (278) before giving her a departing gift of four thousand dollars. And it is only after Quilty is disposed of that Humbert is able to contemplate the tragedy of Lolita's lost childhood (308). It is as if all of Humbert's menace died along with Quilty; that in murdering his dark double, he was somehow purified. A sombre and sincere Humbert emerges from Quilty's ashes; his other, deviant, designing self apparently displaced in the Other and destroyed.

The first direct allusion to the "Name of the Helper" plot in *Lolita* appears in a passage relating to *The Enchanted Hunters* play, which of course, is the ruse by which Humbert is deceived into letting Lolita spend time with Quilty. It goes:

I was under the impression (all of this quite casually, you understand, quite outside any orbit of importance) that the accursed playlet belonged to the type of whimsey for juvenile consumption [...] such as [...] *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Maurice Vermont and Marion

Rumpelmeyer [...] I did not know—and would not have cared, if I did—that actually *The Enchanted Hunters* was a quite recent and technically original composition... (201)

Here, retracing his steps, his thoughts, his thoughtlessness, Humbert marks the clues he missed. Rumpelmeyer suggests Rumpelstiltskin, the name the hero must discover in time lest “his child” be taken from him by a mysterious character. Humbert fails in this task, in fact, he fails to realise there is a game afoot at all. Yet Nabokov sets all the traps so that the second-time reader might gain some satisfaction from the fairy tale symmetry he initiates when this passage goes on to say: “To me—inasmuch as I could judge from my charmer’s part—it seemed to be a pretty dismal kind of fancy work, with echoes from Lenormand and Maeterlinck and various quiet British dreamers” (201). The significance of this apparently throwaway observation becomes apparent only when Quilty, in his final exchange with Humbert, announces: “I have been called the American Maeterlinck” (301). The line that Nabokov playfully draws from Rumpelmeyer to Maeterlinck then, works to nudge the reader in the direction of the “Name of the Helper” trope he lays in place. That Humbert misses the obvious while recognising an obscure literary link to his adversary is the comic sting in the scene’s tail.

In keeping with the theme of obscure, and perhaps, tenuous links, Maeterlinck also has literary ties with another of *Lolita*’s myriad

fairy tale allusions. He was the author of a three-act play based on “Bluebeard” entitled *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*. “Bluebeard” appears in *Lolita* when Humbert visits Lo in hospital and suspects that she is strategising her escape, with the hospital staff in cahoots. Bluebeard, for the uninitiated, is a wife-murdering serial killer who stores the bodies of his victims in a secret chamber. His last wife discovers his murderous secret when she unlocks said chamber against the specific instructions of her husband and finds the bloodied corpses of her predecessors hanging therein. When Bluebeard finds out that she has disobeyed him, he decides that she too must die. The wife stalls him by asking for a reprieve to pray. Nabokov plays on the story’s ending, where Bluebeard’s wife asks her sister, Anne to, “go up to the parapet of the tower and see if my brothers are coming. They promised that they would come and visit me to-day. And if you see them, wave to them to hurry” (Perrault et al. 32). As she anxiously waits for her brothers to come and slay her would-be murderer, Bluebeard’s wife repeats the refrain, “Anne, sister Anne, what do you see?” (33) In *Lolita*, a female hospital attendee reprises that fairy tale refrain and starts Humbert’s cogs turning:

“My sister Ann,” said Mary (topping information with after-thought), “works at the Ponderosa place.”

Poor Bluebeard. Those brutal brothers⁴⁸. (243)

While Humbert's sympathy for Bluebeard seems misplaced, it is not entirely at odds with the overall tone of Perrault's text, which seems to take a stronger stance against the wife's insubordination than it does against Bluebeard's pathological violence. Incidentally, the wife is never named in Perrault's text, the implication being that she and her dead predecessors represent some perennial truth about woman's nature—each, we assume, being murdered as punishment for prying behind the closet's locked door. Of course, this regressive causal chain stops at Bluebeard's first wife, for whose murder we are offered no motive. Perrault provided two morals in verse as epilogues to the tale. The first reads:

Though great the charms of curiosity,
 It often brings regrets in greater measure,
 As every day new instances make clear.
 No sooner seized upon than it has ceased to
 be,
 Despite the fair sex, it's an empty pleasure,
 —And always bought too dear. (36)

The second moral adopts a more ironic tone, claiming that, "monsters" such as Bluebeard "have gone out of date", and that, in

⁴⁸ When Lolita actually does flee the hospital with Quilty, Humbert vows to "destroy my brother" (247). His search leads him to the Ponderosa Lodge (where Sister Anne was said to work) where the landlady tells him that the man that he is looking for "is your brother" (249). Quilty is the "brutal brother" who comes to rescue Lo from Humbert's clutches.

contemporary couples, “it’s less the husband than the wife that’s feared” (36). Perrault’s joke—that brutalised wives are rarer than tyrannised husbands—carries with it the insinuation that male dominion over women is part of some natural order that has sadly been lost or subverted—that women have henpecked men into submission. As Zipes has written:

According to Perrault, Bluebeard is the exception, and normal men are not criminal. Yet as we know, the exception not only makes the rules, it also conceals normative behaviour, for force and violence (physically and psychologically) continue to be “justifiable” if not effective means employed by men to secure their power.

(*Why* 164)

What Zipes is getting at here, is the idea that the perpetuation of violence against women *despite its ineffectiveness* reveals the precariousness of masculine dominion. The use of brutality to retain power reveals the invalidity and fragility of that power. An episode in *Lolita* illustrates this point perfectly. Humbert discovers that the note he made of Quilty’s licence plate has been partially erased. At first, he says nothing, allowing Lo to happily read her comic books as they drive on for three or four miles. Then: “Lo looked up with a semi-smile of surprise and without a word I delivered a tremendous back-

hand cut that caught her smack on her hot hard little cheekbone” (227). Of course, this is not Humbert’s first act of violence towards a woman, and it is far from his worst, but it is the one that best shows his frustration at his own ineffectuality; his inability to control or to own Lolita, and his incapacity to stop her from wanting to get away. Humbert’s pity for Bluebeard starts to look like self-pity.

Let us return to Perrault’s first moral however, the one in which he warns against “the charms of curiosity”. The forbidden cupboard motif of “Bluebeard” has clear resonances with the tales of Pandora and Eve, and again, the genetic links between the fairy tale and the Biblical are heavily evident. “Bluebeard” tells of what happens to disobedient, inquiring women, women who trespass the boundaries that men set for them. In this sense, the moral subtext of “Bluebeard” is similar to that of “Little Red Riding Hood” insofar as both teach of the culpability of female “victims”. We are to believe that, “nothing would have happened to Bluebeard’s wife if she knew how to tame herself and thus maintain a code of civility that calls for female subservience without legitimacy” (Zipes, *Why* 172). Humbert’s affinity with murderous Bluebeard then, is not far removed from his association with Adam. Of course, the parable of the bloody closet also recalls Charlotte Haze’s fatal curiosity; had she never unlocked Humbert’s bureau, she would not have had cause to run into the street and in front of that car. It is by such meticulous mechanics of fairy tale synchronicity that Nabokov operates.

While “Bluebeard” warns women to keep their innate curiosity in check, it also underlines the pitfalls of women’s superficial nature, for the story goes that the protagonist’s blue beard, “made him so terrifyingly ugly that there was not a woman or girl who did not flee at the sight of him” (Perrault et al. 27). Bluebeard is redeemed in the eyes of women however, by his great wealth, his palatial home, and the lavish parties that he throws. His beguiling riches make amends for his repellent countenance. In this context, it is possible to read Bluebeard as an almost tragic figure. However, I fear that to suggest that Bluebeard is himself a victim, whose hatred of women is a response to his repeated rejection and exploitation by them, would be to bestow upon Perrault’s tale a psychological depth that is simply not there. A more plausible interpretation is that Perrault is once again pointing to an inherent feminine folly, suggesting that a woman’s materialism is just as dangerous as her curiosity. In this context, Humbert’s sympathy for Bluebeard makes a great deal of sense, for, as will be explicated at length in the chapter that follows, Humbert makes repeated reference to Lo’s preoccupation with gifts and trinkets, lamenting that her love for him is hollow or non-existent. As such, what seems like a passing reference to “Bluebeard” has thematic ramifications that traverse the first three chapters of this thesis—linking Edenic temptation to fairy tale transgressions, and both to woman’s innate material greed.

Chapter Three: Materialism, Materiality and the Feminine

Part I: The Makings of the Material Girl

In a 1967 interview with his former student and future annotator, Alfred Appel, Vladimir Nabokov announced, “Philosophically, I am an indivisible monist” (*Strong Opinions* 7). The author was responding to a line of questions on the thematic prevalence of doppelgängers in his work, a topic he initially tried to dismiss by calling it “a frightful bore” (71). Appel persisted undeterred however, prompting Nabokov to move to quash the subject with a deliberately abstruse response. Two years later, *Time* magazine pressed Nabokov to demystify his statement; he elaborated: “Monism, which implies a oneness of basic reality, is seen to be divisible when, say, ‘mind’ sneakily splits away from ‘matter’ in the reasoning of a muddled monist or half-hearted materialist” (106).

Nabokov’s sincerity in his professed monism is questionable, not least because he himself had always been an outspoken opponent of ‘isms’—maintaining his intellectual imperviousness to the influence of grand, universal ideas. Furthermore, this philosophy of *oneness* is not borne out in Nabokov’s fiction, where doubles, dualisms, mirrors, and discursive “splits” between mind and matter are in abundance. *Lolita* is replete with pairs. Its protagonist, Humbert Humbert, is doubly pseudonymous, and his narrative

presents a number of clearcut dichotomies; that between middle-aged man and adolescent girl, between past and present, Old World and New World, and between reality and artifice. The novel's division into two parts facilitates this dualistic tendency, working to mirror Lolita the girl's, "twofold nature"; that which our predatory narrator Humbert Humbert describes as her unique mix of, "dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie, snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures" (44). As discussed in Chapter One, while the first part of the novel works to mythologise Lolita—framing the twelve-year-old girl as a wily seductress, possessing an otherworldly quality that marks her as one of a rare breed of feminine children, part two comes crashing down to earth, replacing the magical with the mundane, and revealing our ethereal temptress to be disappointingly, and "disgustingly conventional" (148). This conventionality expresses itself in what European émigré Humbert Humbert views as a mindless consumerism, an insatiable desire for *things* and an unwavering faith in the ad man's promise. Of his captive nymphet, Humbert says:

She believed with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land*—Starasil Starves Pimples, or "You better watch out if you're wearing your shirrtails outside your jeans, gals, because Jill says you shouldn't." If a roadside

sign said: VISIT OUR GIFT SHOP—we *had* to visit it, *had* to buy its Indian curios, dolls, copper jewelry, cactus candy. The words ‘novelties and souvenirs’ simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt. If some cafe sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster. (148)

Previously, this has been read as illustrating an ideological incompatibility between Humbert’s old world aestheticism and the gaudy American modernity that preteen Dolores Haze represents. As Rachel Bowlby writes:

the novel apparently stages a manifest clash between the literary values of Humbert, and the vulgar, consumerly values of Lolita. [...] Lolita does not so much represent innocence and virginity as the crude embodiment of a different kind of victim: one subject to and made over in the image of a mass culture with which she has completely identified; and the narrator, far from representing the force of exploitation, can be associated with an aesthetic authenticity whose

plausibility gives the novel its power, because it distracts the reader from what would otherwise appear as a simple assault. (*Shopping With Freud* 161)

Lolita's central relationship thus becomes a sustained metaphor for the incongruity of European authenticity and American plasticity. Again, a dichotomy emerges, this time between high and low culture. What warrants further explication in this clash of cultural landscapes however, is the implicit gendering that props up its allegorical framework. After all, gendered implications are somewhat inevitable when masculine and feminine are set in opposition as signifying conflicting ideals.

Lolita's lowbrow conventionality upsets Humbert's attempt to mythologise her, repositioning her as a material girl in a material world—a brash, jeans-wearing, comic-book-reading American adolescent. It signifies her ordinariness. On a more insidious level however, the girl's rampant materialism harkens to her discursive ties with matter, the very dualistic notion that she is matter to man's form. He is Idea, essence, the *active* principle, art, culture, progress. She is passive, inert, formless, 'of the earth'. This dichotomous principle is foundational in Western thought. It resonates from Ancient Greece to the twentieth-century America of Nabokov's *Lolita*. There is however, a distinct shift in tone. While the association of the feminine with the material had always worked to signify her inherent inferiority,

consumer culture extolled materialism as the new ideal. As Mary Ellmann wrote in *Thinking About Women*:

Television commercials have achieved a fusion of Maternity and Materiality. In other contexts, [...] the second is defamatory; in the commercial the two coalesce in a single ideal. Competitive mass production exalts materiality as a feminine virtue, the means of most fully realising either 1) the beauty of young girls [...] or 2) the domestic assiduity of wives and mothers. (134)

Woman's primary societal role was thus reconfigured for this new era of mass production. While her natural usefulness as a breeder could be taken for granted, her role as a consumer was consistently encouraged by messages that reinforced the idea that her success as a wife and mother could be judged by the products she stocked in her kitchen cupboards.

In keeping with this, Nabokov's portrayal of his Lolita as the, "*subject and object of every foul poster,*" illustrates an important point about woman's place in consumer culture. Given the gendered connotations ingrained in a dichotomised concept of production and consumption, this portrait of a rampant, insatiable female desire for *things* seems to complicate the postulated binary opposition of a masculine, active production and a feminine consumption that is

merely passive in nature. It reconfigures consumption as a *pursuit*, an activity in and of itself. After all, consumption *drives* production— inverting the causal hierarchy that the Marxist model of capitalism presupposes.

Similarly, the emergence of shopping and even window shopping as a leisure activity, complicated the conventional notion of woman as the passive object of male desire. Rather, in the new consumerist society, woman, for the first time, became the *bearer* of the gaze, and was encouraged not only to look, but to want, to desire, and ultimately, to acquire. That is not to say that capitalism did anything to liberate women from masculine scrutiny. It did however, afford her a new, if somewhat limited, sense of subjectivity. As Rita Felski observes in *The Gender of Modernity*, woman “could only attain the status of an active subject in relation to other objects. The circuit of desire thus flowed from man to woman, from woman to commodity” (65). Consumerism then, complicates but does not revolutionise traditional gender hierarchies. It does, however, facilitate a new discourse around the previously taboo subject of feminine desire; that is, a societally sanctioned feminine desire, one that keenly devotes itself to the proliferation of the capitalist machine.

The notion of the malleability of female desire was (and still is) fundamental to the advertisers’ *modus operandi*. It was an extension of an age-old mythology, repackaged and solidified for the twentieth century by the popularisation of a psychoanalytic discourse that

viewed female sexuality as something enigmatic and difficult—perhaps a phenomenon that even woman herself, in her perceived capriciousness, could not properly understand⁴⁹. Consumer culture thus provided an answer to the perennial question of “What Women Want” by manufacturing a desire for objects⁵⁰. The model of Capitalism was then, a gendered one from the outset, and the language of advertising that Nabokov evokes in *Lolita* is one of seduction, of arousing a want or a need where none previously existed. The preferred object of such seductions is typically understood to be female. This commercial manipulation of feminine desire provides the subject matter for Emile Zola’s *Au Bonheur Des*

⁴⁹Freud himself admitted with amused complacency that his psychoanalytic method was ill-equipped to tackle the problem of femininity. He did not of course recognise that his method, having a monocular scope that treated male anatomy and psychology as prototypical and femininity as necessarily atypical, was at fault. Rather, he deigned to tell women, “you yourselves are the problem”, (*Complete Psychological Works* 113) chastising them for their nonconformity to a theoretical framework that fundamentally excluded them.

⁵⁰ It was Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays who first implemented the principles of psychoanalysis in order to sell things to the masses. In the aftermath of World War I, Bernays invented public relations, a peace-time version of war-time propaganda. As outlined in Adam Curtis’ documentary series *The Century of the Self*, Bernays’ psychoanalytic principles worked to collapse the concept that people bought things based on rational, information-led, decision making. For Bernays, advertising was about exploiting people’s irrational emotions. It is easy to see how a Freudian would deduce that women were advertising’s target demographic, they being supposedly more irrational and emotional than their male counterparts. The importance of women to the consumer market was illustrated by what is perhaps Bernays’ most famous ploy—the “Torches of Freedom” stunt in which women purporting to be feminists marched in the 1929 New York Easter Parade while smoking cigarettes. Where smoking in public had previously been taboo for women given cigarettes’ supposed phallic associations, Bernays made the cigarette a symbol of women’s new emancipation, her acquisition of phallic power, and her expression of the very American ideal of liberty.

Dames or *The Ladies' Paradise*, which follows the exploits of Octave Mouret, the imperious owner of a Parisian department store in the 1860s. A particularly illustrative passage follows:

Of supreme importance [...] was the exploitation of Woman. [...] It was Woman the shops were competing for so fiercely, it was Woman they were continually snaring with their bargains, after dazzling her with their displays. They had awoken new desires in her weak flesh; they were an immense temptation to which she inevitably yielded, succumbing in the first place to purchases for the house, then seduced by coquetry, finally consumed by desire. (76)

Here, the language is that of conquest and domination: woman, in her “weak flesh” stands to be taken, made to succumb. In Zola’s portrayal, she is not the consumer but the *consumed*—eaten alive by her own desire. As Felski observed, for Zola, “‘capitalism triumphant’, [...] is ultimately to be equated with patriarchy triumphant; the march of economic progress brings with it an increasing male sovereignty over female desire” (72). So although consumerism provided a new cultural medium for the expression of a female desire that was previously suppressed or even outrightly denied, this did not equate to an unchecked liberation of women’s libidinal urges. The discourse

of advertising rather projected an image of woman who was desirous to a fault, and easily tempted. She was Eve in Eden, all carnal appetite and no restraint—and the marketeers took full advantage of her susceptibility to corruption.

Woman's new, enhanced subjectivity in the consumerist landscape is thus undermined by a model for selling that treats her as an unthinking bundle of fleeting desires, and ultimately, as a receptor. Advertising orchestrates her needs, directing her towards an ever-increasing array of shiny trinkets; things to make her look nice, to make her smell nice: waist-cinching gussets and bust-lifting bras⁵¹—ultimately, things to make her a better desire object. Humbert remarks on this very point as he describes the department store where he goes shopping for clothes for Lo.

There is a touch of the mythological and the
 enchanted in those large stores where
 according to ads a career girl can get a
 complete desk-to-date wardrobe, and where
 little sister can dream of the day when her wool
 jersey will make the boys in the back row of the

⁵¹ In his handwritten index card notes for *Lolita*, Nabokov peruses a number of girls comics and magazines and finds them abundant in what he calls “Don't be fat' ads”, among them one for “the exciting new TUMMY FLATTENER”, and a “Front zipper that trims tummy, nips hips”. In his notes on the October 1952 issue of “Movie Love”, a publication which is directly referenced in the novel, Nabokov quotes one ad: “Reduce your appearance instantly, girdle: creates slimmer figure that invites romance” (*V.V Nabokov Papers*, Box 2, Reel 2).

classroom drool. (108)

Girls, it seems, buy things with a very specific effect in mind. Dressing oneself becomes a form of visual merchandising, of marketing oneself. Consumer culture has made her an active participant in her own objectification. For the self-aware American girl for whom these stores were built, the changing room mirror assumes the perspective of the penetrating male gaze. For the female consumer was not only encouraged to look at *things*, but to look at themselves and at other women *as if they were things*. They are, in the words of Luce Irigaray, “commodities among themselves” (192) and are as such invited to admire, critique, and compare themselves with the never-ending parade of female images that bombard them from billboards, screens, and magazine pages. The female shopper is thus akin to the 1940s moviegoer described in Mary Ann Doane’s *The Desire to Desire*, as she is “invited to witness her own commodification and, furthermore, to buy an image of herself insofar as the female star is proposed as the ideal of feminine beauty” (24). As the trite old advertising adage goes, sex sells, and while hourglass silhouettes were used to sell everything from cars to cigarettes to stockings, they also worked to sell an ideal of femininity that was devised to seem remote yet attainable. Women bought the idea that they could buy perfection. Essentially, it was not merely the stockings that were for sale, but female sexuality itself. For although women were happy to oblige in their role as consumers, it is

important to remember that they themselves were commodified.

Part II: Sex Sells

Ultimately, this union of capitalism and female sexuality is made manifest in the figure of the prostitute. Men are after all, consumers too, and sometimes, in the Nabokovian model at least, they buy women. Many of Nabokov's protagonists solicit prostitutes and such transactions are treated with a detached sense of mundanity. In *Ada* for instance, a text where prostitutes are described in perfunctory and dehumanising terms as, "the live mechanisms tense males could rent for a few minutes" (173), depictions of prostitution vacillate between the matter-of-fact and the grotesque. Of the former type, Van Veen's recollection of the "fubsy pig-pink whorelet" to whom he lost his virginity is a prime example. Van relates with characteristic virulence how he, "would elbow her face away when she attempted to kiss him after he had finished and was checking with one quick hand, as he had seen Cheshire do, if his wallet was still in his hip pocket" (32).

Van's paid trysts with this woman are portrayed as a product of both biological need and moral necessity. Van sought his release with the whore because his sister-lover Ada was, "too sacred to be openly violated" (80). To a certain degree, this seems to echo Humbert's (not wholly sincere) reluctance to besmirch Lolita's chastity. As discussed at length in Chapter One, chastity is the utmost feminine ideal. It is also perhaps, patriarchy's most self-

defeating construct: both Humbert and Van must postpone their own gratification in order to preserve this ideal, and to preserve their own idealised perception of their desire-objects. This fascination with female sexual purity correlates to an anxiety about female sexual activity. What Van and Humbert fear is that their lovers will be immediately diminished by their having *had them*—that the act will be immediately regrettable, because the girl will be made immediately less desirable. This of course, is the effect of binary simplification, the skewed logic of the discourse of polarities that delimits female experience, whereby those who are not virgins must inevitably be whores.

However, aristocratic Van Veen's interactions with working-class girls, also work to expose the underlying class politics of the sex trade. Chastity is an ideal that only the privileged can afford, as Simone de Beauvoir explicated: "While the bourgeoisie invests the sexual act—and above all virginity—with daunting taboos, the working class and peasantry treat it with indifference" (*Second Sex* 615). The sale of poor women to wealthy men thus arises not merely from a disparity of wealth and opportunity, but apparently, from one of socio-sexual mores. Within the bourgeois culture of heteronormative monogamy, prostitution serves as a type of sanitation system. The prostitute, invariably a woman of lower social standing than her patron, acts as a dumping ground for his excess sexual energy. While middle-class women sublimate their desires by

buying *things*, men like Van Veen *expend* their desires by buying prostitutes. De Beauvoir speaks further to the systematic hypocrisy that underlines the prostitute's status as a social pariah despite her integral contribution to society's function:

Sewers are necessary to guarantee the sanitation of palaces, said the Church Fathers. And Mandeville, in a very popular book, said: 'It is obvious that some women must be sacrificed to save others and to prevent an even more abject filth.' One of the arguments of American slaveholders and defenders of slavery is that, released from slavish drudgery, Southern whites could establish the most democratic and refined relations with each other; likewise, the existence of a caste of 'lost women' makes it possible to treat 'the virtuous woman' with the most chivalric respect. The prostitute is a scapegoat; man unloads his turpitude onto her, and he repudiates her. (613)

The prostitute is thus understood by De Beauvoir as a mechanism of the status quo. The bourgeois cultural ideal of feminine chasteness could not survive without this undervalued upholder of civil order. In *Ada*, this interaction of class and sexual politics is made explicit. Van Veen's sexual class condescensions are not exclusively with

‘working girls’, but with working-class girls more generally, and with girls working in his service particularly. A young Van makes unsolicited advances upon a maid (44), a middle-aged Van boorishly gropes a nurse’s breasts despite her protestations⁵². (247)

Throughout these interactions, our self-fashioned libertine exhibits an imperious sense of entitlement to these women’s bodies, as if he were offering them a rare privilege for which they should be grateful. Nabokov appears to withhold judgement on Van’s ostentatious sexual activity. Even the most absurd and protracted anecdotes are relayed without a glint of sardonic undertone⁵³, and this seems to suggest that Van ought to be taken as seriously as he takes himself. However, the reasonable reader might struggle to do this, as Van’s narratorial tone sits somewhere between affected nonchalance and braggadocio, and his various escapades, intended to thrill and impress the reader, descend into monotonous drudgery. Van is

⁵² There are also a number of rhetorical suggestions of sexual violence throughout Van’s narrative. In one such instance, Van is left a cryptic note by one of the servants insinuating that Ada has been unfaithful to him. Van contemplates an interrogation of the staff, but decides that, “To interview them all—torture the males, *rape the females*—would be, of course, absurd and degrading” (228 emphasis added). It is not entirely clear whose degradation Van is concerned with here—his own, or the servants’. In another episode, Van invokes the imagery of gang rape while relating a passionate exchange with Ada: “She turned to him and next moment he was kissing her bare shoulder, and pushing against her like that soldier behind in the queue.” (95)

⁵³ No better example comes to mind than the farce of Van’s duel with Tapper (244-246), an episode that might have worked as a caricature of Van’s peacockish masculinity, but is instead delivered to the reader cold, untouched by Nabokov’s characteristic parodic tone. The resulting unintentional humour works only to isolate the reader, making empathy or even tolerance for Nabokov’s Antiterranean antihero seem an evermore remote possibility.

horrid, and yet, we never quite care about him enough to despise him. This is the novel's main failure, and Douglas Fowler argued that Nabokov's inability to either condone or condemn Van's actions, arises from the author's lack of objectivity. For Fowler, Van is his creator's agent, his likeness in the text: "he is a mask: it is not an accident that the initials 'V.V.' often replace the name 'Van Veen', for the 'V.V.' is also Vladimir Vladimirovich, Nabokov himself" (182). Fowler further argued that *Ada* "is naked Nabokoviana" (188)—a blueprint for Nabokov's personal philosophy and a place to grind personal axes; the fictional world of Antiterra—a world similar but dissimilar from our own in idiosyncratic and apparently innocuous ways—is "his world, and it is an improved version of ours" (194). As such, Nabokov gives his protagonists (plural, as *Ada* the lepidopterist is another Nabokov in miniature) free rein to act out their Nabokovian wills within the Antiterranean universe. Van's sexual escapades with his "hundreds of whores and scores of cuties" (331) are an expression of this licence. As such, Van remains morally unchecked by his author; a spoiled, overindulged brat of a protagonist with no sense of narrative or libidinal restraint, and the result is a complete lack of tension. As Fowler noted, "Van simply has too little to do, nothing to learn, and no need to change" (189).

The novel's tendency to stylistic excess is perhaps best exemplified in a lengthy passage that describes an elite prostitution ring called The Villa Venus Club. Here we encounter an alliance of

upper-class pimps, The Councils of Elderly Noblemen, who acquire girls for supply following a very exact list of specifications:

Delicately fashioned phalanges, good teeth, a flawless epiderm, undyed hair, impeccable buttocks and breasts, and the *unfeigned vim of avid ventry* were the absolute prerequisites demanded by the Elders”. (276 emphasis added)

It is interesting that this shopping list of what are predominantly physical attributes should close with an intangible. The Elders are concerned with authenticity of feeling: the girls and women in their employ must not *feign* erotic ecstasy, rather they should *embody* it. This is supposedly indicative of the rarefied quality of service the Villa Venus offers its elite clientèle. Here the girls wear not the painted smiles of garish street whores, and the clients can relish in the knowledge that their touch elicits genuine pleasure, rather than thinly veiled revulsion. This ensures that the girls of Villa Venus are not viewed as victims of economic circumstance, but as keen participants, driven not by money, but by authentic desire. This exonerates the men who pay for sex, and emphasises woman’s animalistic, sensual nature. Ultimately however, The Elders’ insistence on the girls’ enthusiasm for their work, speaks to a masculine fear of female duplicity and a deep-seated belief that falsehood and deception are at the very core of woman’s nature—

taking, as she does, after Eve. The common prostitute stands as justification for these beliefs, purportedly epitomising how woman, driven by her intrinsic superficiality, makes love to men that she loves not in exchange for money. The prostitute is thus an emblem for woman's lack of moral integrity, and of her parasitic *use* of men. This serves as a neat moral inversion of men's *use* of prostitutes—repositioning the exploited as the exploiter.

Biblical rhetoric is, for whatever reason, almost unavoidable when dealing with literary depictions of prostitution. Indeed, the Bible leant the canon several notable prototypes, and in keeping with the theme, *Villa Venus* is likened to Eden itself (277), an exotic paradise that caters to exotic tastes. The descriptions of the human bill of fare descend into fetishistic Orientalism; a sort of anthropological spectacle that once again betrays the fact that upper-class white male privilege is the immutable epicentre of this narrative of sexual pleasure and sexual commerce. Here, women are depicted as collectables—rare exotic animals or the precious artefacts of some ancient civilisation, pillaged by the imperial Elders:

Three Egyptian squaws, dutifully keeping in profile (long ebony eye, lovely snub, braided black mane, honey-hued faro frock, thin amber arms, Negro bangles, doughnut earring of gold bisected by a pleat of the mane, red Indian hairband, ornamental bib), lovingly borrowed by

Eric Veen from a reproduction of a Theban

fresco...(277)

The aloof narrative style that marked Van's relations with his lower class "whorelet", is exchanged here for an ornamental prose, a style more befitting these exotic sex creatures. The narrative slips further into preposterousness, displaying an almost Sadean relish for the grotesque. One passage describes a boy prostitute of eleven or twelve whose overuse had left, "imprints of bestial clawings and flesh-twistings" and whose, "unappetizing dysenteric symptoms [...] coated his lover's shaft with mustard and blood, the result, no doubt, of eating too many green apples. Eventually, he had to be destroyed or given away" (279). The erotic burlesque reaches its zenith however, when we are told of a Russian Lesbian weightlifter (Nabokov's own peculiar capitalisation) who throttled to death with her own two hands, "two of her most beautiful and valuable charges. It was all rather sad" (279).⁵⁴ The understated pathos of this last

⁵⁴ Depictions of homosexuality in Nabokov typically resort to this type of lazy stereotyping. As Lev Grossman commented in an article for *Salon*, "Nabokov was the archenemy of cliché (*sic*), a writer passionately committed to overturning tired literary conventions through careful observation of the real world, but his homosexual characters are as a rule egregiously stereotyped." ("The gay Nabokov" n.pag) Nabokov's brother Sergei was homosexual, as were two of his uncles, one of whom was inappropriately affectionate with the young Vladimir—a personal detail that has garnered great attention in recent biographical studies of the author (see Michael Maar's *Speak, Nabokov*)—specifically in relation to his conspicuous thematic preoccupation with child sex abuse. There is evidence in Nabokov's novels that the author believed homosexuals were pedophiles, notwithstanding the abundance of sexual relationships that occur between male adults and female children in his work, and in *Pale Fire*, Kinbote's homosexuality is matched not only by acute madness and

sentence seems almost farcical in juxtaposition with the ludicrous tableau that precedes it, and one wonders if all of this excess serves as nothing more than a needless diversion in a novel replete with needless diversions.

While *Ada* is extraordinary in its length and complexity, its portrayals of prostitution are tonally similar to Nabokov's treatments of the theme elsewhere. From the dead wife substitute in the short story "The Return of Chorb", to the Parisian streetwalker Monique whose, "compact, neat, curiously immature body" (*Lolita* 22) serves to alleviate Humbert's wanton lust—prostitutes are little more than faceless footnotes to male desire⁵⁵. In this, their very utilitarian function, they adhere to Fredric Jameson's definition of the commodity as an entity that, "no longer has any qualitative value in itself, but only insofar as it can be 'used'" (131).

Of course, aside from these various brief encounters, Nabokov also makes a prostitute of his *Lolita*, who, orphaned and alone save

narcissism, but also an avid misogyny—as if the prerequisite for loving men was hating women. Meanwhile, Lesbianism is treated either as a triviality—something young girls do (Humbert assumes, *Ada* and *Lucette* demonstrate) to prepare for or attract boys—or as a preposterous caricature of hyper-masculinity in women.

⁵⁵ *Lolita* provides a further example that bears remarking upon purely because it is so seemingly superfluous to the narrative, so utterly throwaway that it is easily missed. It is embedded in parentheses in the middle of an innocent-looking sentence, in the middle of a paragraph describing the various housekeeping tasks that followed Charlotte's death. It reads: "In a moment of superb inspiration I showed the kind and credulous Farlows (we were waiting for Leslie to come for his paid tryst with Louise) a little photograph of Charlotte I had found among her affairs" (100).

for her step-father/captor, establishes, “the system of monetary bribes” (148) that affords her the meagre promotion from unpaid sex slave to enslaved sex worker. This shift is described by Humbert as signifying, “a definite drop in Lolita’s morals” (183). At its core, Humbert’s moral disappointment lies in the girl’s unwillingness to participate in his fantasy of nymphet-love; her betrayal of his attempts to portray her as an aesthetic emanation of his own desire. The disparity between Humbert’s delusions of romance and the grim reality of his relationship with the girl, is subtly and succinctly conveyed in one momentary exchange between the two: “‘A penny for your thoughts,’ I said and she stretched out her palm at once” (208). Here, Humbert’s attempt at something resembling familial rapport is spurned by the girl. Lolita’s devastatingly cynical gesture exposes the fallacy of intimacy that Humbert’s narrative charade works to promote. It serves to remind him (and us) that she is not his lover, not a cohort or companion, and certainly not a daughter, in this “parody of incest” (287).

Naturally, master manipulator Humbert only mentions this brief interaction to elicit reader sympathy for his own plight. Here, we are to believe, is a portrayal of the poetic anguish of unrequited love; of one man’s torment in the face of his beloved’s frigid contempt. Lolita, Humbert complains, makes for a far more enthusiastic consumer than commodity. While she is eager to be paid her allowance, she shows little zeal for her rather macabre household chores. “Only very

listlessly,” we are told, “did she earn her three pennies—or three nickels—per day; and she proved to be a cruel negotiator” (184). Lo’s apparent cruelty is remarked upon frequently by Humbert. What’s more, it seems to originate in the same vapid thoughtlessness that underpins her crude materialism. This cohesion of ideas is epitomised in a scene along Humbert and Lo’s long car journey, when, having passed by a, “blood-spattered car with a young woman’s shoe in a ditch,” Lo announces: “That was the exact type of moccasin I was trying to describe to that jerk in the store” (174). Morbid insensitivity then, goes hand in hand with the girl’s unyielding material lust. She is as oblivious to the scattered remains of a car crash victim as she is to Humbert’s fragile emotions. This mawkish connection is precisely what the narrator hopes to achieve here; the central point being that sensitive Humbert had suffered a far greater indignity through his financial exploitation by the girl, than shallow Lo had even the capacity to feel.

This all works to echo a longstanding concern about the nature of femininity; that being that all women are essentially whores—emotionally shallow, morally bereft, and driven by materialistic greed. Certainly, Nabokov’s portrayals of women are fairly consistent with this attitude. In *King, Queen, Knave* for example, provincial young Franz ruminates on the going price of the city girls he ogles on the streets of Berlin:

He was disguised as a stranger, and these girls

were accessible, [...] they were accustomed to avid glances, they welcomed them, and it was possible to accost any one of them, and start a brilliant and brutal conversation. He would do just that but first he had to find a room in which to rip off her dress and possess her. Forty to fifty marks, Dreyer had said. That meant fifty, at least.” (59)

These women who Franz imagines are unreservedly available to him, are not the “genuine harlots” (72) he later wishes to seek out, but rather, just harlots in general. In Franz’s somewhat inexperienced estimation, the distinction is perhaps redundant, for, as suggested by Nabokov’s deliberately ambiguous syntax (is fifty marks the going rate for a room or for a girl?) *all* women have their price, regardless of their official occupation or social standing. In fact, before he becomes embroiled in his affair with Martha (one of a special breed of whore⁵⁶—the kept woman—for whom Nabokov reserves particular

⁵⁶ Martha hates her husband, Dreyer, but hates more the thought of losing access to his money. In her dreams, she is a coveted and expensive prize, revealing her true inclinations; “Three lecherous Arabs were haggling over her with a bronze-torsoed handsome slaver.” (95) Her marriage to Dreyer is a continuous act of prostitution, albeit one that lacks in sexual activity. We are told that, “she who thought herself ripe for adultery had long grown ready for harlotry.” (126) Her husband however, interprets his wife’s frigid refusals as a mark of propriety. As previously explicated in this chapter, whores existed precisely so that wives could be chaste, and thus, respected by their husbands. While Dreyer himself is an unconscionable philanderer, he is actually assured by his wife’s apparent disinterest in sex, proffering, “Why should I want a hot little whore in my house? Perhaps her whole charm lies in the fact that she is so cold” (219).

venom) Franz seems to regard his every encounter with a new female as a potential transaction. In one such instance, Franz knocks on a door in hope of finding lodgings and a young girl answers. He ponders: "The girl was enchanting: a simple little seamstress, no doubt, but enchanting, and let us hope not too expensive" (60). Here, Nabokov is unambiguous—it is the girl and not the room that Franz wants to rent. In Franz's unromantic yet perversely naive perspective, he cannot envision being rejected by a woman unless prohibited by monetary restrictions. Instead, he views women precisely as commodities, accepting implicitly that some are more affordable than others, and suspecting that each woman is a whore in latency, waiting for someone to name the right price.

Indeed, the emergence of consumer culture impelled such suspicions as Franz's. Consumer excess and erotic excess were understood to be two sides of the same silver dollar coin. Shopping for pleasure was regarded as a channel for sublimated sexual urges, the irony here being that the language of the marketplace was certainly not one of libidinal restraint, but rather one that encouraged the consumer's acquiescence to their every whim.

The seeming contradiction here speaks further to the disruptive effect of consumerist modernity on the binary concepts that underpin Western thought. Where simple notions of feminine passivity and masculine activity were distorted by a new consumer environment that saw women *actively* spending money on objects that they

desired, even the thoroughly modern Freudian discourse of barbaric Id and civilised Ego seems ill equipped to deal with a phenomenon that at once facilitated the repression of forbidden appetites, while at the same time, it celebrated the ecstasy of indulgence. Essentially, retail therapy was more about the splurge than sublimation. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser's⁵⁷ prolonged explication of one woman's insatiable material longing, the author comments on this modern psychological middle-state as being, "scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is no longer wholly guided by reason" (70). Inhibition was the enemy of profit; it was the very thing the ad man worked tirelessly to erode. The ever-expanding influence that such (typically male) marketeers held over the desires of young women thus sparked moral concern. There was an implicit fear that once the lid was let off female desire, it might spill over into unchecked areas. As Rita Felski explains:

Young women who moved to the city in search

⁵⁷ Incidentally, in Nabokov's introduction to the English translation of *King, Queen, Knave*, the author preempts accusations of borrowed plot-points, saying: "I suspect that those two worthies, Balzac and Dreiser, will accuse me of gross parody but I swear I had not read their preposterous stuff at the time, and even now do not quite know what they are talking about under their cypresses"(viii). And so, Dreiser (and Balzac) entered the rather expansive pantheon of writers that Nabokov dismissed. His observation is worth noting however, as the character dynamics of *King, Queen, Knave* at times look like an inversion of the Drouet, Carrie, Hurtswood love-triangle of *Sister Carrie*, especially given Dreyer's role as a wealthy retailer (recalling Hurtswood) and Martha's resentful attachment to him and his money. Further parallels with this dynamic emerge in *Laughter in the Dark*, as Margot (again, the attractive but manipulative apex of a nasty little love-triangle) seems to be cut from the same materialistic cloth as Martha and Carrie.

of work were considered to be highly susceptible to promiscuity and ultimately prostitution, because their appetites for luxury, once awakened by their proximity to an alluring profusion of material goods, could only be satisfied by selling their bodies for financial gain. (72)

It is important to remember that when we talk about the female consumer of the Postwar America depicted in *Lolita*, we are often talking about women spending money *allowed* to them by men—this itself is implied by the word *allowance*. A world profuse in material temptation and relatively lacking in professions open to women, was seen as a moral minefield for the unmarried girl, for whom commercial seductions were apt to translate into sexual ones. Rich women were made by rich men. Notions of sex and capital then, express an inherent power structure. The fallen woman was thus an inevitable casualty of a capitalist system where men held the purse strings and women, being wooed by window displays, showed themselves to be susceptible to all kinds of suggestion.

Thus far, in this chapter's treatment of themes of materialism and consumerism, a number of common dichotomies have presented themselves. Perhaps foremost, has been that between activity and

passivity, although, as we have seen, these terms are not entirely interchangeable with notions of production and consumption. However, capitalism's success is grounded in the symbiotic relationship of another pair of opposites; that of the exploiting force and the exploited resource. In human terms, this can translate to those who sell and those who are sold; a division of pimps and prostitutes. The relationship between the two is characterised by an imbalance of power that has been naturalised by a philosophy that values profit above all else. Despite the apparent negative ethical connotations of exploitation, the social Darwinism that underpins *laissez-faire* capitalism promotes an acceptance of a system where one person profits from another person's suffering, on the basis that this represents the natural order of things. The strong will prosper while the weak grow poorer.

This dichotomous split between the exploiter and the exploited is more often than not, a gendered one, at least in figurative terms. Exploited peoples, in their role as Other, are feminised in an extension of the rape rhetoric that permeates through the American colonial narratives discussed in Chapter One. In turn, the conquering capitalist is masculinised, in that they assume a position of relevant dominance. A Sadean sexual politics to match our Darwinian socio-economics ekes through here, whereby binary logic performs a split

between masters and slaves.⁵⁸ Although the dominant party is masculinised, they are not always male, as illustrated by Nabokov's numerous depictions of female pimps. Within the Nabokovian schema, older women exploit their more desirable and, effectively, more marketable younger counterparts for capital gain. *Laughter in the Dark* presents one Frau Levandovsky, an enterprising old lady who seeks to earn more than the going room rate from her young and unsuspecting lodger, Margot. The woman solicits a meeting between Margot and an interested stranger she meets on a train. That stranger on the train is Axel Rex (alias Miller), a man whose opportunism and appetite for villainy far surpass old Levandovsky's profiteering ploy. The old lady finds herself trapped inside a locked bathroom while Rex absconds with Margot, free-of-charge. If Margot emerges from this scenario as an innocent pawn in a game to which she is oblivious, she later reveals herself to be a whore at heart. Finding herself abandoned by Rex and wanting for cash, she takes

⁵⁸In *The Pornography of Representation*, Susan Kappeler describes what she calls a "Sadeian" model of pornography as presenting only two options: to suffer or be the cause of suffering. Kappeler argues that although neither of these scenarios might appeal to the female subject, the latter is supposed to imply dominance and is as such considered preferable. Kappeler likens this to the capitalist model, whereby the oppressed are envious of their oppressors—wishing not to overturn them, but rather to become them. It is another example of the oppressive logic of binary opposition, where all other possibilities for human relationships are denied:

The slaves conditioned to see only one choice, to be master or slave, to cause suffering or to suffer, ensure the very continuation of the Master even in his *coup d'état*. Locked into the mutual mirror-gaze of master and slave, the two will see-saw endlessly, changing places now and then, leaving the structure intact. (149)

herself to a dance-hall, “as abandoned damsels do in films” (25), and gives herself to two Japanese men in exchange for some loose change.

Another aged madame appears in *Lolita*, when Humbert’s search for what he calls “commercial substitutes” (53) leads him to the lair of “an asthmatic woman, coarsely painted, garrulous, garlicky, with an almost farcical Provençal accent and a black moustache above a purple lip” (23). She tries to sell Humbert what he assumes is the old hag’s daughter, a “monstrously plump, sallow, repulsively plain” (24) child. Humbert, a nympholept of unquestionable good taste, politely declines, but pays his hostess nonetheless in order to avoid a beating from her male cronies. Similarly, during the novel’s final showdown, Quilty attempts a peace-offering to Humbert, citing a, “most reliable and bribable charwoman, a Mrs. Vibrissa—curious name—who comes from the village twice a week, alas not today, she has daughters, granddaughters” (301).

These are the dynamics of female familial relationships in Nabokov’s savage microcosm, where mothers and grandmothers exploit their daughters’ and granddaughters’ superior sexual worth. It is perhaps nothing more than a logical conclusion, albeit a devastating one, in a world where woman’s greatest asset is her sexuality. The mother, having lost her appeal and her value through the ravages wrought on her body in childbearing, resents her offspring, particularly her daughters, who come to surpass her in

sexuality (see the 'wicked stepmother' trope discussed in Chapter Two). The mother punishes the daughter she envies and recoups her losses by capitalising on the girl's burgeoning appeal to men. The mother, through sexual jealousy and capital greed, views her child now as an object and a possession. She claims the rights to the daughter's body. Having created her, she is hers to sell. The mother commodifies her own daughter, for, as Nabokov shows, once the well of youth and virility has dried up, she has nothing else worth selling. Besides, it is always preferable, in the Darwinian battle for survival and the Sadean battle for dominance at least, to be the pimp rather than the whore. While commodification equates to objectification, the madame retains for herself some modicum of agency. In fact, the madame literally acts as the girl-commodity's agent—she speaks for her, negotiates her terms, assigns her price. Her position is as such, one of relative power, albeit a power gained through the subjugation and exploitation of another.

This model of inter-relational power dynamics between females colours Humbert's passing suspicion that Lolita herself, seeking an avenue to alleviate her workload in the face of his unrelenting advances, was "playing the pimp" with her good friend Mona. Alas, Humbert tells us, Lo had "found the wrong substitute" (192) and Mona's attempts at a flirtatious decoy are wasted on a man of such specialised tastes. Mona, Humbert explains, "though handsome in a coarse sensual way and only a year older than my raging mistress,

had obviously long ceased to be a nymphet, if she had ever been one” (190). The result is that Lo fails as a pimp and must remain a whore. John Stratton compared Lolita to Monique, the Parisian streetwalker that Humbert solicits, stating that both can be bought and both are consumers, and he is right, for Monique reveals in our brief encounter with her what Lo does over the course of a novel—that she is entirely motivated by a desire for material things. Of Monique, Humbert says:

She looked tremendously pleased with the bonus of fifty I gave her as she trotted out into the April night drizzle with Humbert Humbert lumbering in her narrow wake. Stopping before a window display she said with great gusto: “*Je vais m’acheter des bas!*” (*Lolita* 23)

Needless to say, Nabokov is not concerned with sentimentality. Nor has he time for Dickensian social commentary. We are offered no window into Monique’s downtrodden existence, nor any sympathy for her circumstances. Instead, this anecdotal glimpse of the sub-nymphet streetwalker, teaches only that she is a prostitute and a consumer, and that these two things are intrinsically linked. Monique is excited by money and delighted by the ease with which lascivious men are given to part with it. Prostitution hence emerges in Nabokov’s scheme as a fair exchange. In fact, Monique appears to come out of this particular transaction with the greater spoils;

brimming as she is with the prospect of new stockings. Nabokov's prostitutes are not characters but simple archetypes. They are not meant as markers of social injustice, economic imbalance, or sexual oppression. Rather, the exchange of sex for money is presented in such a way as to normalise and to naturalise it. Prostitution is portrayed as the organic conjugation of masculine sexual lust and feminine material greed. The whore is not a victim. Rather, her devotion to consumer culture is such that she allows herself to be consumed.

Part III: Hollywood Hetaeras

For Nabokov's women, stardom is presented as a viable and infinitely more attractive alternative to whoredom. As we shall see, both career paths are seen to appeal to some innate aspect of feminine nature, and as such, both are propounded throughout the broader literary canon as essentially feminine roles. From *Moll Flanders* to the previously mentioned *Sister Carrie*, literature abounds with enterprising young women who used their most marketable asset—their “feminine charm” (euphemistic to varying degrees)—to achieve social ascension and material gain. It is an escape route that Dolores Haze pursues when she absconds with Clare Quilty, lured by vague promises of Hollywood, only to be faced with the proposition of a very different kind of film career—doing “weird, filthy, fancy things,” all while “an old woman took movie pictures” (*Lolita* 276).

Quilty is, in the words of critic Dana Brand, “a pop-cult American version of Humbert” (20). Playwright and pornographer, he baits Lo with the promise of stardom, and Humbert, self-described as “a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood” (*Lolita* 39), simply cannot compete with his rival’s aura of real fame. In fact, when Humbert boasts of his own matinee idol good looks and his resemblance to “some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush” (43), both he and the reader are quite unaware of the identity and proximity of his famous doppelgänger. Likewise, he has no clue that little Lo’s “crush” is reciprocated. While academic Humbert’s only foray into the production of popular culture comprises a brief stint in the “pseudoliterary” job of “thinking up and editing perfume ads” (32), Quilty trumps this by actually being *in* the ads. *Lolita* is drawn to him like a Nabokovian moth to the bright lights of Hollywood, and hapless Humbert can only lament, “Oh Fame! O Femina!” (121) As Michael Wood remarked, “Life with Humbert was a cage, a travelling prison, a dreary round of sexual duty. Quilty looked like glamour and romance and freedom” (136). While Humbert considers himself a man of intellectual substance, Lo is wholly more susceptible to Quilty’s surface gleam. This susceptibility is a kindred concept of passivity. Both terms imply a kind of benign defencelessness, and essentially a penetrability. The sexualised female body therefore becomes a perfect carrier for such concepts.

Fame, like money, holds Nabokov’s female characters in its

magnetic grip. The lure of stage and screen beckons for Margot in *Laughter in the Dark*, for Ada and her mother, Marina, and for little Lolita, who, her mother tells Humbert mockingly, “sees herself as a starlet” (65). Nabokov gives the impression that he views these misplaced ambitions with something like jaded amusement, perhaps even patronising joviality. Conceitedness and vanity, it seems, are the driving forces behind Nabokov’s aspiring actresses’ mirror-gazing daydreams of celebrity status, and again the author’s repetition of the theme serves to establish what looks like a characteristic folly of the feminine disposition. Indeed, acting itself is viewed as something of a folly by Nabokov, and one suited to the skill-set of the average female. In *Mary* for instance, a novel overtly preoccupied with issues of feminine performance and pretence, the author presents to the reader, “an aging, world-famous actress giving a very skilful representation of a dead young woman” (30).

What’s more, Nabokov appears to suggest through juxtaposition, that the work of the actress and the work of the whore are not entirely distinct from one another. His aspiring starlets often double as harlots, and both careers are underlined by a selling of the self, the marketing of one’s sexuality and desirability, and the accentuation of façade and charade—of appearing and pretending. Nabokov insinuates that the coquetry of the actress is not far removed from that of the courtesan. Interestingly, Simone de Beauvoir also noted some crossover between the two roles, likening

the modern-day actress not to the reviled street-whore, but to the revered hetaera; the difference being that, “the former trades in her pure generality, so that competition keeps her at a miserable level of living, while the latter tries to be recognised in her singularity: if she succeeds, she can aspire to a lofty fortune” (*Second Sex* 624). As with all commodities, the prostitute cannot autonomously decide what category she belongs to, rather her value is “revealed through a man’s desire”. Just as not all actresses have the capacity to be film stars, not all harlots have the distinction of being hetaeras.

The most recent incarnation of the hetaera is the movie star. Flanked by her husband or serious male friend—rigorously required by Hollywood—she is no less related to Phryne, Imperia, or Casque d’Or. She delivers Woman to the dreams of men who give her fortune and glory in exchange. There has always been a vague connection between prostitution and art, because beauty and sexuality are ambiguously associated with each other. (625)

Indeed, the association of beauty and sexuality, and of art and prostitution plays out in Nabokov, where Lolita’s mythic singularity—that which elevates her from child to nymphet—is just as apt to make

her pornographic⁵⁹ fodder in one of Quilty's home-movies, as it is to make her the muse of one of his plays. Once a girl is made a commodity, she has little say in how she is used, and Nabokov may be warning against the type of narcissistic longing to be admired that drives Lo from the careful watch of one abuser into the clutches of another. For Nabokov, the actress is an exhibitionist, and her art-form is nothing more than an immodest form of self-display. In *Ada* for example, Marina, while on stage, finds herself aroused by, "the penetrative sense of her own beauty [...] and the gallant applause of an almost full house" (15). Marina's theatrics however, are not confined to the theatre, and her children accuse her of insufferable pretentiousness and insincerity; of, "playing the hackneyed part of fond mother" (55), and again, "acting the fond, worried mother" (207). Marina can only *act out* such roles because she is completely devoid of character, a vacuous woman bereft even of maternal feeling, described by Van and Ada as being of "empty mind" (192) and "essentially a dummy in human disguise" (199).

Vapid and vain Marina is not far removed from *Laughter in the Dark's* Margot, a character who exists entirely to be looked at.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Pornography is etymologically linked with prostitution, stemming from the Greek: *pornographos*; *porne* meaning prostitute; *graphos* denoting the depiction thereof.

⁶⁰ *Laughter in the Dark* is essentially a book about watching and being watched, seeing and unseeing. Margot's status as the text's desire object means that her entire existence is dependent on her being seen and being wanted. This fact is explicitly expressed by Albinus who, plagued by a conflict of his conscience and his lust, and by his desire to either possess

Margot's desire to be desired first shows in her job as a life-drawing model, where, we are told:

she used to pick out the best-looking man and
 throw him a dark liquid glance whenever he
 raised his face with its parted lips and puckered
 forehead. She never succeeded in changing the
 colour of his attention, and this vexed her. (19)

Margot is above all else, a willing and enthusiastic desire object. In the words of her lover, Axel Rex, "like so many women, she has a craving to be admired by others" (158). However, Margot is ignorant of what this entails, for the ideal object does not look back, does not reveal her own subjectivity. Rather, the proper object surrenders herself to inert futility. Margot's "liquid glances" are thus misplaced. This betrays an inherent hypocrisy in the social etiquette of the subject-object relationship. There is an unspoken contract of pretence between the two that must not be breached: the object should not show herself, rather she should merely appear. Once again, the active/passive gender dichotomy is the governing principle here. As Tassie Gwilliam explains:

the hostility to feminine duplicity operates
 symbiotically with covert requirements that

the girl or murder her, concludes that simply not seeing her is the best solution, stating, "Well, she is dead anyway, since I shan't go there any more" (15). The unseen object ceases to be.

women behave in ways that could be construed as duplicitous: women's behaviour and bodies were supposed to provoke desire, but women were forbidden from intending to provoke desire, or from being conscious of their desirability. (106)

It is nothing more than Margot's self-awareness, her knowledge of her own desirability, that inspired Nabokov to call her "a common young whore" (*Strong Opinions* 71). It is difficult to quantify whether Nabokov viewed Marina's pretentiousness as more or less despicable than Margot's corresponding artlessness. Certainly, his harsh words for Margot would seem to suggest that even feigned modesty is preferable to none at all, but then, Margot is but sixteen, and it seems unfair that Nabokov would blame her so unreservedly for what is essentially a youthful eagerness to be noticed. Perhaps her author judges her harshly because she gives herself so readily to a middle-aged married man whose only attractive attribute is a vague connection to some people in the film industry. Unfortunately for Margot, her foray into the movies is not all that she imagined. The poses and expressions she practiced before the mirror are distorted by the camera's lens, the figure on screen resembling more her mother's image than her own. She is horrified. Both Albinus and Rex on the other hand, are delighted by her failure; the former having feared losing her to more glamorous and affluent suitors, the latter,

because it affirmed what he knew all along—that Margot, although pretty, was utterly inept. Margot then, talentless and undistinguished, is not De Beauvoir’s Hollywood hetaera but Nabokov’s lowly whore.

This portrayal of Margot is particularly damning, for the literary trend for rags to riches tales that Nabokov draws from and contributes to, was largely based on the supposition that acting was not only a triviality, but a profession that drew on women’s innate capabilities. It was an extension of the rhetoric that viewed woman as womb, as an empty vessel and a passive receptor. This presents something of a linguistic and logical problem for those who subscribe to a system of binary opposites, for *acting*, in this instance, becomes an expression of passivity. The contradictions go further, as the same is not said for men who act. For the male actor, performance is a practiced art. For the female, lacking any fixed personality of her own, acting was rather a natural vocation, given as she was to imitation, falsehood, and duplicity. The prevalence of the stereotype was leant scientific validity by Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, in which the evolutionist identified man as having “more inventive genius” (578) than his female counterpart in whom, “the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man” (584). In *Idols of Perversity*, Bram Dijkstra, elaborated on this trope:

By the mid-1870s, the idea that woman was inherently an imitator, not an originator, had

become one of the most pervasive clichés of Western culture. Because of her propensity for imitation, the stage came to be seen as the place where woman could best express her contribution to the cultural life of civilised society. (...) In the literature of the day actresses were ubiquitous. (120)

Dijkstra draws upon the ever-fruitful literary example of *Sister Carrie*, and observes that, “Dreiser took great pains to make it clear to the reader that acting was for Carrie an intuitive gift, not a talent based on creative ability” (121). Carrie is, in Dijkstra’s words, “the Darwinian woman personified” (120-121). Dreiser insists that Carrie is understood as a woman of considerable charm, but of no extraordinary skill. Her gifts are god-given and fortuitous, a mere by-product of her, “naturally imitative” nature (Dreiser 104). While Carrie is allowed to flourish, Dreiser gives her no credit for her own success. Instead, he introduces Ames, a character who, it seems, exists solely to intellectually intimidate Carrie and undermine her achievements as an actress. Somewhat disparagingly, Carrie views Ames as a type of masculine ideal, and as such, places great weight in his persistent blows to her pride. Just as Carrie becomes self-assured and self-sufficient, Ames interjects to instil her with further self-doubt. He tells her:

Most people are not capable of voicing their

feelings. They depend on others. That is what genius is for. One man expresses their desires for them in music; another one in poetry; another one in a play. Sometimes nature does it in a face—it makes the face representative of all desire. That's what has happened in your case. [...] It so happens that you have this thing. It is no credit to you—that is, I mean, you might not have had it. (443)

The gendered overtones of Ames' polemic are unambiguous: genius is a masculine reserve. Real art is a product of intellectual brilliance; what Carrie does, however, merely exploits her physicality. Simply put, man is mind to woman's body, culture to her nature. The work of the actress is not creative, for creativity is the stronghold of the male author-god—the playwright or screenwriter who gives her words, the director who conducts her performance. Nabokov appears to affirm this line of thinking. In *Ada* for instance, Van Veen is “nauseated” by Ada's desire to act (334), his reason being a preference for the written word over the spoken one. While the written word has authority, Van feels that this perfection is diminished in interpretation.⁶¹

⁶¹ Van very much takes after his author in this respect, for whom the concrete finality of the written word represented the epitome of artistic control. In his introduction to his screenplay for *Lolita*, Nabokov talks of his trouble with relinquishing creative control to the film's director, Stanley

The implicit gender dichotomy which emerges here, of masculine creativity and feminine mimicry, is thoroughly hierarchical, for invention necessarily precedes imitation. As such, woman remains dependent on man for her existence, and we never really escape the confines of the Eden narrative. This is a rather disappointing conclusion for the actress, as on the face of it, she appears to symbolise female independence. Certainly, acting is Lolita's chosen escape route from Humbert, and in the case of Sister Carrie who, having previously attached herself to men in order to survive, finds a new financial autonomy through the theatre. However, until these women start writing their own scripts they will be thought of as mere vessels. Rachel Bowlby touches upon this in her reading of *Lolita*, noting that all of the novel's polarities can in some sense be approximated to a common distinction "between the original and the derivative or the fake" (41). High-culture-Humbert

Kubrick. Nabokov tells how his reluctance to self-edit led him to produce a script that Kubrick rejected on the grounds that the film would run for eight hours. Given his own way, Nabokov admits:

I would have advocated and applied a system of total tyranny, directing the play or the picture myself [...] terrorizing the actors, mingling with them in the bit part of a guest, or ghost, prompting them, and, in a word, pervading the entire show with the will and art of one individual..." (*Plays* 9)

This is essentially what Nabokov does in his novels—he pervades and invades them, tyrannising the text with his authority, marking his artistic territory. Of course, Stanley Kubrick was hardly any less stringent a director than Nabokov was an author. As Cook and Triggs observe in their essay on visual portrayals of *Lolita*: "Kubrick's film is shot completely in black-and-white—yet, in the continuity script, there are clear instructions for objects to be specific colors. His fastidiousness has often been speculated to be an expression of an obsessive-compulsive disorder" (53). As such, *Lolita* ended up with not one, but two authoritarian fathers.

thus represents masculine innovation, originality, and authenticity, while all-American Lo is bound to notions of modern mass production and its connotations of replication and uniformity. Lo's conventionalism then, ties her to an increasingly homogenised America. Even the rustic American countryside seems oddly familiar to outsider Humbert, "because of those painted oilcloths which were imported from America in the old days to be hung above washstands in Central-European nurseries" (*Lolita* 152). Similarly, the narrator delights in the seemingly self-satirising name bestowed on (the real, not invented—America's gift to Nabokov) town of Shakespeare, New Mexico—a failed mining prospect founded in 1870, now a ghost town—as redundant to modern America as its literary namesake. Originality is almost meaningless in this America where art is supplanted by commercialism and "ART" is an acronym for "American Refrigerator Transit Company" (157). Instead, homogeneity renders everything comfortingly recognisable: "the would-be enticements of their repetitious names—all those Sunset Motels, U-beam Cottages, Hillcrest Courts, Park Plaza Courts, Green Acres, Mac's Courts" (146). This land of facsimile produces Dolores Haze, herself the American replica of a European prototype.

As Bram Dijkstra explained, this dualistic literary tendency to treat man as innovator and woman as imitator was symbolised by man's connection with The Sun—giver of light, giver of life—while woman was symbolically aligned with The Moon—having no light of

its own, “just as woman, in her proper function, had existence only as the passive reflection of male creativity, The Sun was Apollo, the god of light, the moon Diana, his pale echo in the night” (Dijkstra 122).

Diana, the moon goddess, is especially significant when we consider her evocation by Nabokov in *Lolita*. In “The Enchanted Hunters”, the play written and directed by Quilty—its name a nod to the eponymous hotel where all three players in the novel’s warped love triangle first converge—Lolita plays “a farmer’s daughter who imagines herself to be a woodland witch, or Diana, or something” who “plunges a number of lost hunters into various entertaining trances” (200). Diana was goddess of the hunt. Lolita as huntress then, becomes another variant of the Eve-archetype—no longer called a wicked seductress but an enchantress, and a capturer of men—the irony being that Quilty uses the cover of the play to seduce and ensnare his nymphet. As we have seen, Diana is also goddess of The Moon—speaking to the girl’s imitative and superficial nature. Further to this, however, Diana is both a virgin goddess and the goddess of birthing—occupying, like the Virgin Mary, two seemingly opposed types of feminine sexuality. As discussed earlier, Humbert’s concern for Lolita’s assumed virginity and the preservation thereof forms something of a thematic preoccupation in Part One of the novel, just as his discovery of her lack of virginity is supposed to work to permit some of the abuses that occur thereafter. Certainly, some

renowned critical responses⁶² to the novel have cited Lolita's sexual activity as a catch-all justification for anything Humbert does to her. The evocation of Diana as goddess of birthing however, bears the most biting irony, given the circumstances of Lolita's death. Coincidences are rarely, if ever, mere coincidences in Nabokov, and the plurality of meaning that Diana evokes would have probably rather pleased the author.

Part IV: Gender in Performance

Performance is a cornerstone of Lolita's characterisation throughout the novel, and Humbert indicates that her dramatic education had begun long before she was cast as Quilty's enchanting huntress. Lolita, the conventional American teen, is a diligent student of both big screen and small screen—they are her portals to grown-up existence, to scenarios far removed from the sheltered suburban lifestyle she might have lived had Humbert not invaded it with his European exoticism and leading man looks. To Lolita, who is learned in the formulae of Hollywood romance, and schooled in the precise choreography of the cinematic kiss, Humbert's flirtations look just like the movies. Humbert says, "I could kiss her throat or the wick of her mouth with perfect impunity. I knew she would let me do so, and even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches" (48). Our leading man has Hollywood as his cohort, for the girl has been groomed for such

⁶² See examples from Molnar and Boyd cited in the Introduction chapter.

dalliances by the likes of Bogart and Bacall.

Lolita's Hollywood affectations become more coloured with melodrama as her formal theatrical education progresses under the tutelage of Quilty, and the girl spouts such campy lines as, "Carry me upstairs, please, I feel sort of romantic to-night" (207). Humbert himself might have argued that Lolita is as much a victim of the projected ideal of romance pedalled by Charlotte Haze's pulp paperbacks and prosaic Hollywood trash as she is of his own uncompromising lust. However, for Humbert, who takes advantage of Lolita's brash modernity, the tragic consequence of the girl's inclination to theatricality is her underlying lack of sincerity. While Humbert's desire for the girl is avid and earnest (some, like Lionel Trilling, have even called it love—themselves perhaps, too habituated to the narrative beats of boy-meets-girl stories), he finds the girl inconstant in her affections, given to lies, and ultimately, to betrayal. He abhors her "exercises in sensual simulation" (230), the acquired dramatic devices she adds to her armoury against tragic Humbert, our jilted lover. He is appalled to find that Lo, much like Margot, enjoys being watched, and revels in the searing heat of the male gaze: "And I also knew that the child, my child, knew he was looking, enjoyed the lechery of his look and was putting on a show of gambol and glee, the vile and beloved slut" (237).

Underlying all of this, seems to be an implicit understanding on Nabokov's part that the societal gender conventions "that Hollywood

teaches” are just that—conventional rather than natural, and one participates in their continuation through performance—adhering to the script, replicating the mannerisms, walking the walk and talking the talk. Performance then, is an ongoing act that constitutes reality and identity, for if Nabokov accuses the actress of conceitedness and deceit, then he must also dole out the same judgement to Humbert Humbert, who plays an altogether more contrived and sinister role—that of the well-adjusted, heterosexual adult male. Humbert wears what he cleverly calls his “adult disguise” (39)—the insinuation being that he still belongs in his child body, along with Annabel in some psychic space that doesn’t succumb to death or change. However, there is a broader meaning at work here that sits equally well with Nabokov’s belief that reality is a “very subjective affair” (*Strong Opinions* 9)—the meaning that all human appearances are merely disguises, designed to create the illusion of some externally defined idea of a person—of a continuous entity that can be readily identified and easily categorised. But—and here is the precise meaning—there is no way to spot a hidden Humbert by appearances alone. Nabokov gives Humbert the good fortune of being handsome—Hollywood handsome, in a cultural space where normative ideals are projected on screens and sold to the masses. Humbert appears to be that ideal. In “Screen Land” only surface appearances matter. Again, Nabokov is warning against the American cultural pandemic of superficiality that allows Humbert to operate in plain sight. Humbert

inhabits a character in order to infiltrate Lolita's life without suspicion. He plays husband to Charlotte, a role in which he is continuously challenged to find new ways to avoid sexual encounters with a woman who he views as the very embodiment of disingenuous femininity. Humbert also plays the protective father, belying the true nature of his affections in order to achieve absolute paternal control over his step-daughter prisoner.

Throughout all this, Nabokov seems to demonstrate an understanding of the mechanisms of gender identity formation. Judith Butler called it performativity. Nabokov does not name it, but he notices it. Through mimicry, acting, and repetition, the subject *becomes itself*. As Butler explicates:

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body [...] Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.

(173)

Lolita, on the brink of adulthood, is attempting to fashion herself into a woman following the blueprint of Hollywood's leading ladies. Since she is at a juncture in life where she is metamorphosing—transitioning from nymph⁶³ to woman—Lolita's self-creation is highly visible. There is of course, a vast ideological chasm between Nabokov and Butler; one that I do not intend to bridge here. As this very thesis works to demonstrate, Nabokov was anything but radical in his ideas about the gendered subject, and his portrayals of female, and indeed of queer characters, reveal the kind of essentialism that Butler's theory of performativity directly challenged. Nabokov does nothing to suggest that he believes in the arbitrariness or mutability of gender. For him, sexed bodies inhabit set gender traits; the masculine woman and the effeminate man are not only aberrations, but punchlines in Nabokov's literary world. However, despite all of this, there is something of an implicit, if not wholly conscious awareness of the construction of identity through the *acting out* of societally prescribed conventions, so that gender does not merely *appear on* the subject, but is actively *performed by* the subject. Again, the aforementioned case of Marina the actress, who impersonates a doting mother in her relationships with her children, illustrates this idea of *acting oneself*. Of course, this is meant as a

⁶³ The term "nymphet" is after all, a nod to Nabokov's entomological interests. Nymph is the name given to immature insects before they undergo the process of metamorphosis by which they reach their adult phase.

condemnation of Marina's character, and not as a commentary on how gender roles are learned and propagated. Nabokov makes no attempt to shatter stereotypes; however, the repetition of the themes of acting and imitation throughout his corpus might suggest that the essential self is perhaps undiscoverable, or even non-existent.

This requires one major qualification, for while Nabokov's female characters appear to *perform themselves* into being—making appearances or putting on a show of how they want themselves to be seen—his male protagonists, however deluded or demented, are ultimately self-defined by narrative means—they *write themselves into being*. In this sense, and in accordance with Van Veen's and Vladimir Vladimirovich's preference for the authoritative written word over the interpretative spoken one, we slip back into a two-tiered ontology, whereby masculine identity is seen as internally and intellectually defined, while female identity is externally and corporeally defined. While man writes his own experience in order to create himself, woman's script is taken from a template. After all, while Humbert's wolf-in-sheep's-clothing performance of normative masculinity is ultimately a self-serving and conscious exercise, his narrative works to present his inner truth, and to do so on his own idiosyncratic terms. Nabokov affords his female characters no such opportunity at self-authorship, with the small exception of Ada's marginal notes and corrections to Van's narrative in the early chapters of *Ada* (the style is not maintained throughout). Ada's

asides work more to stress Nabokov's favourite theme of the treacherous nature of Mnemosyne than to offer any illuminating insight into the girl's inner workings. In recent years, others have tried to make amends for Nabokov's neglect of the female narrative, as shall be discussed in Chapter Four. First however, this discussion of materialism, commodification and Hollywood ideals in *Lolita* must draw its conclusions about what the confluence of these various thematic threads means for the female subject within the Nabokovian text.

Part VII: Material Matters

This chapter began with a question mark over Nabokov's claim to ontological monism and has since traversed a wide array of topics, all related under the broad heading of materialism. Of course, the fact that Nabokov wrote about material matters does not, in and of itself, negate his alleged monist standpoint. It is rather the pronounced and repeated emphasis on the separation of the material from the intellectual that does this. This substance dualism is solidified by the consistent gendering of the properties of mind and matter.

Lolita's ties to matter are hinted at from the moment McFate connives to have Humbert walk into her home, for her first appearance is anticipated by a trail of material evidence. Exhibit One is "an old gray tennis ball" (37), followed by—clue of clues—"the

brown core of an apple” lying in the fender of the fireplace. This rotting core is not a Biblical emblem of seduction, but a primary signifier of materiality and mortality. The novel charts Lolita’s decay— at twelve, she is the “*fruit vert*” (40), at seventeen, she is expired. This metaphor is advanced further when Humbert notices, “a fruit vase [...] containing nothing but the still glistening stone of one plum” (39). This remnant of a freshly devoured fruit, still wet from Lolita’s saliva, is a marker of the girl’s appetite; her sensuousness, and her carnality. But with this carnality comes finitude.

In keeping with the fruit metaphor, mature femininity is underlined by notions of *ripeness* and *staleness* for Nabokov—words indicative of death and decomposition. Humbert describes Charlotte Haze as having, “heavy hips, round knees, ripe bust” (72). Of his first wife, Valeria, he says, “I appealed to her *stale* flesh very seldom” (26 emphasis added). Of course, Valeria is the victim of Humbert’s most hyperbolic misogyny. She is described as an “animated merkin,” and, “a large, puffy, short-legged, big-breasted and practically brainless *baba*”, whose “only asset was a muted nature” (25). What’s more, Humbert’s attacks on Valeria, both verbal and physical, are directed specifically at her woman’s body. In one such instance he muses on, “slapping Valeria’s breasts out of alignment” (87), as if her very anatomical makeup were an insult to his refined aesthetic sense. Breasts, in Nabokov, are viewed as ugly encumbrances of the feminine form. They are surplus bulk, an excess of matter.

Unfortunately, such rhetoric is not exclusive to Humbert Humbert. It is reiterated, for example, in Nabokov's 1972 novel, *Transparent Things*, where protagonist Hugh encounters a strangely lascivious older woman. Mrs Flankard we are told is, "an exuberant and pretentious lady with a florid face and octopus eyes" (28). Like Charlotte Haze, Mrs Flankard is oblivious to our protagonist's active disinterest in her womanly attributes. "Like many overripe and still handsome lady artists," we are told, "she seemed quite unaware that a big bust, a wrinkled neck, and the smell of stale femininity on an *eau de cologne* base might repel a nervous male" (29). Again, mature femininity is associated with *staleness*—this time pungent and repelling, like rancid meat.

It becomes clear here that it is not merely woman's materialism that concerns Nabokov, but her very *materiality*—her fleshy composition and corporeality opposing the artist's supposedly transcendent intellectuality. As Mary Ellmann wrote, "Materiality is the favourite statement of feminine alliance with the concrete. It implies, in turn, masculine alliance with the abstract" (97). Of course, in *Lolita*, fear of ripe femininity is intrinsic to Humbert's sexual pathology. His fixation on girls between the ages of nine and fourteen is underlined by a somewhat violent contempt for women's bodies. Charlotte Haze embodies a tragic inevitability for Humbert—a death of sorts, what he calls, "the coffin of course female flesh within which my nymphets are buried alive" (*Lolita* 175).

While Charlotte Haze represents to Humbert a horrifying glimpse of what his budding nymphet will become, Lolita's materialism, her steadfast devotion to the capitalist dream, defies his attempts to aestheticise and immortalise her. Rather, she is fixed to the material, to the neon glare and plasticity of modernity, a feminised modernity that Nabokov views with acute scepticism. Nabokov's dichotomous treatment of New World Lo and Old World Humbert is exemplar of a greater discursive tendency to equate the modern with the feminine; all the while nostalgically mourning the loss of the masculinist past, like a postlapsarian Adam, ruing the day he asked God for a companion. Nabokov's great American novel is tinged with a distinct pessimism; it guffaws at young America's gullibility, its seeming fatuity in the face of an ever-growing array of cultural absurdities—the "soap operas, psychoanalysis and cheap novelettes" (*Lolita* 80) that permeate the psychosphere of a burgeoning American population. As Dana Brand commented:

Each of the Americans Humbert encounters construct their identity and view of the world according to the images of normalcy provided by advertising, mass culture, and applied social science. Only Humbert the foreigner is able to resist the influence of these new and powerful forms of coercion. He does this by aesthetically distancing himself from the American

commercial and social environment. (14)

While Humbert represents his author's aesthetic ideals and supposed intellectual impenetrability—a higher consciousness that is impervious to crass billboard seductions, the *Lolita* he paints represents not only an America that is young and impressionable, but an ideal that is hollow and transient—the inescapable ephemerality of the material.

Part VIII: *Ada* and the Post-American Nabokov

If *Lolita* is Nabokov's great American novel, then *Ada* is his post-American one. Nabokov returned to Europe in 1961, and despite his own zealous insistence that he was, "as American as April in Arizona"⁶⁴ (*Strong Opinions* 98) remained there until his death in 1977. *Ada* was composed at his suite at the Montreux Palace Hotel in Switzerland between February 1966 and October 1968, and represents something of an artistic return to origins. As such, the novel thematically straddles Nabokov's post-American and pre-American eras. The author's apparent backward-glancing nostalgia for a (perhaps misremembered) paradisiacal past is vivified in *Ada*. His creation of Demonica or Antiterra—a parallel universe that is part the construct of science fiction, part that of memoir—reflects a desire to not merely resurrect, but to *reform* the past. This is a world

⁶⁴ Incidentally, this statement was made in 1966, by which stage the author was five years into his Montreux residency.

sheltered from the forces of politics and encroaching modernity. No uprising or upheaval threatens to tear Van and Ada from their idyllic Ardis, as the young Vladimir was torn from his Vyra. While *Lolita* is the story of how Humbert's paradise is lost, *Ada*, as described by Richard Alter, is "paradise regained—or retained [...] following the precedent of the autobiographic *Speak, Memory*" (Quennell 103). While *Lolita*'s two parts represent the construction and subsequent deconstruction of Humbert's nympholept mythology—the descent of fantasy into material reality—*Ada*'s self-contained universe remains unspoiled by the ravages of Terran history.

Nabokov creates his alternate world with a peculiarly microcosmic scope. The novel spans a one hundred and four year period, and yet, for the Veens, personal affairs are never interrupted or infiltrated by worldly ones. As Van Veen himself contemplates, "In contrast to the cloudless course of Demonian history in the twentieth century, [...] a succession of wars and revolutions were shown shaking loose the jigsaw puzzle of Terrestrial autonomies" (454). Antiterra is spared the political flux wrought on earth's inhabitants, indeed, wrought on Nabokov himself. *Ada*'s characters experience change almost exclusively at a personal level. There is no cause for exodus, no expulsion from Eden. Characters come and go of their own free will. And all the while, Ardis endures.

In this sense, *Ada* is idyllic, even wistful, on the part of the author. As one reviewer noted, "when Van's story begins the social

milieu is much like the prerevolutionary one described in *Speak, Memory*, a trilingual Eden of English butlers, French governesses and Russian nobles” (Hodgart n.p). Unlike *Speak, Memory* however, Van’s biography lacks any cataclysmic event—there is no Bolshevik revolution, no abrupt ending to the state of harmonious bliss that characterises Nabokov’s depictions of the Veens’ aristocratic upbringing. Rather, in *Ada*, the status quo is maintained, and this perfect, prelapsarian state is protracted and projected into Nabokov’s contemporary era⁶⁵. The author’s Russian past then, is not lost, not in fact past, because he writes a new history where nothing really changes. As such, *Ada* conceptualises a unification of past and present, of youth and old age, and even of Russia, Europe, and America, mingled as they are in the same land mass. This reconciliation of past and present is philosophically foreshadowed in Nabokov’s autobiography, where he likens life to a spiral⁶⁶—turning in on itself, and re-turning, each ending a new beginning.

If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call ‘thetic’ the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; ‘antithetic’ the larger arc that faces the

⁶⁵ Van and Ada supposedly die in 1968, one year before *Ada*’s earthly publication.

⁶⁶ The concept of spirality and Nabokov’s textual interactions with the Hegelian dialectic are further expounded in Chapter Five.

first in the process of continuing it; and
 'synthetic' the still ampler arc that continues the
 second while following the first along the outer
 side. And so on.

(*Speak, Memory* 209)

Nabokov calls his first twenty years in Russia his thesis arc, his twenty-one years of "voluntary exile in England, Germany and France" the antithesis, and his American years, a period that would last twenty-one years, the synthesis that forms a new thesis.

Nabokov's post-American or neo-European era thus forms what Nicol and Rivers call his "fourth arc" (xii). Just as this period is antithetical to the American one that preceded it, *Antiterra* is antithetical to *Terra*, or vice versa—depending what planet you take as your vantage point. However, *Antiterra*, with its reconfiguration of political geography⁶⁷, also represents a Nabokovian synthesis. In the words of Robert Alter, *Antiterra* is Nabokov's, "hypothetical anti-world where everything culturally precious to him—the Russian, English and French languages, the vanished graces of his parents' aristocratic estate—could be harmoniously combined" (104) within an otherwise familiar looking map of North America. Of these "vanished graces" Carol Schloss makes an interesting observation in her essay, "Speak Memory: The Aristocracy of Art." Schloss notes that Nabokov

⁶⁷ Dieter E. Zimmer's website, dezimmer.net, has a particularly useful section on *Ada*, including a timeline of the novel's events and a rigorously researched atlas of *Antiterra*.

recounts the end of his Russian period not in terms of material loss, but of intellectual enrichment.

What was lost, Nabokov would have us understand, was precisely what a person of his class and upbringing had been trained to spurn as bourgeois: the attachment to possessions. What he took with him was of more value: “I inherited an exquisite simulacrum—the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate—and this proved a splendid training.” (224)

Here, Schloss shows a Nabokov determined to disassociate himself from crass materialism, citing his own aesthetic appreciation for the *immaterial*—a gift for which he claims, he has his mother to thank. It is a sentiment reprised later in his autobiography, when reflecting on his years at Cambridge, Nabokov says of his fellow émigrés:

With the whiter of those White Russians I soon found out that patriotism and politics boiled down to a snarling resentment which was directed more against Kerenski than against Lenin and which proceeded solely from material discomforts and losses.

(*Speak, Memory* 199)

For the aristocratic Veens, the fact of simply having, and more precisely, of having always had money, precludes the type of

fetishistic materialism that Nabokov sneers at in his compatriots, and indeed, in gaudy American consumer culture. Materiality, however, remains a concern, as for Van who is concerned with the *Texture of Time*, it spells mortality, the insurmountable fact of his eventual non-existence. Van muses, in terms that sound a refrain to his author's words at the beginning of this chapter:

The mind of a man, by nature a monist, cannot accept *two* nothings; he knows there has been *one* nothing, his biological inexistence in the infinite past, for his memory is utterly blank, and *that* nothingness, being, as it were, past, is not to hard to endure. But a second nothingness—which perhaps might not be so hard to bear either—is logically unacceptable. (249)

Here Van and Vladimir—both supposed *natural* monists, attempt to negate their own immortality as an improbability. Life's steadfast working towards its synthesis with death is however, appallingly evident throughout *Ada*, and manifests itself particularly in Ada's pubescent body. In 1888, Van returns to Ardis to find a fifteen-year-old Ada who says of her burgeoning sexual desire: "But, my love, my Van, I'm physical, horribly physical" (127). Ada's horrible physicality—her burgeoning materiality—is then detailed by Van over the following pages. Amongst his observations, Van says: "Her breasts were pretty, pale and plump, but somehow he had preferred

the little soft swellings of the earlier girl with their formless dull buds” (171). This, by the way, follows an episode where a horrified Van rebukes Ada for not shaving her pubic hair: “A brunette, even a sloppy brunette,” he says, “should shave her groin before exposing it” (161). To make amends for this, Van later brings Ada his own shaving kit, “and helped her to get rid of all three patches of body hair” (171). Evidently, Van desires to keep Ada as first he found her at age twelve. Although he maintains that Ada at fifteen was beautiful, desirable, his words and actions betray a sense of diminishment. Van would have Ada a nymphet forever.

Of course, any ruminating questions the reader might have about Van’s sexual preferences are addressed forthrightly when Marina asks her son, “You are not a pederast, like your poor uncle, are you?” (183) Demon Veen, Van’s uncle/father, is a Nabokovian anomaly in that his predilection for young (very young) girls has no direct moral or spiritual consequence. Instead, Demon’s actions seem to be reactionary: they are rooted in that common masculine fear of death and decay, the Nabokovian dread of material wastage. There is a desperate scrambling for stasis, a sprinting to stay still, as Demon, faced with the exponential threat of old age and death, opts for younger and younger girls (Spanish girls—we assume they are each are named Lolita) so that, “when he was sixty, with hair dyed midnight blue, his flame had become a difficult nymphet of ten” (308). Demon’s solution to encroaching death is vampiric—he gorges on

the bodies of the young in order to stave off death. Of course, this reading of Van's propulsion to younger and younger desire objects does not excuse or even supplant the fact of his basic perversion. Ideologically however, both Van's scrutiny of Ada's maturing body and Demon's proclivity for children, seem to tie with the same fear of that "coffin of coarse female flesh" that haunts Humbert's sexual nightmares. The fetishisation of the youthful female body by popular culture is just a broader discursive expression of this same fear of death. The reluctance to see ageing bodies, the denial of the very existence of bodies that do not perpetuate the Lolita myth, is as much evident in Nabokov's own writing as it is in the aesthetics of advertising. This theme will be reprised in the next chapter, where I wish to treat *Lolita* in a broader cultural context, examining its impact not merely as a work of literature, but as a cultural artefact and commercial product, the source material for two movies, and the source of a hundred controversies.

Chapter Four: Presentation, Adaptation and Misrepresentation; how Lolita fared in the Real World

Part I: Treacherous Paratexts

For all of Nabokov's stringency in matters of artistic control, his *Lolita* seems to have escaped his grasp. As discussed at the close of Chapter One, her name has become euphemistic; a signifier for illicit feminine sexuality, specifically for too-young girls whose *raison d'être* is the corruption and ensnarement of too-old men. What's more, her name rings with a kind of big-brand familiarity; it has resonance even to those who don't know what exactly it resonates—to know that the name *Lolita* denotes *something* perhaps precedes knowing exactly what it denotes—but a residue of notoriety follows those three syllables nonetheless. With familiarity and notoriety, comes marketability, and, as consumer culture is the subject of this chapter and the last, it is worth while considering the commodification of *Lolita* the novel, as well as that of *Lolita*, the girl in the novel. For the purposes of this following section, *Lolita*-book and *Lolita*-girl can be read as virtually interchangeable, for the commercialisation of the novel, particularly with respect to its translations into film, has been propagated on imagery and advertising that forefront the girl's sexuality. The definitive example of this is the iconography associated with Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation. However, before

taking that Hollywood detour, it is apt and chronologically correct to start from *Lolita*'s beginnings in print under the watchful eye of her author-master, before she became the property of the masses—when she was but a young text and not yet a book.

This distinction is an important one. While the text is the novel in its natural or naked state, a book is both a literary and a commercial product, comprising all the various accoutrements of such, e.g., its cover, title, prologue, epilogue, dedication, cover blurb, etc. These supplementary items are called the paratext. Literary critic Gérard Genette defined the paratext as the verbal or non-verbal productions that accompany a text. He expands:

One does not always know if one should consider that they belong to the text or not, but they surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to *make it present*, to assure its presence in the world, its 'reception', and its consumption, in the form, nowadays at least, of a book. [...]

Thus for us the paratext is the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to readers, and more generally to the public. (Genette 261)

The paratext therefore influences not only *who will read* a book, but

whether it is read at all, and perhaps most significantly, *how it is read*. Moreover, paratexts converge with epitexts, i.e., paratextual items that are not *materially attached* to the text (advertisements, interviews, etc.), to inform how the text is both perceived and received. Genette alludes to a most important point in the above citation when he speaks of the book being presented not only to readers, but to the public in general, for it is paratext, and not text itself, which informs what is ‘known’ about a book to its non-readers. Undoubtedly, *Lolita* belongs to a category of books that are more widely ‘known’ than they are read, given its vague aura of infamy. By looking briefly at *Lolita*’s paratextual evolution—the history of how it has been presented to the market—we can map how the image of the novel, and of the girl it depicts, have been reconfigured not only to meet socio-cultural expectations, but to shape them.

While many writers simply are not interested in what might be regarded as mere matters of production and presentation, others—Nabokov being one of them—are more wary of the effect of such elements. *Lolita* in its published state is the very manifestation of Nabokov’s totalitarian approach to authorship. John Ray Jr.’s foreword is Nabokov’s satirical hat-tip to the very existence of forewords, in much the same way as Kinbote’s annotations to John Shade’s poem in *Pale Fire*, work to caricature an imbalance of authority between text and paratext. Then there is his afterword, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”, published first in *Encounter* in 1959, and

appearing in all editions of the novel thereafter. The essay is an absolute showpiece in the Nabokovian approach to paratext, clearly instructing readers how the novel should and should not be approached. It has also proven an exceedingly successful piece of paratext, insofar as it remains one of the most oft-cited pieces of commentary on the novel—Nabokov being, in his own estimation at least—his own most worthy critic.

Nabokov also attempted to exert authorial control over *Lolita's* cover design. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the man who valued the definitive finality of the written word was dubious about the idea of having his nymphet rendered pictorially. Understandably, the author feared artistic misrepresentation of the girl he had so precisely written into being. His preference was as such, for covers without girls—ensuring that *Lolita's* image would be imparted only by means of his words to the reader's mind's eye. In a letter to *Lolita's* first American publisher, G.P. Putnam's Sons on 1 March 1958, Nabokov wrote:

I want pure colours, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls. If we cannot find that kind of artistic and virile painting, let us settle for an immaculate white jacket (rough texture paper instead of the usual glossy kind, with

LOLITA in bold black lettering. (Bertram and Leving 170)

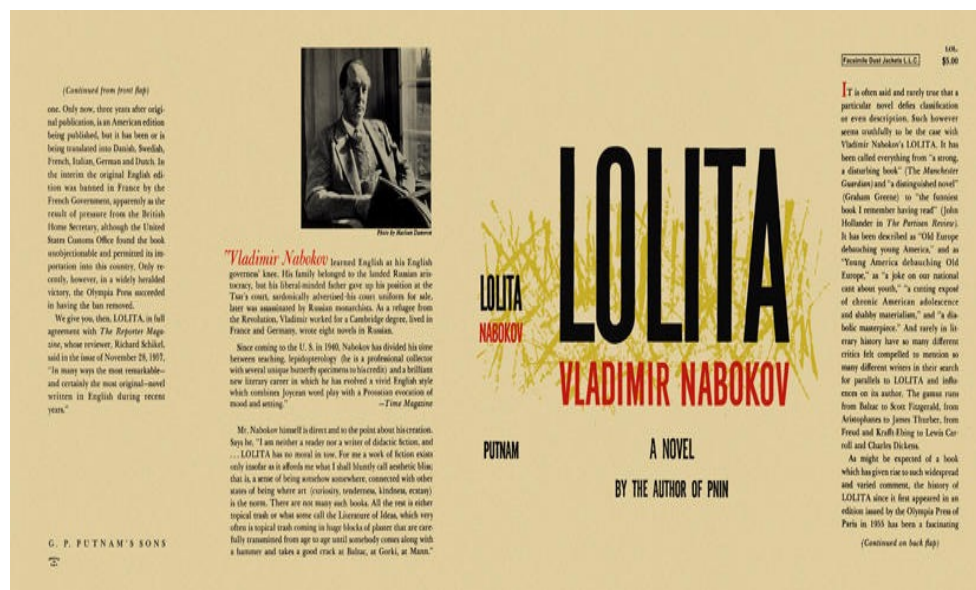


Fig. 1

Putnam's incidentally leant towards the latter option (Fig.1), giving Nabokov the bold type-face he requested, and opting for an abstract splash of yellow over the "accurately drawn details" that must have alerted the publisher to the author's rather exacting standards.

However, even the reliably inoffensive formula of black lettering on a blank background is not entirely neutral, and this is nowhere more evident than in *Lolita's* first incarnation in Olympia Press (Fig. 2). In fact, the Olympia publication is the perfect example of the paratextual significance a publisher's name can lend a book. *Lolita's* first edition went to market without any tantalising cover illustration or explanatory text. Instead, as Dieter E. Zimmer outlines, Olympia depended upon their own "established reputation":

that of the olive-green Traveller's Companion

Series. By placing the emphasis of attraction on the name of the series, Olympia press was able to forgo blurbs. The message was clear: *You already know that within these green covers you will find one lewd item after another.*" (Bertram and Leving 168)

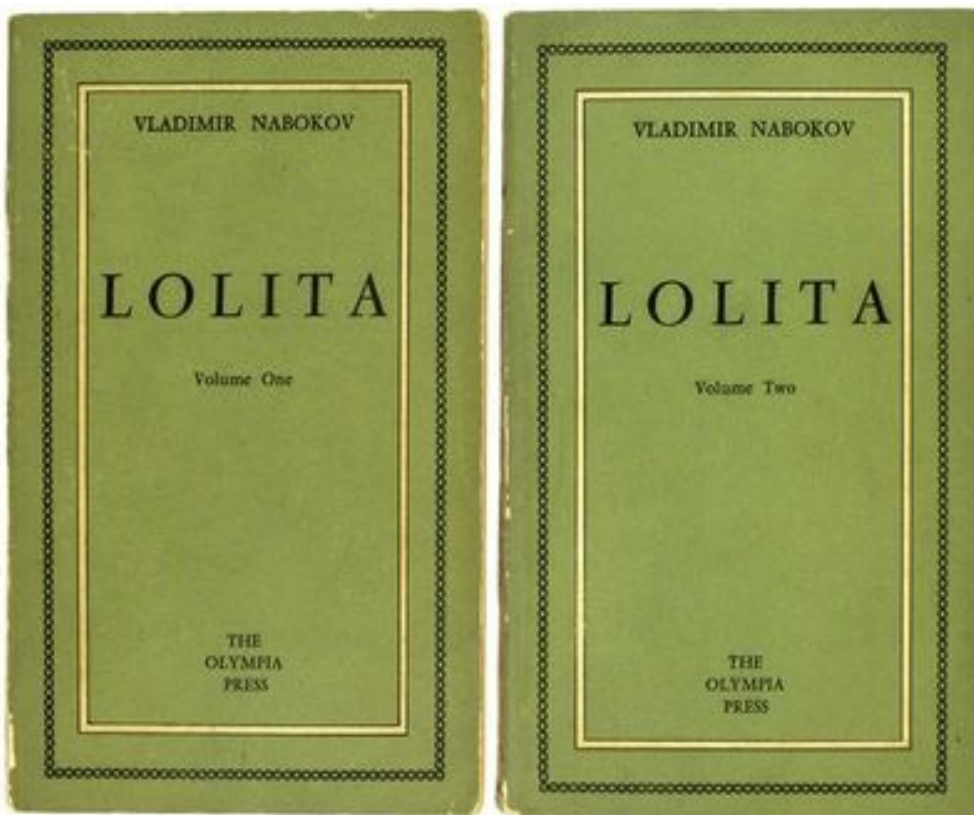


Fig.2

The Traveller's Companion Series specialised in publishing texts that could not legally be circulated in the English-speaking world. Hence, they were produced in Paris to be sold to curious travellers who passed through the city. *Lolita's* appearance in the series thus cemented the notion that this was a forbidden text, the plain green cover provocation enough to any acquainted reader. Similarly stark and suggestive was the first German edition by Rowohlt in 1959,

which Zimmer notes went to the “furthest extreme not to draw attention to the content of the novel:

There were no blurbs on the jacket, and the back was completely devoid of explanation or promotion. The conspicuously empty spaces were a message to the reader: *Surely you’ve already heard about this book. Here it is, and you must judge for yourself whether or not its reputation is justified.*” (Bertram and Leving 168)

However, apart from these notable examples of effective minimalism, publishers of *Lolita* have, for the most part, been brazenly unfaithful to Nabokov’s “no girls” vision, and even the author himself found some of these concoctions quite pleasing.⁶⁸ However, no single factor had such resounding influence on the portrayal and sale of *Lolita* (again, I stress, text and girl alike) than Stanley Kubrick’s 1962 film adaptation. Kubrick’s film, or to be more specific, its accompanying promotional poster, photographed by Bert Stern, lent *Lolita* an enduring cultural iconography and essentially, a broad commercialism. The image it presents (Fig.3), of a lollipop-sucking

⁶⁸ In a piece for a television show called “USA: The Novel”, Nabokov peruses his collection of international editions of *Lolita*, picking out the French, with its pigtailed girl as a “very pretty” favourite. (Trotter, “Nabokov on Different *Lolita* Covers”)

Sue Lyon, gazing enticingly over the red plastic frame of her heart-shaped sunglasses, emblematises

Hollywood's corruption of Lolita's character. The now famous shades don't belong to Nabokov's Lolita. Nor does the self-possessed, mature sensuality, suggested by the sub-

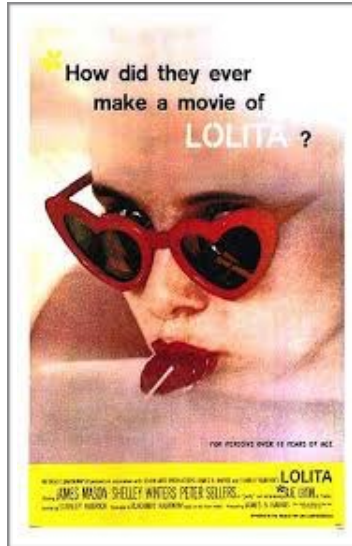


Fig. 3

pornographic, come-hither pose. And yet, this one image has somehow absorbed Lolita. It is the paratext that usurps its text. The realisation of this, is the release of a print edition of *Lolita* with Stern's poster image on its cover. As Zimmer notes, "In the worst case scenario, a tie-in reduces a book to the novelization of a film" (172). Kubrick's 1962 poster image was apt propaganda for the dawning of a decade of sexual revolution. It sold Lolita not only as a seductress⁶⁹, but also as a heraldess of emerging licentiousness; she was the picture child of American youth in revolt, provoking its staid, puritanical elders. Presumably, the promise of the tie-in book cover must have left some readers highly disappointed, for, as Zimmer observes, "The lollipop in the photo, in a vague, noncommittal way, seems obscene—and at no point in the novel is Nabokov's Lolita obscene" (174).

⁶⁹ Nabokov was aware that Lolita's image was being distorted, and told one interviewer, "Nymphets are girl-children, not starlets and 'sex-kittens'. Lolita was twelve, not eighteen, when Humbert met her" (*Strong Opinions* 80).

However, Kubrick's adaptation and his marketing of *Lolita* remained far more traditional than groundbreaking. The movie poster and corresponding trailer pose the tag-line question, "How did they ever make a movie of *Lolita*?" While the question is scandalising, the answer is prosaic. Kubrick created a film that was more faithful to Nabokov's text in general tone than in narrative detail. The presence of an on screen character (a female cohort of Peter Sellers' Quilty) named Vivian Darkbloom, for instance, engages with the novel's sense of play, and keeps Nabokov in the thick of the action—where he liked to be. However, Kubrick's artistic relationship with Sellers culminates in a refurbishment of the narrative. While the first and last word of Humbert's narrative in the novel is Lolita, Kubrick's film is bookended by Quilty's name. Quilty is integral to the success of Kubrick's film. Sellers' screen-devouring presence is a decoy; his eccentricity stands in relief against James Mason's reserve, and the latter plays straight man to the former's jester. As Graham Vickers stated, Mason's Humbert is one "lacking claws, fangs, and vitriol. Deprived of the novel's inner voice and hamstrung by a timid script, the actor cannot begin to hint at Humbert's haunted past, his eviscerating humour his awful obsession, his calculating cruelty" (120-121). Without any inkling of Humbert's predatory nature, the audience is left with a rather vague impression of what kind of relationship Humbert and Lolita share. Kubrick's Quilty absorbs all of Nabokov's Humbert's sexual subversiveness, allowing a suave,

benign, lovestruck fool of a Humbert to emerge as the film's romantic hero. Fillman Richards has argued that the film adaptations of *Lolita* by both Stanley Kubrick and Adrian Lyne have performed a desexualisation of Humbert and a corresponding hyper-sexualisation of Clare Quilty, which, in Kubrick's incarnation, includes hints of BDSM and queer sexuality.

While I would argue that the nature of Humbert and Lolita's relationship is more honestly realised in Adrian Lyne's film—at times, brutally so—there remains an unwillingness to show Humbert Humbert with his claws at full extension. Where Kubrick's film posited itself as a dark comedy, employing innuendo where representation was impossible, Lyne's *Lolita* is rather characterised by an overarching earnestness. It takes its source material seriously in an effort to be taken seriously itself, but manages still to somehow miss the point. Lyne appears to eschew the novel's humour and irony for fear of taking his subject—and indeed, the subject matter—lightly⁷⁰. Jeremy Irons' sombre narratorial voiceover sets the tone from the outset, taking in Humbert's seaside romance with (a mature looking) Annabel Leigh and neglecting only such major but unappetising details as the lower age limits for nymphets—no audience is

⁷⁰ This is entirely understandable, given the cultural climate of the 1990s. Lyne's film failed to find a distributor in the United States in the wake of child pornography law reforms and public sentiment in the aftermath of the murder of JonBenet Ramsey (Vickers 197). It eventually aired on the American premium cable network Showtime, and got a limited cinema release across Europe.

prepared to hear a man profess his desire for nine year olds.

Although Lyne's film did not shirk from portraying sex or even Lolita's suffering, Irons' Humbert is not too tame exactly, but too sincere. He is a jealous, at times violent lover, but we believe that the pain he inflicts is but a fraction of the pain he feels. His Humbert looks like one that might emerge from a crude edit of Nabokov's text, where everything Humbert says is taken at face value and all of his malignancy is left on the cutting room floor. Meanwhile, Frank Langella takes Quilty back into the shadows where he belongs—revelling in the film's dark recesses until his final encounter with Humbert where, naked but for the scant and wholly inadequate presence of a silk robe, Quilty's sexual excesses are visually summarised in an excess of skin.

Of course, both film adaptations increase Lolita's age at the story's outset. In Kubrick's *Lolita*, she is transformed from a chestnut-haired twelve-year-old into a pouting blonde ingenue. Dominique Swain was fifteen when she started filming for Lyne's film, and seventeen when the final reshoots were finalised. While Sue Lyon's Lolita is young—she was fourteen when filming commenced—physically, she is not a nymphet. Because Lyon looked like a conventional Hollywood blonde, she comfortably assumed the conventional female role of love interest to two warring leading men. Kubrick's *Lolita* maintains the immutable Hollywood paradigm of boy-girl love, of male subject and female object, of patriarchy reified and

reinforced. Humbert and Lolita's affair is portrayed as little more than idle infatuation on Humbert's part, and bubblegum-popping teenage precociousness on Lolita's.

Based on the evidence of archive footage and his own words, Nabokov seemed to relish his moment in the spotlight following *Lolita's* Hollywood outing, and besides his initial fears for how a film adaptation might reduce his novel, the author seemed rather charmed by the end-product⁷¹, apparently failing to notice that while his nymphet had metamorphosed into the sexy starlet Dolores Haze had yearned to be, his Humbert had emerged as an innocuous British gent. Nabokov, like Humbert, watched as his nymphet got further and further away from him, running into the clutches of a far more nefarious force, that of the mass culture promotional machine.

Bertram and Leving's 2013 publication, *Lolita: The Story of a Cover Girl*, confronted the issue of Lolita's pictorial misrepresentations by inviting designers to "reinvent" Lolita through new cover art. The sheer diversity of the eighty newly commissioned speculative covers works to revivify the paratextual conversation between book and public. The variety of focus and thematic engagement speaks to the novel's multifariousness. Freed from the inhibitory sanctions of commercial appeal, and equally, of sex appeal, these designs are imbued with wit and honesty. Likewise,

⁷¹He was full of praise in a 1964 *Playboy* interview, saying, "I thought the movie was absolutely first-rate" (*Strong Opinions* 18).



Fig. 4 (top-left) to Fig. 8 (bottom right)

there is no aversion to unpleasantness, even ugliness. Amongst the most affecting examples of this, are the covers which suggest or illustrate male sexual pleasure; something that remains conspicuously invisible in an increasingly pornified cultural landscape that capitalises on the objectification of female sexuality. The familiar, clichéd images of alluring girls are replaced by ones that aim to *re-sexualise* Humbert. These covers illustrate a *perpetrator*, and are

appropriately disturbing, even repulsive; as with Vivienne Flesher and Ward Schumaker's pencil sketch of Humbert, the onanist (Fig. 4), or Sam Weber's portrait of a man whose closed eye expression and sheen of perspiration suggests sexual ecstasy, the source of which, we deduce, is out of frame⁷² (Fig.5). Other covers in the series work to illustrate Lolita's sense of violation, so that Humbert's lust is shown to have consequences. Chip Wass's subversive comic book aesthetic depicts Lolita recoiling from an encroaching Humbert, clutching bedclothes to her naked chest (Fig. 6). Linn Olofsdotter presents the dark, imposing silhouette of a man reflected in a girl's teardrop (Fig. 7). The figure, with his elongated limbs, torso, and neck, is evocative of a very contemporary folklore figure—the Slender Man⁷³—an internet meme whose mythology includes the stalking and abduction of children. The reference works to place *Lolita* firmly in the modern world, where pedophilia is reviled as a monstrosity, and pedophiles are outcast from society. Ellen Lupton's cover illustration realises a similar idea in a different format (Fig. 8). These images work to convey not only some truth about the

⁷² Weber's design is reminiscent of Andy Warhol's 1964 silent film *Blow Job*, in which a man's face is filmed as he apparently receives fellatio from an unseen person.

⁷³The Slender Man originated on an Internet forum in 2009, where one user by the name of Victor Surge uploaded black and white images of groups of children into which he photoshopped a tall, ghostly figure dressed in a black suit. An entire online folk mythology developed around this shadowy character, the particulars of which varying from storyteller to storyteller. Some recurring features include long, tentacle-like arms that he uses to capture his child-prey, and a blank, featureless face. His presence is felt rather than seen, and proximity to the Slender Man causes a deep sense of psychological distress and paranoia.

content of the text, but also to place it in context. They undercut Humbert's own attempt to re-historicise and romanticise his sexual preference by positioning the novel and its narrator firmly in the modern world, where the sexualisation of children is criminalised.

Part II: *Lolita* as scholarly text

As we have seen, paratextual choices are made with both commercial and political designs in mind, and in *Lolita*'s history those choices have centred around whether or not the girl is pictured and if so, *how* she is portrayed. Moreover, the choice is about whether or not the novel's strong sexual theme is represented, and *whose* sexuality is the focus of that representation. Conventional commercial approaches have chosen to focus on the girl, figuring her as sex object while Humbert's nefarious sexual agency remains unrepresented. While the pictorial paratexts of cover art and poster design worked to sell one idea of *Lolita*, the publication of Alfred Appel's *Annotated Lolita* in 1970 worked to frame the novel as something worthy of scholarly attention. As paratext, the sheer bulk of Appel's notes (some one-hundred-thirty-eight pages) serves as a physical indicator of the novel's difficulty, its esotericism, and ultimately, its literariness. It is also worth noting that to date, no girls have appeared on the cover of *The Annotated Lolita*. In this context, the book that scared publishers and shocked moral crusaders becomes part of the canon and part of the curriculum. Appel informs

us that his annotations, “keep in mind the specific needs of college students. Many kinds of allusions are identified: literary, historical, mythological, Biblical, anatomical, zoological, botanical, and geographical” (xi). However, the annotator provides far more than a mere glossary of terms, and although he states that neither “the Introduction nor the Notes attempts a total interpretation of *Lolita*”, they certainly cannot make any claim to critical neutrality. Indeed, Nabokov himself, having reviewed Appel’s notes, asked that the reader be informed “that in several instances his interpretation of *Lolita* did not necessarily coincide” with the annotator’s (xiii).

Appel might rightly have anticipated some degree of paternal disapproval from Nabokov, and appeared to mount a preemptive self-defence in the form of self-satire in his preface to *The Annotated Lolita*. Grabbing the opportunity to be the first critic to draw the obvious comparison between himself and Charles Kinbote—*Pale Fire*’s rogue annotator whose compulsion to self-mythologise distorts his reading of the text—Appel felt compelled to reassert his own ontological validity, stating, “the annotator exists; he is a veteran and a grandfather, a teacher and a taxpayer and he has not been invented by Vladimir Nabokov” (xiii). Further to this, Appel includes a lengthy citation from Kinbote “In Place of a Note on the Text”, taking great pains, it seems, to let the reader know that the irony and precariousness of the annotator’s position are not lost on him.

Despite this acute self-awareness, James M. Rambeau cites Appel’s

note to 6/9 (4/9 in my edition): “*Vivian Darkbloom ...*”*My Cue*” (*Lolita* 323) as evidence “that its author, while neither Kinbotean in his invention nor Nabokovian in his playfulness, is an annotator who has completely lost his sense of proportion, and who has therefore become a parody of an annotator” (Rivers and Nicol, 30). At one page in length, the note is by no means Appel’s longest or most exhaustive, and Rambeau might have chosen from any number of alternative examples to illustrate his point. In the midst of such supposed excesses however, there is something to be gauged by seeking out those instances where Appel chooses *not* to expound or elucidate. For instance, while an annotation to the name “Percy Elphinstone” (31/3) runs for over two pages and works to collate the novel’s numerous fairy tale references, there is no similar note propounding the novel’s Edenic theme. As the first two chapters of this thesis should work to explicate, these two thematic threads are more or less equally weighted in terms of regularity of occurrence. Yet, Appel barely engages with Nabokov’s allusions to Paradise and its inhabitants, opting only to annotate in the most obscure case; that of Lilith. His note reads:

In Jewish legend, Lilith was Adam’s wife before Eve. Also a female demon who attacked children and a famous witch in the demonology of the Middle Ages. In *Pale Fire*, a Zemblan ‘society sculptor’ finds in Charles the Beloved’s

sister 'what he sought and ... used her breast
and feet for *Lilith Calling Back Adam*' (p.108)

See 16/6 for more on enchantments. (342)

And so, this brief lesson in Hebrew mythology segues neatly back into the familiar area of “enchantments”. The note that Appel directs us to here relates to the text, “not human, but nymphic”, and comprises a three-page explainer on nymphs, magic, and fairy tale creatures in which Appel instructs the reader to see his aforementioned note to 31/3: *Percy Elphinstone*. The result is quite the self-referential web, with the annotator’s favourite motif clearly presenting itself. For Appel, Lilith’s demon-woman mythology is just one example of the novel’s broader tropes of folklore and fantasy. Of course, such an appraisal is not *wrong* by any means; it addresses the question of *who* Lilith is, it simply fails to address the question of *why* she is here—in *this* text, at *this* juncture.

Although Appel insisted that his paratextual additions to the novel were not meant to offer conclusions, reviewer Dean Flower refuted this, stating: “the opposite is true. They strongly attempt to reinforce the dull idea that everything in the novel is artifice and puppet show” (502). Appel’s famous proclamation that, “many readers are more troubled by Humbert Humbert’s use of language and lore than by his abuse of Lolita and law” (xi) seems more *instructive* than *descriptive*: Appel is suggesting how readers *should* respond to the text rather than describing any discoverable *general*

reaction reported by *Lolita*'s readers. Rambeau, in accord with Flower, suggests that *The Annotated Lolita*'s size belies a limitation of scope.

The effect of *The Annotated Lolita* is to suggest strongly in its arrangements and sheer bulk that "the formal properties of fiction," most particularly parody, are "the subject matter of fiction." That this proposition is simply not true of *Lolita*, nor generally of Nabokov, can be demonstrated by looking at the sort of criticism which best explains the final appeal of the book.

(31)

In other words, there is more, abundantly more, to *Lolita* than "Humbert's use of language and lore." The annotated edition exists however, to *quantify* the novel's difficulty so as to qualify its literary status. Appel's paratextual additions transform Nabokov's text into a book almost twice its original size, a book with a physical depth more demonstrative of its artistic one, perhaps. Despite all of this however, *Lolita* remains a book about the repeated rape of a child by an adult. While Kubrick's movie poster created a Lolita brand that was tonally frivolous, kitsch, and "girlie" in the *Playboy* sense⁷⁴,

⁷⁴ Nabokov's relationship with that particular "girlie mag" is a long and interesting one, starting with his 1964 interview with Alvin Taffler, and culminating in *Playboy*'s publication of a five-thousand word extract from *The Original of Laura* in its December 2009 issue—a posthumous echo

Appel's hefty annotated edition (*sans* girl on cover) was about reestablishing the novel's seriousness by muting its sexiness. Appel's appeal to the reader to forget Humbert's abuses and focus on his word play is the direct manifestation of this. While Appel does not attempt a de-sexing or de-venoming of Humbert in the way that Kubrick's and Lyne's film adaptations do, his didactic paratexts serve to show the reader that there are *other things* to be concerned about—things unrelated to (and we read, more important than) sex and sex abuse; matters of artistry and male genius.

Part III: White Ink Lolitas

There was something of a movement in the 1990s—perhaps leant impetus by Linda Kauffman's question, "Is there a woman in the text?" (131)—to rescue *Lolita* from her many users and abusers. The object was to reclaim and recover *Lolita*'s wayward reputation. A number of projects that Timothy McCracken christened, "White Ink *Lolitas*"⁷⁵ emerged, attempting to retrospectively imbue Nabokov's

of the magazine's serialisation of *Ada* in 1969. Nabokov even ranked 22nd on *Playboy*'s list of "The 55 Most Important People in Sex", and was himself a keen reader of the "men's lifestyle and entertainment" magazine. *Playboy*'s affiliation with Nabokov, as well as other notable *literati*, shows that American notions of male intellectualism were by no means divorced from those of sex, titillation, and the objectification of women. The relationship of author to magazine was hence a mutually beneficial one; the former gained publicity while the latter validated its self-image as something more sophisticated than smutty.

⁷⁵ "White ink" for the image of breast milk Cixous evokes in *Laugh of the Medusa*. McCracken names three texts, however I will focus on the two that explicitly respond to Nabokov's text here. McCracken also uses the term Lo-centrism as a counter-reference to Cixous' logocentrism.

girl with an authorial voice of her own. The first of these, *Lo's Diary*, was by Italian author, Pia Pera. In keeping with the previous section, Pera's book is rife with intriguing paratexts. The back cover blurb for instance, tells us that here, "we have the true Lolita, the *other* Lolita." This, the blurb

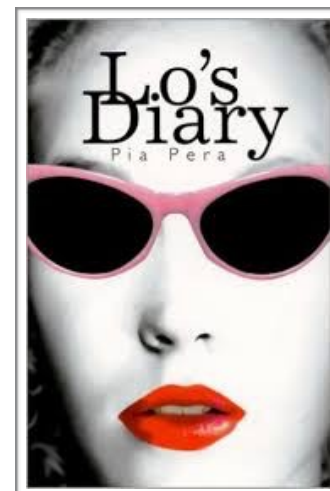


Fig. 9

insists, is a sensitive and feminist treatment of the girl:

"She is a maturing young woman, seen through the eyes of another woman." However, the front cover, which pictures a girl in sunglasses (Fig. 9), refuses to break ties with Lolita's heritage of patriarchal misrepresentation, by overtly referencing (and capitalising on) Kubrick's imagery. The face on the cover is not girlish, in fact, it is scarcely human. Equally jarring is an excerpt from the novel that appears on the back cover which includes the following piece of wisdom from Pera's Lo:

Anyway, the apple is essential. How come these hens don't get it? They go to church year after year, they read the Bible, or at least they keep it on their bedside table, and they forget how the first seduction of the first man occurred? With an apple, that's how. No man can resist a woman who has an apple in her hand. It's theological. A woman with an apple in

her hand is the first woman, the only woman in
 the world, and he's the first man—he stumbles
 on love and he can't shake it, never ever. (101)

Clearly Pera, along with whoever selected this pull-quote, were working to engage with, and to validate Humbert's association of Lolita with Eve. In fact, *Lo's Diary* as a whole works to this effect, giving life to a "true Lolita" who is manipulative, calculating and utterly in control. This Lo imagines *herself* as an enchantress of hunters (241).

The most startling piece of paratext however, presents itself in a preface by Dmitri Nabokov, wryly headed, "On a Book Entitled *Lo's Diary*", in which Nabokov's heir and then copyright holder presents Pera's text as a brazen, greedy, and artistically bereft exercise in copyright infringement. Following legal proceedings, Dmitri conceded to allow the publication on the provision that his preface be published with it, in order to "apprise the reader and the would-be plagiarist of the dry, legal aspects of the copyright issue" (x). Dmitri's chosen method of restitution would have surely delighted his father. The Nabokov name appears inside the covers of a book that Pera tried to claim was not derivative and thus not in breach of copyright laws. Pera's debt to Nabokov is, literally and literarily, announced to the reader before she has said a word. Dmitri even undermines her claims to a political stance, claiming that when an excerpt of *Lo's Diary* appeared in the New York Times, "feminists had mixed feelings

about the calculating harpy that emerged” (viii). Dmitri, it seems, shared his father’s understanding of the importance and influence of paratext, something that Pera, her publishers, and their lawyers, perhaps underestimated when they agreed to Dmitri’s clause.

Pera’s novel adheres to Nabokov’s narrative chronology, rewriting the story from the girl’s perspective. The most revelatory scene echoes the episode in Part One, Chapter 13 of *Lolita*, in which the girl “is safely solipsized” (60). In Humbert’s narrative, his use of Lolita’s leg as a masturbatory prop is vindicated by its apparent harmlessness—Humbert had achieved his momentary bliss, “without impairing the morals of a minor.” Humbert assumes that Lo is ignorant, and thus innocent of the act, saying, “The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her” (62). While Humbert’s version of events works to objectify Lolita—literally treating her body as an object without conscious awareness of how it is being used—Pera not only reinstates Lo’s agency, but puts her in control of the situation. Pera’s Lo observes Humbert knowingly, saying, “he’s all in my power” (102). She is a sexual strategist, weighing her next move, biding her time, letting Humbert suffer. She is excited by her own power: “I’m all hot inside, I’d like to hug him and kiss him without all these pretences, but I’m going to wait till the next move; for now I pretend nothing’s happening, and go on biting my apple” (103). Pera’s vision of a feminist Lolita is one of a sexually empowered twelve-year-old with the self-possessed eroticism of a woman twice

her age. This is matched by an authorial voice that is contrived and never convincingly childlike in its attempts to verbalise Lo's narcissistic teenage angst. Lo's anger at Charlotte, for instance, is articulated in the following conceit: "Exterminate mothers and we'll eliminate everything that gets in the way of progress and happiness, truth, joy in life, and the spirit of adventure" (92).

What's more, Pera somewhat gratuitously makes her Lo a hamster torturing sadist, delighted by her own tyrannical power over the unfortunate creature. Presumably, this narrative tangent is meant to foreshadow Lo's abuse of her own superior sexual power in her cruel mistreatment of Humbert. Pera's wieldy, conniving Lo, thus exonerates Humbert Humbert by substantiating his tales of nymphet-lore. Pera's text is hence, not a rebuttal to the treacherous paratexts that have distorted Lo's image, but rather a further betrayal of the victim of child abuse that Kauffman sought to defend.

While Pera's book restricts itself to re-writing *Lolita* from an alternative perspective, Emily Prager's *Roger Fishbite* interacts with Nabokov's novel in a more nuanced and culturally engaged way. Prager's text is set in nineteen-nineties New York⁷⁶, and centres on the first-person narrative of a girl named Lucky whose world-view is filtered through the lens of daytime television chat shows and Disney films. Prager herself says the book was written as a "reply both to the

⁷⁶ Both Prager's and Pera's (English edition) "white ink Lolitas" were published in 1999.

book and to the icon that the character Lolita has become” (Prager 230). In homage to Nabokov’s love of mirrors, *Roger Fishbite* playfully inverts many facets of *Lolita*. The title, for instance, is the female narrator’s given name for her abuser, and the titular character is

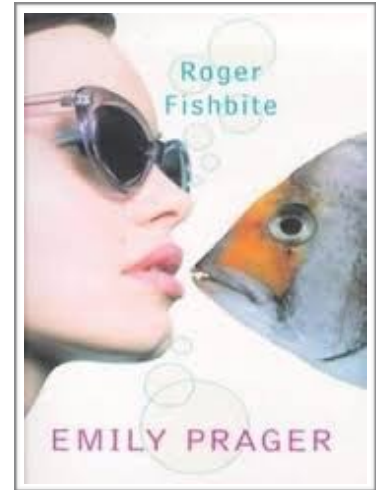


Fig. 10

presented in monochrome, his voice filtered through Lucky’s. Lucky Linderhoff was born on Christmas Day; the day that Dolores Schiller née Hayes died in childbirth. Also, the text’s mysterious interloper, is not a predatory Quilty (unsubtly renamed Filthy in Pera’s version⁷⁷), but rather a rival little girl—one fantastically named Evie Naif—a child beauty queen.

Prager’s novel comments on the mass consumption of depictions of child abuse, referencing *Lolita* itself as a product of this cultural phenomenon (Fishbite keeps a copy in his glovebox) and the media at large, where an increasing confusion of news and entertainment cultivates a voyeuristic demand for abuse narratives. Lucky’s story is set to the cultural backdrop of the murder of six-year-old beauty pageant queen, JonBenét Ramsey⁷⁸, and Prager uses

⁷⁷ Pera takes a rather heavy-handed approach to the Nabokovian art of innuendo, with such clunky examples as Reverend Stiffhorn and Miss Bluedick.

⁷⁸JonBenet Ramsey was murdered on the night of 25th December 1996 in her home in Boulder, Colorado. While Prager never explicitly connects the date of JonBenet’s death with *Lolita*’s, their coincidence perhaps

this to highlight the hypocrisy of a morally outraged audience whose rapt fixation with the case worked only to perpetuate the sadistic objectification of the child after her death.

Roger Fishbite thus offers an interesting take on *Lolita* as a commercial and cultural product; suggesting that reactionary moral repugnance is ultimately belied by the novel's enduring popular appeal. Simultaneously, Prager challenges moral permissiveness on the grounds of artistic merit, citing one of Nabokov's own favourite examples, Lewis Carroll, "who may or may not have interfered with Alice" (Prager 14). There is something perverse, Prager suggests, in our sentimentality towards art; something reprehensible about a culture that prioritises the protection of artistic legacies over the protection of children. Lucky asks the hypothetical question, "Can anyone honestly say that they would save the child and lose the

strengthens the cultural analogy that Prager is working to draw. The case, which remains unsolved to this day, garnered a media frenzy. JonBenet, fashioned after her mother Patsy, a former Miss West Virginia, competed in beauty pageants since she could walk. The following quote, included to give a feel for the cultural scope the case had, is from an article written by Joyce Carol Oates for the *New York Review of Books* in June 1999:

The six-year-old's posthumous celebrity as a (possibly sexually molested) victim led to a *People* cover; mainstream publications like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New Yorker* have printed extensive articles on the case. As of March 1999, there were nearly 2,100 items about JonBenét Ramsey on the Web, many of these involving photographs of the child in her provocative beauty-pageant costumes. There were more than 300 websites devoted to the Ramsey case. In any supermarket or drugstore you are likely to see, smiling wistfully at you from a display of tabloids, JonBenét Ramsey, forever six years old and the most famous little girl of our time. (Oates n.pag)

book?” (15) Of course, Prager assumes that the answer is no. In matters of art and abuse, it seems, we have adopted a utilitarian ethics; whereby the scenario that affords the greatest pleasure to the greatest number of people is thought the right one. A subtle condemnation, perhaps even an implied suspicion, of Nabokov ekes through when Lucky concludes; “You think great literature comes out of nothing? Nothing can come out of nothing” (15). Prager demands an acknowledgement that our fictional nymphet reflects someone’s material reality, and by inference, that Humbert and Nabokov are less distinct than we, the readers, are perhaps willing to admit.

Since Prager’s is a text that explicitly engages with *Lolita*’s symbolic as well as literary cultural relevance, it is interesting that her cover art (Fig.10) employs the ubiquitous formula of girl in sunglasses (again, recalling Lo’s movie mythology), while deliberately subverting the image’s acquired sexiness. This girl in sunglasses, her full lips slightly parted, faces the toothy pout of a fish, its lifeless, black eye the perfect antidote to the affected sultriness of Sue Lyon’s stare in Kubrick’s promotional poster. In keeping with this, Prager’s novel works to demythologise the girl’s experience. While *Lo’s Diary* presents its protagonist as a precocious and premeditating seductress, Lucky Linderhoff is never portrayed as anything more calculating than a parentless child seeking paternal love and protection. In a passage that echoes the close of Part One of *Lolita*, where Humbert reaches the devastating denouement that

his captive nymphet “simply had nowhere else to go” (142), Lucky likens herself to an orphaned zoo animal, clutching to a stuffed toy in lieu of its dead mother. She says:

Perhaps it is shocking to you, Dear Readers
and Watchers, shocking and incomprehensible
that having finally been left alone, that I would
crawl back into the pervert’s bed. If you must
place blame, blame it on the cloth mother
monkey who is, you recall, better than no
monkey at all. (154)

The persistent irony of Lucky's situation is that she fears outside forces; the homeless, pimps etc, when the biggest threat lives at home with her. Narratives of Otherness are vital to Prager’s depiction of modern America, and the author constantly juxtaposes external or foreign forms of exploitation with domestic and familiar ones. While Lucky becomes an activist for the cause of child workers in the Far East for example, she later encounters a “convention of child-model-actresses, evidently a yearly event sponsored by their union, The American Federation of Child Laborers” (132) in a hotel where she and Fishbite are staying. The illusory glamour of the “model-actress” job title is undercut here by the seemingly inappropriate yet accurately descriptive title of “child laborer”, so that illegal or, perhaps more precisely, “foreign” child slavery, converges with the culturally venerated work of the child-star, under the one banner. For Prager,

exploitation is not a remote concept nor a historical relic, nor even the reserve of “dirty old men”, with which the text is littered.⁷⁹ Rather it is a concept so reified by our patriarchal capitalist society that we hardly know it when we see it.

Prager’s point is that we thoughtlessly consume the products of abuse and degradation. Lucky’s mother for instance, with her collection of Chinese antiques and clothing, and her pet fetish for the tiny lotus shoes worn by women with bound feet, has mistaken for quirky *objets*, the practical objects of oppression. Only her Chinese housekeeper, Chiong, views these items in their correct context, but then, Chiong is confused entirely by the American market for misery: “You would never find Chiong on a talk show. In her world, the tragedies of life were nothing to talk about” (164). Chiong’s perspective offers a stark contrast to the perpetual abuse narratives that punctuate Lucky’s own abuse narrative. The apparent omnipresence of these horror stories betokens insatiable public demand.

on what seemed to be the child abuse channel,
 the announcer told of newborns being
 kidnapped, newborns in garbage bins, a little
 boy beaten to death during toilet training, an

⁷⁹ There is her mother’s boyfriend and conman, Señor Luxe (5-6), Lorenzo Morales (71), Father Coughlin at her school (72), and a Japanese stranger who Lucky allows fondle her breast in exchange for the purchase of bullets with which to kill Fishbite (181).

eleven-year-old who had never been bathed,
and children stabbing children in New Jersey.

(112)

The novel's ending is a work of fantasy fulfilment. Fishbite deserts Lucky, fleeing with Evie Naif to Disneyland—a site where notions of childhood innocence collide with a globalising corporate ideology. Lucky, acting not only as, “a child abused”, but also as, “a woman scorned” (213) shoots her abuser and spares her rival. Following her conviction as a juvenile murderer, she broadcasts her own talk show, “Babytalk” from her prison cell. Lucky the killer is rewarded with celebrity status, for in line with that dualistic Sadean model of power and powerlessness that resonates throughout Nabokov, it is better to be the perpetrator than the victim; better the show's host than its content. Lucky, unlike *Lolita*, is at least the author of her own infamy. Where Nabokov's girl in the text never quite reached Hollywood, Prager's achieves the next best thing, in a world where fame and notoriety have reached a semblance of parity.

If *Lolita's* depiction of America bemoaned a rise in conventionalism and a corresponding decline in intellectualism, then the America Lucky inhabits might be the realisation of Nabokov's vision. However, Prager does not equate such conventionalism with a lack of intelligence, but rather with the basic human need to *belong*. It is not the mentality of the ignorant herd, but that of the tribe that drives Lucky. In Prager's America, cultural conformity is the answer

to the disintegration of the family unit. The orphaned and isolated are connected by their relationships to screens—the television becomes a surrogate, another “cloth monkey” mother. Similarly, commercial relationships supplant familial ones as identifying markers—the subject *is* what the subjects *buys*. Perhaps *Lolita* can be read as a harbinger of these cultural shifts, where Lolita—the parentless child who worships at the altar of consumerism—acts as a signifier of societal decline. However, while Prager’s America might seem like a natural progression from Nabokov’s vision of blinkered conformism, her all-American girl is a far more conscientious citizen than disinterested Lo. While Lolita is characterised by her “celestial trust” (148) in the mass messages pedalled by Madison Avenue and Hollywood, Lucky is an inquisitive and critically minded character. Vitally, she is a militant opponent of capitalist corruption—defacing the products of child labour and protesting the cause on New York’s streets. She is then, a more evolved and more empathetic vision of American girlhood. Lucky Linderhoff is no less a product of her environment than Dolores Haze—her very thoughts are mediated by the discourse of twenty-four-hour news channels and chat shows. However, unlike Lolita, Lucky is not merely a receptacle for the environmental noise that surrounds her. Rather, she is *engaged in a conversation* with her environment. She is not merely a product of her culture, but a *producer of* cultural products. She writes her own narrative.

 Part IV: The “Lolita Effect” in Popular Culture

In June 1997, *Spy* magazine heralded the dawn of what it called a “new Lolitocracy” (47): teenage girls, it claimed, were taking over Hollywood. The cover featured Christina Ricci, Alicia Silverstone and Liv Tyler, each dressed in suggestively cute ensembles of short pyjamas and ankle socks, with Silverstone wielding a teddy bear to further drill the point home.

The cover caption read, “Jailbait 1997—The Sudden Thor-like Rise to Power of Sexy Little Girls” (Fig.11) At the time of the issue’s publication, Ricci, Silverstone and Tyler were aged seventeen, nineteen and twenty respectively—a far cry from nymphets by



Fig. 11

Humbertian standards. For *Spy*'s purposes, however, such finer details wouldn't have mattered. The object of the cover story, postmodernist irony notwithstanding, was simply to sell the idea that these girls were young, prohibitively young in fact—forbidden fruit. What was for sale was the fantasy of sexual innocence on the brink of ripeness—that subset of girlhood that pornographers call “barely legal” and media outlets lazily call Lolita. The *Spy* cover is a perfect

example of what Meenakshi Gigi Durham called “The Lolita Effect” at work in modern popular culture, for the evocation of nymphet mythology by mass media achieves the eroticisation of youth not only when girls are dressed up (or undressed) to look like adults, but when adult women are made to look like girls. The Lolita Effect is therefore bidirectional, and its aims are similarly bifold. In the first place, and most obviously, it works to fetishise youth and market young girls as sex objects. Secondly, and more perniciously, the cultural pervasion of images of adult women who look like girls works to promote an infantilised and developmentally arrested female ideal.

The Lolita Effect is at work wherever images peddle the fantasy of perpetual nymphancy. In this middle-space between childhood and adulthood, physical and intellectual maturity are stalled, while sexual readiness is expedited, or, in the parlance particular to this chapter’s theme of commodification, rushed to the market. Fashion—being a cultural intersection between art and consumerism—provides ample evidence of how this phenomenon manifests itself in the visual sphere of everyday life in the Western world. For over two decades⁸⁰,

⁸⁰ I take 1993 as a rough starting point here, where a Calvin Klein underwear campaign turned a teenage Kate Moss into the poster girl for a look that was variably called “the waif” and “heroine chic”. The look was regarded as antithetical to that of the amazonian supermodels that dominated fashion in the eighties, and was fitting with the nineties’ alt-culture zeitgeist. Of course, Calvin Klein was blazing a trail for the sexualisation of young people since 1981, when a sixteen-year-old Brooke Shields told the world that nothing came between her and her Calvins. It was not the first time Shields found herself at the centre of such a controversy, having been propelled to fame in the role of a twelve-year-old prostitute in *Pretty Baby* (1978). For Clavin Klein’s marketers, Shield’s

fashion has presented an image of an androgynous and physically weakened female physique as its ideal. Asexual, at times skeletal bodies are showcased on runways. Emaciated forms are preferred to signs of reproductive fecundity such as breasts and hips. High fashion favours the angular jut of clavicle or rib cage to those womanly signifiers of sexuality. Fleshy, rounded women's bodies are aesthetically incongruent with the fashion industry's preference for "clean lines". In this perverse spirit of elitism, cloth is cut to fit an ideal, while women's bodies are cut to fit the clothes. Full breasts, hips and buttocks are regarded as anti-fashion, lowbrow, and vulgar. This is how fashion advertising distinguishes itself from pornography, for while nudity and sexual imagery are commonplace in fashion photography, the bodies on display speak to an aesthetic austerity.

readymade notoriety was as much a draw as her burgeoning beauty. There is a marked difference however, between Shield's glamorous appearance in 1981 and the minimalist aesthetic that dominated fashion a decade later. While Shields was made-up and coiffured to look older than her years, the Calvin Klein look of the 90s was stark. Young models were made to look younger; there was an emphasis on physical vulnerability. This trend adapted and rebranded for the new millennium, when "size zero" clothing was fetishised, and websites operating under the banner of "pro-ana" (pro-anorexia nervosa) made mental illness and malnutrition aspirational, or, to use their own appalling portmanteau, "thinspirational". With much public and political pressure, the self-regulated fashion industry agreed to combat its own trend, with Madrid Fashion Week leading the way in banning the use of size-zero models on its runways in 2007. It would however, take five years for the industry's standard-setter, *Vogue*, to follow suit. In their June 2012 issue, all international editions of *Vogue* carried an announcement that they would no longer use models who were under the age of sixteen, or models *who they believed* to have an eating disorder. This rather nebulous second criterion raised suspicions that *Vogue's* grand announcement was little more than a token gesture and a statement of half-intent. The banning of young models meanwhile, perhaps served to atone for the semi-scandal caused by images of a pouting ten-year-old named Thylane Blondeau, wearing full make-up, stilettos and a low-cut gold lamé dress in a feature for French *Vogue* in 2011.

There is no excess or bulk, no oozing, lurid fleshiness as with erotica. Instead, the high-fashion body conforms to a certain geometric minimalism.

There are echoes of Humbert's nympholept aesthetics in this fetishisation of the lean, undeveloped physique; likewise in the corresponding phobia of the ripe, rounded female form, with all of its gaudy popular appeal. Something of Humbert Humbert's contempt for mature female flesh permeates our consumerist culture, where multi-billion-dollar industries are built on the impossible premise of regression to prepubescence, supposedly achieved through diet, exercise, cosmetics or increasingly, surgery. Women's continuous and rather futile quest to negate their own biology is taking them to new and evermore frightening frontiers in body dysmorphia. We now live in a world where even virginity—that utmost paragon of desirable girlhood—is recoverable through hymenoplasty.⁸¹

⁸¹ Reliable data on the popularity and profitability of this procedure is difficult to come by. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons, for instance, does not list figures for vaginoplasty or hymenoplasty in its "Annual Statistics Report", while the website for the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons states (rather proudly, I gather) that the, "availability of such surgery in the UK is limited". What is known is that the surgery is more common amongst women from Middle-Eastern and Latin American countries, where virginity tests are sometimes performed on women before they are wed. Of course, as Humbert Humbert knew, such methods for determining virginity have been "thoroughly debunked by modern science" (*Lolita* 124). In the United States, "revirgination" is marketed as a sex-life enhancer, and was described by one recipient in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in 2005 as "the ultimate gift for the man who has everything", if however a very transitory and expensive one. The increasing influence of hard core pornography on Western beauty ideals have seen an increase in demand for "designer vaginas", with labial reduction and vaginal tightening emerging as solutions to the new "problem" of unsightly or overused female genitalia. The emphasis here is

It would be absurd however, to draw a line directly from *Lolita* to our modern day “Lolitocracy”. Moreover, it is absurd to even call it that. While *Spy*, whose feature was headlined “Lights of our lives, fire of our loins...Just Kidding!” (42) takes *Lolita* as the framing motif for what it claimed was a burgeoning cultural phenomenon, Nabokov’s novel can hardly be blamed for instigating a trend that took the best part of four decades to become truly pervasive. Rather, *Lolita* provided a new terminology where previously there was only silence enforced by taboo. While nineteenth-century psychiatric discourse had named and categorised the pedophile for the first time⁸², it was not until Nabokov named his nymphet that popular discourse found a way to talk about “sexy little girls” in terms that were permissively euphemistic. To speak of Lolitas and nymphets is to mark the girl-object as an *objectively erotic being* rather than the eroticised object of deviant sexual desire. The popular understanding of Lolitas is that

not strictly speaking on virginity, but on aesthetic appeal, male sexual pleasure, and a reduction in the size of the vagina and labia that is undoubtedly tied to notions of youth and purity. There is also clearly an issue here of wishing to erase the markers of woman’s reproductive function while, somewhat paradoxically, emphasising her sexual function. Her genitals are cut and stitched to conform to an aesthetic that is deemed attractive—or rather, not unattractive, to men—for underlying all of this is a rhetoric of disgust whereby woman’s physicality is seen as being inherently flawed and in need of fixing. There is arguably some ideological spillover between these elective aesthetic procedures and the practice of female genital mutilation, for while medical risk is an unavoidable reality of being cut—electively or not—the results are not proven to offer any medical or sexual benefit to the female subject (dyspareunia, or painful intercourse, is one common side effect), but rather satisfy patriarchal expectations of the woman as sex-object (“Vaginal ‘Rejuvenation’ Not Safe or Necessary” n.pag.).

⁸² The classification *erotic paedophilia* was coined in 1886 by Viennese psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Krafft-Ebing 371).

they exist to seduce and be desired. They invite and incite transgressive erotic desire. Therefore, to speak of Lolitas and nymphets is almost subversive, as it is in utter discordance with the modern criminological discourse around child sex abuse and child pornography, where the focus (and blame) is fixed on the perpetrator. However, the language employed by *Spy*, works to shift the focus to the sexualised girl-child. They tell us, “the ones society *really* has to keep its eye on are the *little* girls, the twelve to fourteen year olds, the Lolitas” (46). According to *Spy*, the girls themselves are the dangerous ones. The prey is reconfigured as bait—“Jailbait”. She becomes a knowing, willing, and cunning agent, and the predator becomes the ensnared.

This of course, is a Humberian fantasy about the inversion of a power structure, whereby the adult male imagines that he succumbs to the nymphet’s overwhelming sexual prowess. It is a fantasy about submission to a societally prohibited desire, and like all fantasy, its appeal lies in the fact that it pays little heed to the strictures of reality. In truth, sexual relationships between adults and children represent the imposition of the former’s desire upon the body of the latter. It is the child who is forced to succumb, as the adult never relinquishes his power, but wholly enforces and exploits it. The power structure is not inverted because the power structure is immutable. What’s more, this very fantasy of sexual surrender works to reinforce that power structure, by peddling that same Biblical narrative of the damning and

damnable force that is woman. Ultimately, to speak of nymphets and Lolitas is not only to give voice to a forbidden fantasy, but to legitimate that fantasy through an illusory mythology of sexually empowered young girls and disarmed adult men. Nabokov did not invent this fantasy, but he devised a vocabulary where the eroticisation of the object was so complete, so reified, that the leering and lusting subject was taken for granted. Once the girl belonged to an identifiable species, she became all the easier to blame.

Spy's tongue-in-cheek evocation of this cultural fantasy is at least forthright in its intentions, however self-satirising it portends to be. *Spy* recognises a discord in popular media between the visual and verbal spheres. While the visual sphere is saturated with images that fetishise youth and sexualise the young, the verbal messages relayed by many media outlets insist that the production, distribution and consumption of sexualised images of children is morally wrong. These conflicting visual and verbal messages are often delivered simultaneously; whereby an image is reproduced so that it can be marked as inappropriate. The media circus which surrounded the murder case of JonBenet Ramsay—discussed earlier in relation to Emily Prager's literary reply to *Lolita*—is one prominent example of the collusion of public and media in this mass self-delusion, whereby a highly conspicuous cultural preoccupation undermines an outspoken denial of children's sexuality. This hypocrisy betrays an underlying fascination, for child sex abuse narratives are undeniably

popular, in the sense that they sell newspapers and preoccupy the popular consciousness. For all of their supposed unthinkableness, such narratives seem to compel rather than repel public attention; and their proliferation can ultimately be understood as response to demand.

In his books *Child-loving* and *Erotic Innocence*, James R. Kincaid takes Michel Foucault's ideas about the regimentation and regulation of childhood sexuality by adult authorities⁸³ in a bold and at times unsettling direction, arguing that our collective fear of the child molester is nothing more than projection—a way of psychologically dissociating ourselves from our own fascination with children's sexuality. Kincaid suggests that the angry mob at the door of the pedophile doth protest too much, and that by, "insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity, and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism" (*Child-loving* 4-5). Our insistence that children be held sacred as icons of purity and asexuality, is belied by the cultural pervasiveness of sexualised images of children. Kincaid argues that the figure of the

⁸³ In his *History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault briefly talks about how power exacts itself against childhood onanism. Foucault identified a, "secular campaign that mobilised the adult world around the sex of children" (*HoS* 42), arguing that the point of this campaign was never to eliminate the vice, but to repress it so that it could later be revealed; to make it a secret to be discovered—eked out by doctors or psychiatrists. The child thus became the focal point of a whole "medico-sexual regime". While "in appearance, we are dealing with a barrier system," he said, "all around the child, indefinite *lines of penetration* were disposed" (*HoS* 42). It is this deconstructive argument that seems to fuel Kincaid's line of argument.

pedophile is a societal scapegoat, who helps us maintain the illusion that these images are created for someone else's benefit.

The pedophile is thus our most important citizen
 [...] We must have the deformed monster in
 order to assure us that our own profiles are
 proportionate. [...] Defining the child as an
 object of desire, we create the pedophile as the
 one who desires, as a complex image of
 projection and denial. (5)

Further to this, Kincaid holds that we have made the child the epitome of Otherness, and in this Otherness, it has become, like woman, an object of desire. The child, in its purity, its relative *blankness*, becomes a carrier for our projected desires (*Erotic Innocence* 17). Kincaid proposes that this phenomenon began with the Victorians, for whom the child was a symbol of all that opposed the era's trademark reason and restraint. The erotic innocence of childhood was thus better understood not as the fetishisation of virginity, but as a jealous fascination with the child's unbridled libidinal energy. Kincaid notes that the child as we know it is a relatively modern invention, and as such, Victorian practices of clinical categorisation have shaped how the child is understood. In deconstructionist terms, the child, who is meant to embody an *absence* of sexuality, marks sexuality itself. Kincaid takes this argument to conclusions that veer towards overstatement; colouring

Victorian efforts to protect the sanctity of childhood with an unconscious ulterior motive that seems too theoretically abstract to have any basis in historical reality. For Kincaid, every artistic depiction and literary description of childhood innocence points to some underlying erotic fixation. What's more, Kincaid positions his theory within the cultural context of production and consumption, using the analogy of industry and the marketplace to suggest that sexuality as we know it is a synthetic construct, alienated from its natural origins:

I'm not the first to announce that both the child and modern sexuality came into being only about two hundred years ago, but it isn't often noted that, in the excitement of getting these two new products on the market, they got mixed together. (*Erotic Innocence* 52)

For Kincaid then, the child is not merely a historical construct, but a product of an era of studious preoccupation with human sexuality. He suggests that commercial appeal was an influencing factor in the cultural construction of the child, and that the child's illusory asexuality was loaded with a marketable allure.

Regardless of whether or not we accept Kincaid's critical standpoint, his theory of the erotic potency of innocence does seem to preclude any consideration of *Lolita's* enduring cultural appeal, for her allure is unmitigatedly sexual. Perhaps this is why she is such a

dazzling oddity; perhaps this is the source of her power to unnerve and provoke, and why censorious moralists were so keen to suppress her. Perhaps Kincaid is right, and we are, after all, confused or repressed nympholepts. Perhaps the reluctance of many critics and readers to condemn Humbert Humbert is based in some deep-seated affinity. Perhaps this explains Humbert's ability to simultaneously attract and repel readers. But there is a considerable chronological and cultural gap to be bridged between Kincaid's "child-loving" Victorians and our modern-day "Lolitocracy", for while the legal protection of children's innocence is enforced more stringently than ever before, the Victorian emphasis on the *invisibility* of childhood sexuality has given way to a visual culture where sex is ubiquitous. Of course, this can be read as nothing more than a reflection of the dissolution of Victorian sexual mores in general. However Kincaid observed that while we have fully adopted the Victorians' will to safeguard the child's chastity; imposing ever-stricter laws and employing world-wide networks of investigators to combat child pornography, there remains a conspicuous appetite for salacious child sex abuse narratives in modern America. Ultimately, Kincaid holds that, "we uncover what we shield, censure what we enjoy" (*Erotic Innocence* 74).

However, to speak of contemporary America, or even of the nineties' America that both Kincaid and *Spy* were commenting on, is

not to speak of the America that *Lolita* was born into, and I wish to account (briefly⁸⁴) for Lolita's evolution from a literary nymphet into a pan-cultural archetype and a byword for child pornography. Here, I wish to address not merely how, but *when* the cultural conflation of sexuality and girlhood came into prominence, and what part, if any, Nabokov's fateful nymphet played in its emergence. I will begin with the contemporary culture of *Lolita*'s publication. While the print advertising of the 1950s is now so notorious for its political incorrectness that it barely warrants repeating here, its depictions of women as wives, cooks, and sex objects are noteworthy for the distinct *womanliness* of their portrayal.



Fig. 12

Women were portrayed as mothers or lovers, subservient to men in either instance, but the bodies on display were unmistakably those of physically mature *women* (see Fig.12). While depictions of what might be called mental girlishness—fluffy, air-

⁸⁴ Graham Vickers' *Chasing Lolita; how popular culture corrupted Nabokov's little girl all over again* provides a comprehensive historical overview of Lolita's representation and misrepresentations in popular culture. I do not intend to retrace Vickers' steps here, but to provide a brief account of changing cultural climates and the changing image of Nabokov's nymphet.

headed, fawning, domesticated women—were Madison Avenue’s blueprint, there was no suggestion that biological girlishness was desirable. One has only to look at the Hollywood actresses of the era to see this; Elizabeth Taylor, Rita Hayworth, Ava Gardner, Bette Davis—each of them profusely *womanly*.

Whenever children were depicted in advertisements of the era, the target demographic was their mothers. Housewives were in



Fig.13

charge of grocery shopping, and children were often portrayed in ads as little more than hungry mouths to feed, not unlike hatchlings in a nest. The typical images of the era, often colour illustrations rather than photographs, were marked more by a homely cuteness than anything

resembling sexuality (Fig. 13). There was a clear delineation between the adult world and that of the child.

That line was to be blurred by the emergence of a new socio-cultural group—the teenager⁸⁵—an entity that existed somewhere between these two spheres, neither child, nor adult wholly, but marked by sexual energy and spending power. In 1947 or thereabouts, Humbert Humbert found his Lolita to be

⁸⁵ The word “teen-agers” (in its original hyphenated spelling) likely made its debut in print in a 1941 issue of *Popular Science Monthly*. (Cosgrove, *Life* n.pag)

metamorphosing into one such alien being. The boom of teen culture and the teen economy created a new intermediary space between childhood and adulthood, and a new category of girlhood that was to become the paragon of desirability. As illustrated in the following excerpt from a *Life* magazine article of 1944 entitled, “Teen-Age Girls: They Live in a Wonderful World of Their Own”, the teenage girl was an alluring novelty and a whole new object for visual consumption:

By their energy, originality and good looks they have brought public attention down from debutantes and college girls to themselves.

Moving through the awkward age, the troubles of growing up, their welter of fads and taboos, they eventually became—in the judgement of almost every Western nation—the most attractive women in the world. (Cosgrove n.pag)

Of course, all of this was developing as Nabokov wrote his *Lolita* into life, and another excerpt from the same *Life* article seems to speak directly to a Humbertian view of American adolescence. With considerable authority, *Life* informed its readership:

There is a time in the life of every American girl when the most important thing [sic] in the world is to be one of a crowd of other girls and to act and speak and dress exactly as they do. This is

the teen age.

The cited article offers a helpful historical and anthropological insight. The sexualisation of girl-children however, began long before the invention of the teenager. As Humbert Humbert himself takes great pains to educate his reader, the history of nympholepsy (for isn't that a far nicer word than pedophilia) is a long one, and, before the Victorian practices of categorisation and criminalisation imposed themselves on the domain of human sexual behaviour, the nympholept could indulge his fantasies with relative impunity⁸⁶. While sexualised images of young women and girls might appear to be more pervasive in our modern era, pre-Lolitan America was not entirely innocent of insidious suggestion. To give one famous example of cutesy appeal, from 1935 to 1938, America's most bankable Hollywood starlet was Shirley Temple. Temple began her ascent to fame at the age of three in a series of shorts called *Baby Burlesks*, in which child actors in nappies played adult roles for comedic effect. In one such film, *Polly Tix in Washington*, Temple plays a high-class hooker. In her first scene, she is adorned in lingerie with ankle socks and Mary Jane shoes on her feet. Later, she

⁸⁶ Indeed, had Humbert and Dolores been nineteenth century lovers, their union would have been perfectly legal. As Posner and Silbaugh outline, "Most states codified a statutory age of consent during the nineteenth century, and the usual age was ten years" (44). Although the age increased during the twentieth century, Posner and Silbaugh note that until consent laws were reformed in the 1950s and 1960s, "Many states used to require that the victim be "of previous chaste character"—this being the very loophole that Humbert seeks to exploit in his narratorial pleadings with his reader-jurors.

is introduced to a prospective client draped in bangles and pearls, spouting lines like, “I’m expensive!” At the peak of her career in 1936, Temple starred in *Poor Little Rich Girl*, in which she performed the song *When I’m With You*. The lyrics form something of a Freudian nightmare, with Temple squeaking adorably:

Oh Daddy how I miss you!
 You’re busy all your life,
 I love to hug and kiss you,
 Marry me and let me be your wife!

Temple goes on to tell her Daddy, that, “In every dream I caress you”, and that, when he’s around, “Every street I walk on becomes a lovers’ lane.” Apparently, Temple’s unique brand of dimpled and ringleted cuteness, was enough to let all this pass as good innocent fun. That is, until Graham Greene, who would later become both an advocate of *Lolita* and a friend of Nabokov’s, wrote a piece on one of Temple’s films for the British culture magazine *Night and Day*. Greene’s review of *Wee Willie Winkie* in October 1937, led to a lawsuit by Fox against *Night and Day*. The basis of Fox’s libel action was, according to Greene: “that I had accused Twentieth Century Fox of ‘procuring’ Miss Temple ‘for immoral purposes’” (Hawtree xiii). Greene’s piece was a diatribe on the source of Temple’s cinematic allure. Of Temple, he stated, “infancy with her is a disguise, her appeal is more secret and more adult. Already two years ago she was a fancy little piece” (Hawtree 204). Greene’s real umbrage

though, is not with Temple herself or even her “owners” (Greene renames them “leaseholders—their property diminishes in value every year”), but with her audience, of whom Greene takes a rather Kincaidian view.

Her admirers—middle aged men and
clergymen—respond to her dubious coquetry,
to the sight of her well-shaped and desirable
little body, packed with enormous vitality, only
because the safety curtain of story and dialogue
drops between their intelligence and their
desire. (Hawtree 204)

In March 1938, three months after *Night and Day*'s brief life in publishing came to an end, the court ruled that the magazine pay £3500 to Fox for defamation, with Fox demanding that Greene himself pay £500 of that total sum. Shirley Temple continued acting until her retirement in 1950, at the ripe old age of twenty-two.

Temple's retirement coincided with the rise of a new screen icon, one whose appeal was so thoroughly sexual as to be almost a caricature of sex itself. Marilyn Monroe was just two years older than Shirley Temple. The details of her personal life and her tragic death are too well known to recount again here. Likewise, it risks sounding clichéd to talk of Monroe's particular brand of sexuality, that which is all too often described as an intoxicating mix of voluptuous womanliness and wide-eyed girlishness. Monroe played the ingénue

both on and off screen in a show of faux naiveté that made Temple's act look almost restrained. Like Temple, Marilyn once sang a song professing her devotion to her "Daddy". In *Let's Make Love* (1960), Marilyn performed a version of Cole Porter's *My Heart Belongs to Daddy*, opening with the spoken line, "My name is Lolita and I'm not supposed to play with boys". Here, we see Lolita's mythology get mixed with Marilyn's in what could feasibly be the precise moment where popular culture starts to get Lolita wrong. *Let's Make Love* was released two years before Kubrick's film adaptation of *Lolita* presented Sue Lyon as a blonde bombshell teenage Lolita, and here we have a thirty-three-year-old sex goddess calling herself a nymphet. Of course, Marilyn sold herself as a pure sex object. She was hyper-feminine and hyper-sexual, but never sexually aggressive. When Norma Jean assumed the role of Marilyn, the dumb blonde, she created a fantasy figure who was vivid yet vacant; a soft, manipulable, girlish, fluffy and moreover, *available* sex object. Marilyn's objectification was absolute; she was made to be looked at, dreamt about, and ultimately, consumed. She belonged to everyone, and everyone adored her. While Marilyn and Lolita are separated by a chasmic age difference, their respective public personas intersect at the point where patriarchal phantasy encourages a conflation of women and children. While Dolores Haze's "seduction" of Humbert is her way of acting grown up, Marilyn seduces her audience by acting as if she never grew up. Somewhere, in the process of these

separate performances of femininity, Lolita and Marilyn might appear more similar than dissimilar—mistaken as that perception is.

Somewhere along the way, popular culture decided that girls and women were indistinct, separated only by degrees of desirability.

The cultural prevalence of this conflation is illustrated in Erving Goffman's 1979 study, *Gender Advertisements*, in which the author looks at representations of gender in print advertising. Goffman assembled a large sample of images, identifying how compositional and thematic recurrences work to systematically mark women as subordinate to their male counterparts, but equal or similar to their children. Goffman notes that:

there is a tendency for women to be pictured as more akin to their daughters (and to themselves in younger years) than is the case with men.

Boys, as it were, have to push their way into manhood, and problematic effort is involved.

(38)

Womanhood then, is pictured more or less as a continuation of girlhood. While physical development is visible, gender advertisements sell the notion that girls and women are of similar ability and social standing, while men and boys are divided more noticeably in terms of status and strength. As Goffman put it, "Girls merely have to unfold" (38).

In 1974, a drugstore perfume called Love's Baby Soft launched

in the United States. It was cheap, pink, and marketed towards girls around the age of nymphancy, as Jessanne Collins explains: “this fragrance was an object of intense feminine fetishization for girls who had reached a certain age: the one at which we began to feel, rather definitively, not quite like girls, not



Fig. 14

yet like teenagers”(“Girl Powder”, n.pag). The company’s first advertising campaigns ran with the tagline, “Because innocence is sexier than you think.” An infamous print ad from 1975 featured a girl of roughly six styled with the make-up, big hair, and lascivious pout of a porn star. The girl clutched a teddy bear to her chest, presumably a signifier for baby softness, or perhaps, more pointedly, baby sexiness (Fig.14). In an extension of their ‘sexy baby’ brand identity, Love’s Baby Soft also released a TV ad with a tie-in print campaign, featuring a doe-eyed woman dressed in white, lapping luridly at a lollipop in what might be read as an homage to Kubrick’s *Lolita* poster. While the print ad ran with the same tagline as before, the television spot featured a male voiceover who professed, “There’s one person nobody can resist and that’s a baby”, before characterising Love’s scent as, “a cuddly, clean baby...that grew up very sexy.” Here, young girls and grown women are

conflated, as ideas of innocence are polluted by an overtly sexual message. As Collins comments, “Somebody, somewhere, seemed confused about the difference between babies, and girls, and women”, so much so that all three seemed to be presented as desirable objects. Indeed, it posits babies as positively irresistible, and to whom if not to men? As Jane Caputi argued:

The ad blatantly positions the young girl as a sex object and acknowledges that it is her ‘innocence’ that makes her such a suitable erotic target. Although this appears paradoxical, it makes perfect pornographic sense. The ‘moralistic’ ethic puts chastity next to godliness and makes sex ‘dirty’, defiling a supposed physical and spiritual ‘purity’. Sexual gratification of any kind becomes all bound up not only with taboo violation, but also with defilement. (106)

In the 1970s, another disturbing development in *Lolita*’s cultural misappropriation occurred. As Graham Vickers recorded, “The earliest child pornography movies were marketed under the name ‘Lolita’ and were made by a Copenhagen-based company called Color Climax” (161). In an extension of this trade, magazines, carrying titles such as “Lollitots, Lolita Color Specials, and Randy Lolitas” (162) were published in Europe for exportation to the United

States. All of the images created in this first wave of Lolita porn have been digitised and still circulate online today. The titles are catalogued in an alphanumerical series that Vickers explains: “the various *Lolita* videos and magazines are identified as LL followed by the series numbers 1 to 36. A picture called LL23-30 therefore refers to the thirtieth picture scanned from Lolita video number 23” (162-163). Meanwhile, in Japan, an entire manga sub-genre devotes itself to illustrations of little girls in sexual scenarios. They call it Lolicon. At the same time, Lolita has leant her name to a Japanese fashion subculture. On the face of it, Lolita Gothic—where teenage girls dress something like opulent Victorian dolls—has nothing to do with Nabokov’s all-American girl. Certainly, Loligoth is not about Dolores Haze specifically, but rather about the sexual appeal of young girls generally. Between Lolicon and Loligoth, there is an implicit, if not immediately evident affinity. Of course, the only possible assessment of Japanese culture that I can make is coloured by my Western standpoint and biases, and as such, it would perhaps be wiser to observe without comment. As Vickers notes:

It seems even the most innocent assumptions about shared societal values cannot be made when it comes to Japan. In the present context it may be plausibly argued that Japan actually sanctions, or at least broadly tolerates, a national male obsession with school girls. The

sexual politics of the Japanese Gothic Lolita
 phenomenon is therefore something of a
 minefield. (157)

What we can safely conclude however, is that Lolita's cultural scope is global, and that she stands as a universal signifier for childhood divested of innocence. The sheer persistence of this mythology speaks to its popular appeal.

Part V: Twenty-first Century Lolitas

In 2012, American singer Lizzy Grant released an album under the moniker Lana Del Rey. Del Rey's image was that of a 1950s ingenue, all Bardotesque big hair and pout, spliced with retro Americana and Hollywood movie soundscapes. The album, *Born To Die* featured a song called "Lolita", as well as a number of tracks that directly referenced Nabokov's novel. Del Rey herself has Nabokov's name tattooed on her right arm (alongside Walt Whitman's) and once described herself and her sound as, "Lolita got lost in the hood" (Swash, n.pag). Indeed, *Born to Die* was something of a collage of quasi-Lolitan themes: young, beautiful girls in precarious situations, sugar daddies, and wayward teens appear throughout. In "Off to the Races", a song which opens with the line, "My old man is a bad man", Del Rey quotes *Lolita's* famous opening line, singing:

Light of my life, fire of my loins
 Be a good baby, do what I want

Light of my life, fire of my loins

Gimme them gold coins

Gimme them coins.

This, apparently, is what Del Rey meant by “Lolita got lost in the hood”. A more subtle homage to Nabokov appears in “Carmen”, where Del Rey recalls the song sung by Humbert and Lo as she sits with her legs across his lap while he covertly exploits the tune’s mechanical rhythm. Del Rey echoes the rhyming scheme of that, “Carmen-barmen ditty” (*Lolita* 60), by rhyming, “darlin’”, “alarmin’” and “charmin’”. Meanwhile, a song titled, “Diet Mountain Dew” features the lyric, “Baby, put on heart-shaped sunglasses/’cause we’re gonna take a ride”. Heart-shaped sunglasses are key to Del Rey’s self-styled Lolita image; she has worn them in a number of promotional photographs. They are key also to decoding what version of Lolita it is that Del Rey means to emulate, for the sunglasses, she surely knows, were not Nabokov’s invention. They are rather a shorthand for Lolita as teenage bombshell; the sex kitten image of Lolita that has reigned since the 1960s. As such the heart-shaped shades are perhaps an apt marketing tool for a fledgling female pop star in a music industry fuelled by youth, sex appeal, and image.

Del Rey’s identification with Lolita seems to be at least partially rooted in biographical detail. The artist’s attraction to older men forms a common theme across her music, interviews and videos. In the song “Cola” for instance, she says, “I gots (*sic*) a taste for men who

are older/It's always been so its no surprise". Likewise, in "Put me in a Movie" Del Rey plays up the same little girl sexuality that formed Marilyn Monroe's appeal, cooing, "You can be my daddy". Naturally, as the word "daddy" doubles as a lover's endearment and a diminutive of father, its full connotations are not lost on this *Lolita*-tinged album. It speaks to a dominant/submissive dynamic, whereby the female subject surrenders herself to a male authority figure. Del Rey's professed preference for older lovers appears to correspond with her own desire to play little girl lost. As well as all this, the song's title, "Put me in a Movie", is subtly suggestive of Lolita's relationship with Quilty, her dreams of Hollywood stardom and Quilty's ulterior motives. It is also suggestive of the female subject's complicity in her own objectification, and of her erotic compulsion to be watched. Lana Del Rey's artistic interpretation of *Lolita* then, is of a girl who pursues and seduces older lovers, involving herself in relationships that are both mutually consensual and mutually exploitative. Perhaps it warrants stating that Del Rey has never claimed to represent Dolores Haze, but rather Lolita—the Humbertian construct that began as one fictional man's fantasy and evolved into the archetypal, pan-cultural male phantasy she is today. While Dolores Haze never self-identifies as Lolita, Del Rey has assumed this identity as a means to self promotion. Her appropriation (or misappropriation) of Lolita's character and mythology is thus indicative of the type of commercial exploitation that Nabokov's nymphet continues to endure in the

twenty-first century.

While Lana Del Rey's ingenue persona might justifiably be called contrived, there are, undoubtedly, far worse abuses of Lolita's name afoot. In 2014, the controversy-courting high-street fashion label American Apparel had a "Back to School" viral ad campaign banned by the UK Advertising Standards Authority on the basis that it, "had the potential to normalise a predatory sexual behaviour" and that it, "fuelled Lolita fantasies" ("American Apparel Slammed", n.pag). Indeed, the ad in question pictured a plaid school skirt for sale on the company's website under the name Lolita. In a direct imitation of voyeuristic "up-skirt" pornography, the ad pictured a girl from behind, leaning into a car window, her underwear in full view. In their concerted effort to scandalise, American Apparel offered a grim but succinct portrait of what Lolita means in modern popular culture. Lolita stands for sex, yes, but as contemptible as the campaign was, it also represented the leering, rapacious misogyny that has posited her as such. For unlike Kubrick's *Lolita* poster, in which a teenage sex object looks enticingly down the lens—returning the gaze of whoever admires her—the "Back to School" campaign posits the male gaze without any possibility for reciprocation. This is more like the Humbertian gaze that steals a thrill from unsuspecting children at play. This is a violating gaze, an uninvited gaze, and one that is generally taken for granted in an increasingly pornified cultural landscape.

Even more recently, high-fashion shoe designer Christian Louboutin's Fall 2015 collection included a patent leather Mary-Jane shoe called "Dolly Birdy" (Fig.15). Available in baby blue and baby pink, they are essentially little girls' shoes for wealthy grown-ups, and would perhaps in any other context pass as good-humoured kitsch. This is a Christian Louboutin shoe however, complete with his signature red-lacquered sole. Louboutin's designs overtly reference fetish wear and his aesthetic speaks to the erotic potential of footwear. A Louboutin shoe is a

fantasy object; its practicality completely subservient to its desirability. As Louboutin himself has stated repeatedly, a shoe is



Fig. 15

not necessarily made with walking in mind—some shoes are made “for the bed” (Margot, n.pag.).⁸⁷ Within the context of a Louboutin collection, a sweet-looking buckled shoe becomes someone's kink. Indeed, in the 2015 Channel 4 documentary, “Louboutin: The World's Most Luxurious Shoes”, American Vogue's Hamish Bowles tells the designer that this shoe is, “the most sick thing you've done in a long time.” Incidentally, the “Dolly Birdy” is reminiscent of the shoe in Ellen

⁸⁷ In 2007, Louboutin collaborated with filmmaker David Lynch to present “Fetish”, an exhibit of what Louboutin described as the “static pleasure” of shoes. Lynch photographed nude models from Paris's Crazy Horse cabaret wearing Louboutin's shoe sculptures, including his now-iconic fetish ballet pumps, propped up vertically by an eight-inch stiletto spike. The point was to make shoes entirely without a practical use—shoes impossible to walk in, shoes to be looked at and lusted over.

Lupton's *Lolita* cover illustration (Fig. 8), where the polished leather surface reflects the shadowy image of an encroaching man. Since *Lolita* is synonymous with the nascent sex appeal of little girls, I think it safe to assume that Louboutin's "Dolly Birdy" is at least in part a nod to Dolly Haze. Louboutin's design ethos is one where the male erotic gaze is not merely prefigured, but actually given precedence over the wearer's comfort and mobility. The Dolly Birdy, with its low, wide heel, appears uncharacteristically practical, but they prefigure a far darker predilection than any of Louboutin's BDSM-inspired *objets*. While his typical stiletto exaggerates the arch of the instep to create an elongated leg and pelvic tilt, this shoe rather de-emphasises those womanly markers, suggesting that the male gaze prefigured in their design is one who prefers girls to women.

That young girls are the object of lascivious looking is not Nabokov's doing, nor *Lolita's*, nor even Humbert's. Equally, that *Lolita's* name and monikers are used in such contexts has little to do with the literary source. The novel is however, about sexual obsession. It is *about* (in part, at least) pedophilia, and it is *about* a girl who incites the desire of not one, but two pedophiles and—in at least one of those cases—desires her abuser in return. In marking the misconceptions about and misrepresentations of *Lolita*, I do not mean to attempt a de-sexing of the novel, or even a de-sexing of *Lolita* as the text's victim. While the likes of Lionel Trilling, Thomas Molnar, and even Brian Boyd have cited *Lolita's* sexual escapades

with young Charlie Holmes as justification for Humbert's subsequent abuses of the girl, I do not wish to posit a rebuttal of their arguments based on the negation of Dolores Haze's sexuality. To do so, would be to subscribe to the same Madonna/whore dichotomy that this thesis claims to deconstruct. The criterion for victimhood should be neither asexuality nor abstinence. That rhetoric of "good victims" is bogus. It equates deflowering with defilement, and thus suggests that only those who are sexually initiated by their rapist are truly violated because it is them alone who are truly *violable*. In this rhetorical context, a victim's sexual history is read as precursory to rape—it is evidence for the defence. When the victim in question is a child, the issue is further confounded by a cultural refusal to conceptualise childhood sexuality. As Kincaid argued, our society has made icons of purity out of its children, it denies that they have a sexuality to speak of, and literature observes this sanctioned silence.⁸⁸ Of course, *Lolita* is subversive in this respect. And yet, the very idea that the nymphet is a "little deadly demon among the wholesome children" (17) is morally loaded. In her book *Daddy's girl; young girls and popular culture*, Valerie Walkerdine looked for alternative ways to think and talk about childhood sexuality and found herself at

⁸⁸ The cultural tradition of childhood asexuality is also, I believe, a heteronormative one, for it works to repress those whose sexuality is intrinsic to their identity (e.g., LGBT groups) while heterosexuality enjoys the privilege of being *unmarked*. The heterosexual subject has, in a sense, nothing to declare—his or her sexual identity need not *reveal* itself, there is no call to "come out", only a passage from what we might call sexual latency to sexual activity. The invisibility of childhood heterosexuality is thus more easily maintained.

something of a loss:

Culturally we are left with a stark choice: sexuality in little girls is natural, universal and inevitable; or, a kind of Laura Mulvey type male gaze is at work in which the little girl is produced as object of an adult male gaze. She has no phantasies of her own and, in the Lacanian sense, we could say that ‘the little girl does not exist except as a symptom and myth of the masculine imaginary. (173)

Echoes of Humbert’s solipsistic ownership of Lolita eke through in the second option Walkerdine outlines here. The girl with “no phantasies of her own” recalls the one with, “no will, no consciousness--indeed, no life of her own” (*Lolita* 62) that Humbert greedily possesses. It is this relationship, between the male imagination and its female object—artist and muse—that I wish to explore in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Mortal Mothers, Eternal Fathers; Nabokov's creative hierarchy

Part I: The Problem of The Muse

The muse's mythology speaks of her ethereality—she is the paragon of the feminine enigma—and yet, she cannot speak to dispel the mystery. The man-made myth upholds itself by maintaining the muse's remoteness, her compelling *haziness*, after which one Dolores was named. The problem of the muse is that she is bound to be always only an accessory to genius, and that her mythology is grounded in an unwavering acceptance that women inspire art while men create it⁸⁹. What's more, the muse's problem is that her image is not her own. She exists only in the artist's portrayal and is bound to remain essentially unknowable.

The relationship between artist and muse is a gendered one and one in which the imbalance of power between the sexes is reified through art. As Susanne Kappeler argued in *The Pornography of Representation*, the aestheticised woman, commonly called the

⁸⁹ Nabokov's repeated invocations of Mnemosyne, mother of the muses and memory personified, illustrates this very point. Mnemosyne is characterised by Nabokov as the "sweetest and most mischievous of muses" (*Lolita* 260) and "a very careless girl" (*Speak, Memory* xii). She is at once alluring and elusive. She is given to deceit and small betrayals, and while this Mother Memory is a fruitful source of inspiration, it remains the part of the author *to give form to*, that which she provides. Through art, all of that which is fleeting and bound to be lost with the passage of time is harnessed, arrested. That is to say that the *feminisation* of artistic inspiration is predicated on notions of male artistic mastery and on oppositional notions of ephemerality and eternity.

muse, is an objectified woman. As object, she is perceived as “soulless until animated” (56); the artist *gives her life* in the act of portraying her. The depicted woman is hence “robbed of her own subjectivity” while the depicting artist wholly “assumes the subject position” (57). For Kappeler, the hierarchical dynamics of the relationship between male artist-subject and female muse-object is rooted in the conventions and organisation of signification. She says:

What distinguishes man from woman is his access to representation, to cultural symbolisation, *the power of naming*, in which he uses women, along with all the other silent animals, as symbols, as objects for representation. (68, emphasis added)

The male artist’s *power to name* is perhaps nowhere more vividly exemplified than in the opening paragraph of Humbert’s narrative in *Lolita*, where, as previously explicated in the first chapter of this thesis, the novel’s fictive male writer informs the reader that “in my arms” the girl officially named Dolores, “was always Lolita” (9). The diminutive that Humbert chooses encapsulates his will to aestheticise and objectify the girl, the name Lolita being more lyrical than its sorrowful origin. What’s more, this renaming—leant almost ritualistic resonance by the power of Nabokov’s language (“Lo-lee-ta”)—reveals something of Humbert’s perverse paternal designs on the girl. In order to fulfil his fantasy of paternal incest with his muse,

Humbert renames her so as to lay claim to her as his own creation. In doing so, Humbert creates a narrative vacuum in which the muse is shown to have no existence independent of or prior to her relationship with the narrator. Her past is obfuscated, her past name and past self rendered void. The girl that Humbert possesses is later described as “not she, but my own creation” (62), a statement that succinctly works to substantiate Kappeler’s core argument—that the act of artistic portrayal transforms the female subject into a cultural object, owned primarily by the artist, secondarily by his patrons, and thirdly by the public.

Lolita tells the tale of the fictional Dolores Haze’s transformation into the eponymous and fabled nymphet. Robert Alter suggested that *Lolita* is:

in many respects a highly ironic version of the myth of the Muse or Eternal Beloved, shrewdly raising all sorts of psychological and epistemological questions about what is involved in a man’s addiction to such a myth. (116).

However, while Alter proffers that *Lolita*’s muse motif is parodic, Nabokov’s reiteration of the theme elsewhere would seem to neutralise any irony and naturalise the artist/muse dynamic through repetition. For instance, while a marked show of artificiality is integral

to *Lolita*'s trope of renaming—particularly where pseudonyms and anagrams are used—the renaming of the lover-muse is treated with contrasting sobriety. This theme is reiterated in Nabokov's final, unfinished and posthumously published work, *The Original of Laura*, when of the titular muse, the male narrator says:

Everything about her is bound to remain blurry,
 even her name which seems to have been
 made expressly to have another one modelled
 upon it by a fantastically lucky artist. Of art of
 love, of the difference between dreaming and
 waking she knew nothing. (87)

The final sentence here might have been an addendum to the passage from *Lolita* cited at the close of the preceding chapter, as Nabokov posits yet another muse without any will, consciousness or life of her own—not a knowing subject, but an object of the artist's own creation. The muse in question here is named Flora, becoming Laura in the novel within the novel. Her name—the signifier of her identity—is to the “lucky artist” merely *a suggestion of something else*, a phonic gift from the muses. The modification the artist performs on Flora's name amounts to a *reduction*—the removal of the *initial*—that primary signifier. In this sense, she becomes a diminished version of herself: herself less one capital element.

While admittedly, this analogy might seem to overstate that

capital F's significance, I believe it is justified by consideration of how the artist's name and the name of his muse are differentially weighted. The writer's name is synonymous with his *oeuvre* insofar as one might talk about having read Dickens. By extension, the writer's name might take on a suffix and become an adjective denoting his singular style, i.e., Dickensian, Kafkaesque, and, naturally, Nabokovian. The writer's name then is all-significant, for it is inseparable from his work and his artistic persona. The use of pen names actually underlines the importance of a name to the author, his publishers and his readers alike. Nabokov's adoption of the *nom de plume* V. Sirin during his Berlin period is a case in point, but of course, alternate and assumed identities were a key fixture of the Nabokovian fictional universe too, where authorial cameos were facilitated by the anagrammatic masks of Vivian Darkbloom and Blavdak Vinomori. Importantly, pen names are usually self-given and always self-serving. They are a tool with which the author at once conceals an identity and creates a persona. What's more, the pen name is not merely a veil but a shield; it protects and deflects. Indeed, Nabokov, understanding that one's "good name" is an invaluable but delicate property, had originally planned to release *Lolita* under a pseudonym. Instead he weathered the scandal and acquired a significant fortune while *Lolita*'s name garnered infamy⁹⁰.

⁹⁰ Nabokov upheld that "*Lolita* is famous, not I. I am an obscure, doubly obscure, novelist with an unpronounceable name" (*Strong* 107)

Meanwhile, in the visual arts, where merit and monetary value are determined by the artist's name, paintings are treated as effectively eponymous (e.g., "it's a Picasso"), and artists *sign* their works, tangibly marking their identity and creative ownership on the artwork⁹¹.

In contrast, the naming or renaming of the muse is neither self-determined nor self-serving. In fact, in renaming the muse, the author invalidates the very notion of her having a self that is not *contained in* or *portrayed by* the text into which he writes her. In the case of Flora, the woman's given name is viewed as the raw material precursory to art. Her *self* then, is but preliminary and surplus to the text into which the lover-creator writes her. Even her skeletal structure becomes a metaphor for the author's narrative scaffold, her figure the form of his poetry: "Her exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel—became in fact the secret structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems" (*Original* 17). Her substance is entirely subsumed by his narrative, her life a plot point tangential to the male narrator's story. What's more, gleaning what we can about her from her author's incomplete index cards, Flora/Laura's character approximates to a typical Nabokovian self-referential device. She appears in one (unfinished) text but signals towards another—none other, of course, than her author's most famous novel—the one in

⁹¹ Indeed, Picasso's trademark autograph is as recognisable as any of his works, and comprising seven pen strokes—including an authoritative underline—was just as considered as any of his famous one-line drawings.

which his muse motif was perfected. Flora/Laura is created then, not to reveal anything about herself—for even fictional characters can be said to have some core or essence—but rather to remind the reader of *who* they are reading. The lines of derivation are plainly exposed in a passage where our narrator tells us that at the age of twelve, his Flora was preyed upon by her mother's boyfriend—one baldly monikered Hubert Hubert. He too had a daughter, he tells Flora, “same age—twelve—, same eyelashes [...] same hair” (61) but she died tragically, as Nabokovian nymphets are prone to do. The girl's mother subsequently died of a broken heart. Flora is hence another example of the Nabokovian duplicate girl—the replica of love lost. However, Flora's case is exceptional insofar as she is doubly duplicate, removed from her true original by three degrees, for she is at once a replica of Humbert Humbert's twelve-year-old lover—who was herself a replica of Annabel Lee⁹²—and a replica of Hubert Hubert's daughter—bearing in mind that Hubert also functions as an intertextual signpost, having no real substance or *raison d'être* apart from pointing to his Humbertian likeness. In each instance, the Laura of the novel within the novel stands for something other than herself, something external even to the text in which she appears. FLaura⁹³, despite or perhaps because of her being unfinished, exemplifies the

⁹² Of course, even Annabel is not so much a character as a literary reference.

⁹³ The spelling “FLaura” (113) appears only once in Nabokov's text, however for convenience I will use it hereafter to denote Flora/Laura, the original and her fictive semblance.

formal function of the muse-object in Nabokov's novels. FLaura is above all else *reflective* insofar as the artist creates her in order to show some facet of himself. In terms of narratorial gender conventions then, FLaura's reflectivity links her to the lunar mythologies of the feminine explicated in Chapter Three of this thesis. Her masculine creator is the sun: light-giving, life-giving, deific insofar as he is the starting point and centre point of his novelistic universe. He frames his female protagonist as an object emanating no original light of her own: her light is a "pale fire"⁹⁴ she snatches from the sun" (Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*. 4.3.431) a muted reflection of her creator's literary luminescence. She is quintessentially derivative and intrinsically secondary, an echo of Eve, created by a male god after Adam, for Adam, and from Adam. In his commentary on *Ada*, Robert Alter discusses the importance of the reflective muse both to Nabokov and the patriarchal tradition generally. He says:

Art [...] is a flow of libidinous energy towards

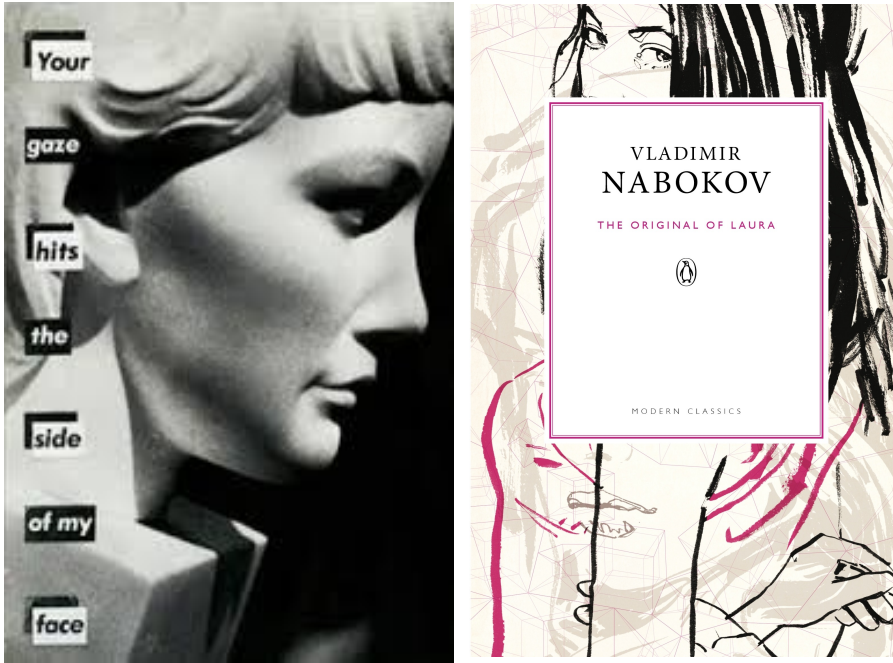
⁹⁴ The line from which John Shade's poem and Nabokov's novel take their title. In full it reads:

"The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction/
 Robs the vast sea: the moon's an arrant thief/
 And her pale fire she snatches from the sun"
 (4.3.429-431). The sun and moon are expressly gendered in Shakespeare's metaphor for artistic inspiration and its lowly associate, imitation. Kinbote doesn't recognise the reference in his commentary, but by Nabokovian non-coincidence, quotes his own retranslation of a Zemblan mistranslation of *Timon of Athens* in his notations to lines 39-40 of Shade's poem. In Kinbote's version, "pale fire" becomes "silvery light" (68) in a demonstration of the annotator's distortions of both John Shade's meaning, and William Shakespeare's words.

the world [...] And for the male-dominated Western tradition, at least as far back as Dante, the emblem, talisman or goal of this pleasure is the figure of a beloved woman; it is through her that the artist comes to realize the fullness of life. "He saw reflected in her," Van says of himself and Ada just before the end, "everything that his fastidious and fierce spirit sought in life." (115-116)

The idealised muse is hence a compendium of projected ideas that originate with the male subject. The muse is a vessel and a symbol. Her subjectivity is displaced by his, as he uses her body as a canvas on which to screen his inner desires. Further to this, FLaura is a metafictional construct harkening the artificiality of the text in which she appears; she is hence a marker of her author's hand. In other words, when Nabokov links Flora to Lolita, he announces his own authorial omnipotence. That his power is revealed *through her* implies that he bears power *over her*. Of course, the author reigns over all of his creations, irrespective of their constructed genders; they are, to repeat the author's own designation, mere "galley slaves" (*Strong* 95) doing the bidding of their literary overlord. That is not to say however, that all of Nabokov's slaves are created equal. There exists a gender hierarchy wherein female characters are routinely subjected to the gaze of male protagonists. They are visually probed,

assessed and judged on their physical merits and demerits. The presumed-male reader is invited to enjoy these assessments vicariously, from his elevated position of power. Hence, the female reader, to quote Linda Kauffman's reading of *Lolita*, "is required to identify against herself" (135), despite understanding that her acceptance of or participation in the objectification of the muse cannot and will not afford her the privileged subjectivity reserved for her male counterpart. In other words, in a culture organised around and for the male subject, woman's object status is perpetually reinforced so that women are conditioned to view themselves and each other through the filter of the male gaze. However, while man psychically reaffirms his supreme subjectivity through the objectification of women, the woman who assumes the objectifying gaze is only reminded of her own object status as she compares herself to other women. Both woman's individual and collective power is diminished by a culture of competition where even non-participation, i.e., not presenting oneself for the male gaze, does not guarantee protection from an unforgiving and punitive scrutiny. Contemporary visual pop-culture, with its emphasis on body-idolatry and body-shaming, coupled with its targeting of a young female demographic, vivifies the damaging and highly limiting effects of mutual and self-objectification among women. The woman who plays watching, judging subject, does not immunise herself against being objectified, but implicitly assents to the process and gendered order



Figs. 16 and 17

of objectification.

Patriarchal culture does not prefigure a female gaze character returns the gaze with the same agency—the same acting, desiring, *consuming* type of looking—that characterises the male look of lust in his fiction, the reason being that looking, nay, *watching* is a pastime that affords especial pleasure when it goes unnoticed. The gendered dichotomies of artist/muse and subject/object are parallel to that of active/passive. It follows that the active watching subject prefers a passive object, as evidenced by the downward head-tilts and side-on glances that typify portrayals of female desire objects from classical art to contemporary pornography, as satirised by Barbara Kruger’s 1982 artwork “Your Gaze Hits the Side of my Face” (Fig.16).

When the seductress does look back, her gaze is

Fig.17

always partial or askew; she looks up from under her lashes, over the rim of her heart-shaped sunglasses. Even the cover of the Penguin paperback edition of *The Original of Laura* repeats this visual trope; a young woman looks backwards over her shoulder, her arms weirdly contorted as if bound behind her back, the bottom of her face concealed by the book's title box (Fig. 17). The female gaze does not confront the male gaze straight on; it meets his eye with an inviting timidity that suggests a sexual availability that is comfortingly unthreatening—the virgin who might be made a whore, perhaps.

Conversely, the cultural monopoly of the male gaze creates the illusion that it is all-powerful and inevitable. The male subject is constantly reassured of his dominion over women by their repeated representation as objects for his visual consumption. Recall Franz of *King, Queen, Knave*, who perambulates the streets of Berlin like a window-shopper, agog at the sight of every female specimen he encounters, “and taking a good preliminary look at genuine harlots” (72). Franz's emboldened sense of entitlement is matched only by a stupendous disregard for decorum; he is a consumer in the proper sense, driven by animal appetite and uninhibited by etiquette. By contrast, Humbert Humbert portrays his hobby of erotic looking as something far more concerted; the nympholept's gaze is focused like a hypnotist's. In the following passage from *Lolita*, Humbert exhibits a disproportionate sense of his own scopophilic power when he ponders the ontological implications of the secret pleasure he derives

from watching nymphets at play. He says:

A propos: I have often wondered what became of those nymphets later? In this wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect, could it be that the hidden throb I had stolen from them did not affect *their* future? I had possessed her—and she never knew it. [...] Had I not somehow tampered with her fate by involving her image in my voluptas? (21)

The onanistic gratification afforded Humbert by looking becomes a secret violation of his object, a violation that he suggests might even have palpable effects in the future for the untouched, presumably unharmed object. Humbert posits himself as the typical scopophile as defined in Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema": he is the watching subject who venerates his object, elevating her to the status of mythic creature—nymphet and muse. Mulvey posits a second category of male watcher—the voyeur—for whom watching gratifies a sadistic desire to debase his object. Humbert the aesthete and Quilty the pornographer can, in simplistic terms, be said to represent these respective categories quite faithfully. However, the act of erotic looking—an act that Humbert himself works to conflate with aesthetic sublimity—is not wholly innocuous in his pondered scenario, rather it is the causal force behind an active, transforming and physically transcendent psycho-sexual phenomenon, where men

rewrite the fates of women just by leering at them. What's more, Humbert himself uses the analogy of the cinematic voyeur following *Lolita's* couch scene. He muses:

The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark. (62)

Humbert's chosen metaphor is an interesting one because he at once asserts his innocence and affirms his onanistic intentions; artistic pretensions give way to bestial compulsions, and yet he insists, there was no harm done. The cinematic analogy he employs depicts a unidirectional relationship between male watching subject and female desire object that situates the bearer of the gaze in an imagined position of power. By looking alone, he can possess her—he can *take* his sexual gratification from her. Not even her remoteness, her obliviousness, her disinterest, or even her rapt refusal can prevent him from taking his own pleasure from looking at her. In yet another episode, Humbert says:

I felt that my perception of her, if properly concentrated upon, might be sufficient to have me attain a beggar's bliss immediately; but like some predator that prefers a moving prey to a

motionless one, I planned to have this pitiful
attainment coincide with one of the various
girlish movements she made now and then as
she read (42)

That Humbert is a sexual specialist—selective in his choice of object and moment of orgasm—does not make his desire more refined or less repugnant than the next paedophile's. Equally, his literary valorisation of his chosen object does not vitiate his abuse and subjugation of her. As Kappeler argued, aestheticisation of the muse-object works by the same mechanisms as sexual objectification, and the former does not preclude the latter. Therefore, Humbert's insistence that, "Sex is but the ancilla of art" (259) rings hollow, for while his desire object and aesthetic object are one and the same, in chronological terms his sexual abuse of the girl preceded his aestheticisation of her, and if temporal precedence implies primacy (as it did in the Garden) then Humbert's literary representation of the girl does not supersede his sexual use of her. By pronouncing this supposed truism, Humbert invokes the culture/nature oppositional hierarchy, placing aesthetic sensibility above biological sensation. Moreover, his language is pointedly gendered, an ancilla being an antiquated term for a handmaid, so that the subjugation of sex to art is reinforced with notion's of woman's domestic servitude, and the opposition of familial (feminine) and worldly (masculine) spaces.

Also, while Humbert epitomises the recurring figure of the

Nabokovian surrogate, the author of the text within the text who makes an aesthetic object out of his desire object, *Lolita* is unique insofar as it offers us a text within the text within the text—Quilty’s play written for and about *Lolita*—*The Enchanted Hunters*. Quilty, as Humbert’s dark mirror, perhaps personifies the ambivalent distinction between art and pornography, or aesthetic and erotic looking, for while Humbert strives to present himself as an uncompromising aesthete, Quilty, his nympholept rival and lookalike, contentedly straddles the roles of both playwright and pornographer, and importantly, opts for the same muse in both instances. It is important to note however, that Humbert merely *omits* to make pornography of *Lolita*, not by any moral or aesthetic opposition to the idea, but by his sheer failure to think of it. He laments, “Idiot, triple idiot! I could have filmed her!” (231) What’s more, Humbert does not *abhor* Quilty but envies him, for far from being Humbert’s shadow, Quilty is actually always a step ahead of Humbert. Indeed, as Virginia Blum points out, Quilty was infatuated with *Lolita* from the age of ten, and for much of the novel, the two are in cahoots, foiling Humbert at every turn (Blum 210). If Quilty’s very existence mars Humbert’s claims to artistic purity then it arguably makes Nabokov’s own assertions about the incongruity of art and pornography in his afterword to *Lolita*⁹⁵ seem

⁹⁵ Defending himself from accusations of obscenity, Nabokov argued that in pornography, “every aesthetic enjoyment has to be entirely replaced by simple sexual stimulation” (*Lolita* 313). Nabokov’s argument has been echoed (and cited: see Maes & Levinson, 21) in contemporary

similarly spurious. Quilty shows that the pornographer can also be an artist, and vice versa. Likewise, Quilty's uses of Lo, although caricaturist in their villainy, would seem to support Kappeler's understanding of the sexual politics of representation, whereby all types of objectification diminish and degrade the person who is objectified. Nabokov's artist-protagonists share with their author the "power of naming" of which Kappeler speaks. Hence, the muse is effectively doubly objectified; a "galley slave" to her author and a sex slave (literally, in the case of *Lolita* at least) to his fictive proxy. The gendered hierarchy of male artists and female muses is both reflected and perpetuated in Nabokov's texts.

Part II: Nabokov's Pygmalion Motif

In a letter to his friend and advocate, Graham Greene, dated 31 December 1956, Nabokov lamented, "My poor Lolita is having a rough time. The pity is that if I had made her a boy, or a cow, or a bicycle, Philistines might never have flinched" (*Selected Letters* 197).

The boy, the cow, and the bicycle are direct allusions to Mann's

Death in Venice, Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, and O'Brien's *The Third*

philosophical discourse surrounding art and pornography. Jerrold Levinson for one, argues that art and pornography are mutually exclusive because "One induces you, in the name of arousal and release, to ignore the representation so as to get to the represented, the other induces you, in the name of aesthetic delight, to dwell upon the representation" ("Erotic Art and Pornographic Pictures" 234). However, this argument for exclusivity is fundamentally grounded in a mind/body dualism: art is for contemplation and appreciation while pornography is for *consumption* (Levinson 229). It therefore rests on the faulty supposition that that which works on the mind cannot work on the body, and vice versa.

Policeman, respectively. Literary quip aside, Nabokov's statement seems to suggest that Lolita—the *girl* in the text—is somewhat *inessential* to the novel that bears her name; that some bovine or velocipede substitute might take her place and the story would remain essentially the same, with Humbert only mildly altered into a homosexual or objectophile. Nabokov's tone is droll, perhaps slightly superior, but the implication is that Humbert's desire object is interchangeable and not intrinsic to the story, thus underlining Lolita's status as an object subjugate to the novel's narrator-subject. According to Nabokov's irreverent musings, she might as well have been inanimate.

The myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor who becomes infatuated with one of his statues, provides the perfect narrative analogy to both *Lolita's* parody of the myth of the muse and Humbert Humbert's "parody of incest" (287). As Anke Bernau explained, Pygmalion is "in a sense, both his creation's progenitor and suitor; if sex and art are both claimed as masculine prerogatives, Pygmalion is both father and lover" (Bernau 77). Of course, Humbert's 'fatherhood' of Lolita is part fabrication, part fantasy; it serves both as a legal alibi to inquiring strangers and a titillating tableau to Humbert's sexual imagination. However, Lolita in "solopisized" (60) form is also very much a product of Humbert's ideation, again, "not she, but (his) own creation" (62).

What's more, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion was a man "disgusted with the faults which in such full measure nature had

given the female mind” (X. 244): only his own sculpture meets his exacting standards, possessing “a beauty more perfect than that of any woman ever born. And with his own work he falls in love” (X. 248-249). Like Humbert, Pygmalion views woman’s *nature*—insofar as she is *of nature*—as intrinsically flawed. Perfection is *man-made* for both men, and accomplished through his mastery of art. In art, Nature’s raw materials are improved upon, its beauty augmented, and its grandeur surpassed. When Aphrodite grants Pygmalion’s wish to have his “ivory maid” (X. 275) as a lover, the statue is ultimately brought to life by the artist’s kiss, as if the artist literally breathes life into his work. There are obvious parallels here with the necrophiliac theme in the European folk and fairy tale tradition discussed in chapter two. By extension, Pygmalion’s desire for the inanimate Galatea can also be likened to Humbert’s pining for the idealised dead Annabel and his mission to break “her spell by reincarnating her in another”. In Ovid, the desire object/*objet d’art* awakes at her father/lover’s kiss and beholds “the sky and her lover at the same time” (X. 291-294). Pygmalion *initiates* his lover, awakening her first to the light and then to her sexuality, or perhaps more precisely, to his sexual desire for her. The Pygmalion myth then tells of a narcissist’s desire. It tells of a man who can see no beauty in women apart from an object crafted by his own hands, reflecting hence his own intellect and skill, and above all, his ability to *create*. And this is the essential point, for although Pygmalion’s designs on

the statue are undoubtedly sexual⁹⁶, his creation of her is *asexual*, a point that Ovid underlines by stating that Pygmalion had chosen to live a celibate existence prior to the statue's creation. Pygmalion then had no desire to *procreate biologically*, as he scorned women. Rather, he makes a lover of his *artistic progeny*.

In Nabokov, *Lolita's* parodic incest is succeeded by a literal one in *Look at the Harlequins*, a novel where the author's metafictional intertextuality reaches its zenith as fictional autobiographer, Vadim Vadimovich N.'s life and works parallel those of one Vladimir Vladimirovich N. There is a strong theme of pedophilia throughout the novel, culminating in the protagonist's eventual sexual relationship with his biological daughter. Here, Nabokov's Pygmalion motif merges with yet another Lolitan self-reference, as V.V. tells how his daughter Bel had come to resemble in her adolescence, "my partner in a recurrent dream [...] same cheekbones, same chin, same knobby wrists, same tender flower [...] I do not want, and never wanted, to succeed, in this dismal business of Isabel Lee" (*LATH* 134). Vadim and Bel spend two

⁹⁶ Importantly, the statue remains an object even after her transformation into a real woman. Her coming to life, for instance, is illustrated by Pygmalion grabbing at her breast and feeling it soften from ivory to flesh in his hand. He does not soften his grip on the thing made flesh in his hands. His sense of ownership does not falter, his groping advances do not yield, and nine months later Galatea gives birth to Pygmalion's child, Paphos (*Met.* X. 283-297). The Pygmalion myth's portrayal of objectophilia idealises an absolute form of female subservience and passivity, for Pygmalion is enamoured by a mute, inanimate, and non-refusing beauty. His lust is not only a narcissist's lust, but a necrophile's desire for total non-resistance.

summers “roaming all over the Western states” (135) in homage to Humbert and Lo. Although, V.V. insists that their relations “remained essentially innocent” (137), such claims are delegitimised by his own admissions. In one instance, he tells how, “I had to thrust my hands under her skirt and rub her thin body, till it glowed, so as to ward off ‘pneumonia’”⁹⁷ (136). In another, he tells how his fiancée Louise is shocked to see Bel walking around the house naked in her father’s presence. In an echo of the wicked (step-)mother trope that characterised Charlotte Haze’s relationship with her daughter, V.V. remarks, “I felt, perhaps wrongly, that Louise was enjoying the hideous banality of a stepmother-versus-step-daughter situation” (150). This diversion technique, by which V.V. attempts to blame the older woman for the “banal” crime of jealousy, is entirely unconvincing, but in Nabokov every text is a working component of the whole oeuvre, and this pale echo of Charlotte’s fairy tale rivalry with her daughter is just one example of that. Nabokov’s love of repetition is epitomised in Vadim’s final meeting with the now

⁹⁷ This is echoed in the Hubert episode in *The Original of Laura*, in which the man plunges his hand beneath a sick Flora’s bedclothes, saying, “I fear you are chilly, my love” (73). In her critique of *TOOL*, Ellen Pifer argues that the sex-obsessed Flora has wrongly interpreted Hubert’s paternal affection for less wholesome advances. Flora is, according to Pifer less like Lolita than Humbert, who projects his own fantasies upon the nymphet (Leving 101). Pifer’s argument is troubling as it seems to follow the same logic as the Freudian “rape phantasy”, whereby patients who reported being abused by their fathers were said to be relaying false memories borne of repressed incestuous desires. Pifer also fails to acknowledge the continuity between the episode in *TOOL* and the one that appears in *LATH*, which I believe bears significance given the texts’ mutual preoccupation with self-referencing and thematic repetition.

estranged Bel, in which he angers and upsets his daughter by mistakingly calling her Dolly. In *Look at the Harlequins*, Dolly is a nymphet who the narrator molests in his lap at the age of eleven. She is, of course, yet another Lolitan phantasm, just like V.V. himself feels like he is living a life parallel to some other writer, “who was and would always be incomparably greater, healthier, and crueller than your obedient servant” (76). However, while V.V.’s narrative is pointedly derivative, it is nonetheless *his* to tell. By contrast, Dolly and Bel are almost mute, they exist as muses to the fictive author, and as emblems of the *real* author’s literary calling card: Nabokov writes nymphets⁹⁸, and these two particular examples are not even the only two nymphets in the novel in which they appear. They are but metafictional facets of a literary corpus that treats the fetishisation of sexualised children as incidental to self-celebration.

Indeed, something of an autoerotic undercurrent runs through Nabokov’s egocentric style, whereby the muse-object functions to simultaneously titillate the reader and adulate her author. *Look at the Harlequins* is interesting because Nabokov deliberately and delightedly draws comparisons between himself and his paedophile fictive proxy; there is even a playful suggestion that *Lolita*—mirrored here by Vadim’s *Kingdom by the Sea*—had its origins in a real-life episode, as Vadim’s Humbertian tryst with Dolly

⁹⁸ In his review of *The Original of Laura*, Martin Amis referred to what he called “the little-girl theme” as “hardly more than a logo—part of the Nabokovian furniture” (Leving 176).

on his lap makes its way into his novel. Nabokov's literary use of nymphets was conspicuous and unrelenting, and I have no desire to call his bluff or double-bluff, but rather to mark it as a keystone of his aesthetic philosophy. The incest theme concurrent in *Lolita*, *Ada*, and *Look at the Harlequins* is an analogy—be it unconscious or self-satirising—for the author's unabashedly apparent self-love. Nabokov makes mirrors for himself everywhere.

Importantly, the Pygmalion motif also occurs in Nabokov's non-fiction. In *Speak, Memory*, he reminisces on his young love, Tamara, stating, "I took my adorable girl to all those secret spots in the woods, where I had daydreamed so ardently of meeting her, *of creating her*" (175, emphasis added). This is a peculiar sentiment. It suggests some premonitory power on the part of the author—as if his desire for the girl preceded his knowing her; Nabokov is ever the chess-master, one step ahead of fate. This theme is echoed in Nabokov's novels. In *Mary*, a dreaming Ganin conceives of "the image of that girl he was to meet in real life a month later" (*Mary* 44), while in *Look at the Harlequins*, Vadim Vadimovich's dream girl appears to be made manifest in the figure of his own adolescent daughter (134). Even more strikingly however, the autobiographical encounter detailed by Nabokov suggests that having met his lover, he must somehow *bring her to life*, literally, *create her* in order to make her his own. This rhetoric, used in relation to a real person once known intimately by the author, echoes Humbert's egoistic

solipsism and suggests a Pygmalion will to claim intellectual paternity of his lover. Typical of muse narratives, it denies the preexistence of the muse: they meet and she is created, again *initiated*, as if she had been hitherto dormant like a Sleeping Beauty lying in wait for her prince. While Tamara's impression on the young Nabokov was strong enough to warrant inclusion in his autobiography, his use of language would suggest that his own impression on Tamara's life was nothing less than seismic; he *conceived* of her and now, in his telling of her, he *immortalises* her. Nabokov was perhaps not unaware of his own inflated sense of importance, saying:

People of the writing variety—homo scribo or scribblingus—are extremely conceited and vain, and resemble in that way certain women who immediately seek themselves out in a summertime group photograph, can't get enough of themselves, and always return, through the entire album, to that photo, though they pretend to be looking at their neighbours and not themselves. (Schiff 72)

How unfortunate that this rare attempt at self-deprecation doubly functions as a (less rare) critique of woman's inherent failings.

Likewise, in her review of Nabokov's *Letters to Véra*, Judith Thurman has remarked that the author's love for his wife was at

times “hard to distinguish from self infatuation” (“Silent Partner” n.pag). Indeed, Véra’s biographer Stacy Schiff tells of how Nabokov’s love affair with his wife was kindled by her ability to recite his poetry verbatim, as was later the case with Yurievna Guadanini, a woman with whom Vladimir had an extra-marital affair while living in Paris. Schiff describes Véra as a woman “most herself when reflecting light elsewhere” and in another nod to the lunar woman motif says, “This moon was no thief” (73). The artist’s wife “assumed the passive role, allowing her husband to speak through her” (73). She devoted her life to her husband’s promotion; she was his proofreader, his agent, and some-time translator, “more than a typist, less than a collaborator [...] The words were entirely his, but she was their first reader, smoothing the prose when it was ‘still warm and wet’” (Schiff 52). She kept his correspondence, chased his cheques, and dutifully attended his lectures. Schiff claims that only “once in a 1964 talk, did [Nabokov] use the word ‘muse’” (297) to describe his creative relationship with Véra. Her name doesn’t appear in *Speak, Memory*, and any probable ties between her and Nabokov’s fictional females are subtle at best. Volodya⁹⁹ wrote *for* his wife, not about her¹⁰⁰.

Brian Boyd describes Véra as having “a passionate interest in literature” (*Russian Years* 215), suggesting that she might even have had a writing career of her own, had she wanted one; but Schiff

⁹⁹ As Véra called him.

¹⁰⁰ Indeed, much of *Speak, Memory* is addressed *to* her, although the “you” of the text is never identified by name.

surmises that the author's wife was far too attuned to her husband's supercilious regard for female authors to have dared publish her own work. This was a man who professed "I dislike Jane, and am prejudiced, in fact, against all women writers. They are in another class" (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* 268), and at Cornell was quoted as saying, "Austen is a kitten, and Dickens, Dickens is a great big dog¹⁰¹" (Schiff 38). Véra absorbed and echoed these sentiments:

She professed antipathy for Austen. She thought Colette was not a writer at all. She detested George Eliot. She could not shake her sense that Mary McCarthy was the incarnation of evil; she was convinced that Virginia Woolf was wholly insane. Emily Brontë and Catherine Mansfield passed the test, though not with flying colours. Natalie Sarraute was a nonentity" (Schiff 275).

So Véra Nabokov applied her talent and exceptional work ethic to the service of her husband's genius. Véra then was the model literary wife, the silent partner who, as Schiff put it, toiled tirelessly to ensure

¹⁰¹ At Wellesley, Nabokov was dismayed by his female students, saying: "I have given my damsels exercises to do, and they sit having bowed their fair, blonde, dark (and absolutely empty) little heads ever so low, and they write" (Schiff 141). He did, however, enjoy flirtations with some of the prettier ones. One Katherine Reese Peebles, with whom he had an affair, is quoted by Schiff as saying, "He did like young girls. Just not *little* girls" (140).

that her husband “existed not in time, only in art” (xiii). Véra took care of life’s menial chores so that Volodya never had to stoop from his post. She was the quintessential good woman standing behind the great man.

Part III: Nabokov’s Divine Metaphor

“A creative writer must study carefully the work of his rivals, including the Almighty” (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 32).

While the Pygmalion myth is fundamentally misogynist and rooted in a philosophical dualism that posits art above nature and man above woman, the myth of the male artist’s divinity, as promulgated in the above quote from Nabokov, extends directly from the Edenic patriarchal tradition. The relationship of artist to muse is that of the creator to his creation, and therefore in it, woman’s derivation from and dependence upon this paternal figure is cemented. We are firmly back in the Garden, and as such, this final chapter revisits many of the themes discussed in the first. As Christine Battersby explained in *Gender and Genius*:

the genius’s power is modelled on that of God the Father: the King and patriarchal Ruler of the Christian universe. God the Father is the Author of Nature, human authors, artists and composers mimic divine creativity. (14)

The author then is the supreme subject, a master of universes. Of course, the term “master”—an explicitly gendered noun—is used to describe the highly accomplished artist. Susanne Kappeler, in her explication on the gender dynamics of artistic representation, re-contextualises the idea of mastery however, analogously tying notions of sexual domination and authorial power. She says:

The subjectivity we aspire to, the role model of the human subject, is [...] not the acting subject in any scenario, the libertine who derives temporary (sexual/dominating) pleasure: it is Sade the Author, the orchestrator of human destiny, the one and only master of the game.

(155)

Authorship then is espoused as the paragon of egocentric and phallogentric human self-expression, and the ironclad brand of authorial control practiced by Vladimir Nabokov is the very apotheosis of that paragon. In accordance with Kappeler’s “Sadeian” model of representation, Humbert’s enslavement of Lolita is but the shadow of true dominance, for it is not the fictive player but the author who truly imposes his will upon the world. Intellectual mastery then, outweighs sexual or physical dominance; the pen is mightier

than the sword, and the “penholder¹⁰²”—replete with all of its sub-Freudian connotations—is typically male or masculinised¹⁰³.

Again, a mind/body dualism emerges, and this binary hierarchy is absolutely integral to the divine metaphor for artistic creativity. Western intellectualism posits itself as almost anti-corporeal, as if in denial of the very practical need the artist has of a working, moving body. The physical means of creation are entirely subservient to the thought that precedes them. Indeed, Nabokov delegated the mundane manual task of typing his works to his wife. The manuscripts however, were all in his own hand. In the visual arts, where physical methods of production are absolutely of the essence, the case is slightly different, but there remains a cultural emphasis on individual *genius*—an intangible and eternal essence made manifest in the work of art. Even the material marker of genius—the painting hanging in the gallery—is given the appearance of imperishability by the continual work of preservationists. Art and the artist must persist; there can be no sign of their decay or demise. This is important

¹⁰² I take the term from a passage regarding Dolly von Borg in *Look at the Harlequins!* V.V. writes: “Summarise her. Mirages of motels in the eye of the penholder” (112) in what is both another hat-tip to *Lolita* and a writerly innuendo.

¹⁰³ “Women writers”, that is, the category of writer sweepingly denounced by Nabokov as subpar, are marked as a deviation from the norm. There is no equivalent subgroup called “male writers”: they are merely “writers”, their gender unmarked and unannounced, and having no supposed bearing on the quality or *qualities* of their writing. The “writer” who is a man, is read and critiqued as an individual. Stylistic similarities between writers who are men are never attributed to their being of the same gender, precisely because they *are not gendered*.

because the denial and devaluing of the physical aspects of creativity and the corresponding foregrounding of intellectualism is analogously tied to the very definition of the binary sexes, for physical creation is the role of the female. With her body, she brings forth life. The discourse of genius—of male artists and female muses—however, reframes woman not as a creator, but as *the created*.

In Plato's Symposium, the female philosopher Diotima presents a dualistic concept of procreation to Socrates, stating that pregnancy and birth occur in the mind as well as in the body. Diotima argues that reproduction is the ultimate desire of all human beings because it "is the closest mortals can come to being permanently alive and immortal" (54). While bodily reproduction fulfills this will to immortality in some partial or imperfect sense, Diotima holds that the intellectual "children" of poets and craftsmen are of infinite more value than biological offspring. She says:

Everyone would prefer to have children like that rather than human ones. People look enviously at Homer and Hesiod and other good poets, because of the kind of children they have left behind them, which provide them with immortal fame and remembrance by being immortal themselves. (59)

Diotima's argument was echoed by Mary Ellman when she posed the

hypothetical question, “Does anyone seriously believe that women, in giving birth, get ‘the closest the human race can get to creation’? Closer than Bach, whose wives between them produced twenty children?” (63) The presumed answer is of course no. And this is because art is a means to transcendence; the artist is immortal. Woman’s biological propensity to procreate affords her no such claim to godlike supremacy. Rather, it announces her ties with the natural world, and culture has taught us that it is on a plain above nature, that nature—and by association, woman—are enemies of human progress. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud declared that woman was “hostile” towards civilisation, and exercised “a retarding, restraining influence on it” (51). According the Freud, woman’s impediment is her maternal instinct; she is biologically averse to advancement. He says:

Women stand for the interests of the family and sexual life, whereas the work of civilization has become more and more the business of menfolk, setting them increasingly difficult tasks and obliging them to sublimate their drives—a task for which women have little aptitude. (51)

Motherhood and the domestic space with which women are associated connote primordiality and animality. For Freud, the maternal sphere is base and un-evolved. Therefore, no man aspires to motherhood or jealously covets woman’s capacity to procreate.

Instead, the inverse is true, where women envy the penis and the access to culture that it affords and symbolises. Therefore, in Western tradition, the creation of the universe is not imagined as life flowing forth from some ancestral womb, but rather as a male deity commanding light and life into existence with his *words*. As Ellman further elucidates:

When we think of our primary metaphor of creation, God's creation of the world, we think of the world as an idea in His head (not as a foetus in His belly) and of his deliberately choosing to bring this idea into existence. That is, our concept of creation is profoundly intellectual and self-directed. (64)

The natural world and all that's in it is preceded by an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent male intellect, an eternal force untethered to a corporeal form: the perfect analogy for the author whose universes are composed of thoughts conveyed through words, whose authorial voice resonates throughout his texts like a booming voice from the heavens. Consider the importance of "The Word of God" in scripture and the formative and authoritative power of language becomes yet more apparent. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov sees the universe as a minnow standing beside the giant of human intellect and its signification, saying, "How small the cosmos (...) in comparison to human consciousness, to a single individual

recollection, and its expression in words" (9).

Nabokov comfortably inhabited the role of authorial deity.

Battersby said that, "The better the artist, the more nearly he approaches omnipotence: his hand is omnipresent in the work of art, and detectable in even the most insignificant details" (14). Apart from the fact that Nabokov would refute the very notion of "insignificant details"—his narratives being constructed with the same meticulous precision as his chess problems—his books act as material carriers for his eternal intellect; he is *everywhere* present between their covers—from the conspicuous contrivance of a John Ray Jr's foreword to *Lolita*, to the insistent authority of V.N.'s afterword.

Yet although the writer's subjectivity reigns supreme in the literary universe—his creative prowess comparable only to a supernatural force—the manner in which Nabokov asserts his authorial power reveals an implicit insecurity at the core of the deific metaphor. His power is not absolute but opposed, a fact betrayed by the author's persistent attacks upon his arch-rival: the mother. As touched upon in the first chapter of this thesis, *Lolita's* pages are rife with maternal deaths, miscarriages, stillbirths, and dead babies. Maternity is tied to mortality, birth to death, so that only the type of creativity that is *bloodless*, made instead of ink flowing from pen (an unavoidable yet illustrative phallic metaphor), has any value.

The opposition of masculine creativity and maternal creation

works only to degrade the mother by fabricating a false hierarchy that subjugates the female on the basis of her biology. The *will* to suppress along with the systematic repetitions that enact that suppression, expose the fallacy of male dominance. Discursive demonstrations of dominance reveal its construction and *constructedness*, and in turn reveal the supposed threat posed by those who are being suppressed or dominated. The extent of the mother's power is evidenced in the extent of the effort to suffocate and silence that power. Above all else, the mother is absolutely and inescapably necessary; there is no man or men, no army or labour force, no artist or writer who is not causally connected to a mother. This very crux is the subject of Jacques Derrida's commentary on what he calls "matricidal writing":

The mother can be replaced—or killed—and substitution, fiction, and thus phantasmic speculation is possible. As for maternity, it would resist replacement, because birth, the date or the mark of birth, has *taken place*."

("The Night Watch" 100)

The matricidal writer bears always with him the ineluctable fact of his maternal origin; he might kill the mother but he cannot negate his ontological dependency on her, and he cannot will himself *un-born*, for as Derrida reasons, such a will "inscribes denegation within it: I do not want, I cannot want what I say I want: not to be born—or to die.

Like suicide, matricide (the curse of being born) bears within it this contradiction” (91). The myth of authorial self-creation is ontologically incongruous, the erasure it commits preposterous. The best the author can hope for, according to Derrida, is to “succeed in murdering some particular mother or figure of the mother, while maternity itself, maternity in its phantasm, survives” (88).

Nabokov seeks to negate the mother’s logical indispensability by dispensing with her frequently, and in a manner that is more casual than callous. Mothers die in childbed—destroyed by the fruit of their own wombs; babies die inside their mothers’ bodies or in their infancy. Martha, the “hot little whore” (219) of *King, Queen, Knave* lives in morbid fear of pregnancy after suffering a miscarriage. Sex is both her currency and her weakness, a mutual source of pleasure and pain, and it is hard to avoid the supposition that this is Martha’s penance for her extra-marital affair. Her body might betray her, might betray too, her lies, her sexual sins. Martha’s fear of conception is contrasted in *Ada* by Cordula’s “cheerful” remark after Van had “had her very comfortably” that, “this will probably mean another abortion—*encore un petit enfantôme*” (*Ada* 255). “Little infant ghosts” do indeed haunt *Ada*’s pages and Cordula’s affected nonchalance is undercut by the maternal tragedy that resides at the very core of the novel’s plot. The replacement of Aqua’s stillborn “mauve baby” (26) with her sister’s leads to Van and Ada being raised as cousins rather than siblings. However, Aqua’s

miscarriage is exceptional insofar as it is fundamental to the novel's action. Only the death of Lolita and her daughter bear comparable weight. More often, maternal, foetal and infant deaths are incidental rather than integral in Nabokov's narratives. Cases like Mona Dahl's (*Lolita* 223) and Jean Farlow's (104) are mentioned merely in passing. Phantom babies punctuate the pages in Nabokov; individually they barely register, their effect is cumulative. Viewed in succession and in their multitude, these incidental ghosts make a crypt of the womb and mark the maternal body as a site where generation breeds destruction. Death subsumes birth and the mother emerges as a martyr, bound in servitude to her own perilous biology. The act of bringing forth life becomes its own cancellation.

Nabokov perverts and pollutes maternal procreation by thematically equating it to mortality, and he does so in order to promote man's creativity by relief. Procreation and creativity are counterposed and obviously gendered. Their opposition is hierarchical, with Nabokov championing his own literary practice as a means to *immortality*, "a blasphemy, a small but insolent ambition for divinity" (Ellmann 64). What's more, while the author subverts and sabotages woman's biological means to creation, he also questions her aptitude for *intellectual* creativity, so that woman's every access to creation is completely supplanted by the paternal and patriarchal creativity personified by the deific writer. Nabokov's personal expressions of antipathy towards "women writers" contribute to this,

as do his repeated portrayals of women as philistines, whose cultural interests are mere affectations. Charlotte Haze reads novels for Humbert's benefit, and Humbert tells how her reading material changed to "illustrated catalogues and homemaking guides" (78) as soon as they were married. As explicated in chapter three of this thesis, man and woman are often opposed as high-brow and low-brow in Nabokov, which is itself just another variant of the culture/nature dichotomy. Often, women with creative aspirations are shown to be pretenders or deluded hobbyists. Mrs Flankard, the "lady artist" and romance novelist of *Transparent Things*, has her work accepted for publication, "on condition that it be drastically revised, ruthlessly cut, and partly rewritten" (29), a task that falls first to "a pretty ponytail" at protagonist Hugh's publishing house, who, we are told "possessed even less talent" (29) than the original author. Eventually, Hugh is tasked with fixing the damage done by not one, but two comparably inept "women writers". In *Look at the Harlequins*, V.V.'s first and best loved wife Iris "decided to become a writer herself" (51). Alas, we are told that:

"Not only did she lack all literary talent, but she had not even the knack of imitating the small number of gifted authors among the prosperous but ephemeral purveyors of 'crime fiction' which she consumed with the indiscriminate zest of a model prisoner" (51).

Iris is not only a poor writer, but an undiscerning reader. What's more, she lacks even that most feminine art of mimicry and spends her time deleting what she writes, re-writing and re-editing, so that on the eve of her death she is left with nothing to show for her toils. Then, there is Lyudmila in *Mary*, more a compendium of negative feminine stereotypes than a character in and of herself. Appearing in Nabokov's first novel, she is the quintessential Nabokovian harridan, characterised by falseness, cheapness, and staleness: the material woman always in decay. Nabokov mocks her overstated sexuality, her hackneyed performance of her own femininity.

She would run her nails, so sharp that they might have been artificial, over his chest, and pout, and flutter her coal black eyelashes in her performance of a slighted girl or a capricious marquise. There seemed to be something sleazy, stale and old in the smell of her perfume, although she herself was only twenty-five. (*Mary* 15)

This practiced and repugnant physicality is coupled with intellectual pretensions, as we are told Lyudmila had a passion “for Poe and Baudelaire, whom she had never read” (16). The Nabokovian woman

typifies what Schopenhauer¹⁰⁴ designated “the unaesthetic” sex. Women, according to Schopenhauer, have no “receptivity” for the arts but “affect and profess to like such things [...] for the sake of their keen desire to please” (619). Essentially, a woman who claims to understand or appreciate art is *pretending*, she flirts with art in order to flirt with men; she is childlike, frivolous and utterly vacuous. Most importantly, the reason that she pretends is because of her biological imperative to procreate, so that even her forays into cultural life are driven by her “nature”. Further to this, as Battersby demonstrated, the rhetoric of genius that emerged with Romanticism worked to valorise the ‘feminine’ characteristics of the genius (intuition, sensibility, emotion etc.) while, by no slight contradiction, pillorying the very notion of female creativity.

¹⁰⁴In their article “If We Put Our Heads Between Our Legs”, Senderovich and Shvarts present the evidence that Nabokov had read Schopenhauer (he mentions his name on a few occasions) and that the German philosopher’s ideas “pervade his work.” They argue that, “Schopenhauer provides the language in which Nabokov’s philosophy becomes more apparent” (Senderovich and Shvarts, n.pag). Of course, they do so in the knowledge that Nabokov himself would have steadfastly disavowed his being influenced by *anyone*. My citing Schopenhauer here means to mark a certain ideological affinity rather than to suggest any direct or specific influence between the philosopher’s and the author’s beliefs about women. It is perhaps interesting however, to consider that Schopenhauer *did* have a direct influence on the ideas of Sigmund Freud, meaning that if Senderovich and Shvarts are correct, Nabokov had more in common with his arch-nemesis than he would care to admit. The reason for tracing the line from Schopenhauer (a philosopher with a particular interest in aesthetics) to Freud (a theorist with a pronounced tendency to misogyny) to Nabokov (an artist displaying a confusion of the two), is to underline the patriarchal philosophy that pervades Nabokov’s thought and to mark the author’s treatment of women as in keeping with an oppressive discursive tradition. Nabokov opposed his autocratic aestheticism to Freud’s autocratic psychoanalysis. However, both ideologies presuppose phallocentrism; both are grounded in a man-made literary universe.

The psychology of woman was used as a foil to genius: to show what merely apes genius.

Biological femaleness mimics the psychological femininity of true genius. [...] The genius was a male—full of ‘virile’ energy—who transcended his biology: if the male genius was ‘feminine’ this merely proved his cultural superiority.

Creativity was displaced *male* procreativity: male sexuality made sublime. (Battersby 3)

A displaced *female* procreativity was however, inconceivable.

Essentially, the creative woman is an aberration because artistic creativity requires her to suppress her reproductive instinct, to become sterile in order to *play at* being male. While the male artist is driven by genius, the female remains a slave to her womb, and any actions she might take to disprove this open her to increased hostility. Nabokov’s distortions of procreation through his trope of dead mothers and dead babies further devalues woman’s biological imperative, whereby the reproductive drive slopes sharply towards the death drive; reproduction becomes a means to self-destruction. In contrast, the author’s compulsion to create is posited as a will to eternal life. He writes himself into perpetuity.

At the end of *Lolita*, Humbert gives the instruction that his memoirs be published only after Lolita’s death. He then addresses the girl directly, saying:

do not pity C.Q. One had to choose between
 him and H.H. and one wanted H.H. to exist at
 least a couple of months longer, so as to have
 him make you live in the minds of later
 generations. I am thinking of aurochs and
 angels, the secret of durable pigments,
 prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is
 the only immortality you and I may share, my
 Lolita. (309)

Humbert gives this address supposing that Lolita will survive him by many years. He hopes too that she will bear a male child, presumably because the perils of nymphancy are unknown to boys. Of course, this is a complete turnaround from Humbert's earlier fantasy wherein Lolita's hereditary line produces replica nymphets for his nefarious use. What this closing passage essentially iterates however, is the paradox that the muse must first succumb to her mortality in order to be immortalised. As Colleen Kennedy commented:

To be immortalized, Lolita—never really 'living' to begin with, only an image of her stepfather's lust—must be dead. Pale, pregnant, and vulgar Dolly Schiller will die in childbirth. Humbert, however, is able to step out of the picture; he will transcend over Lolita's dead body. Both

host and audience, he represents himself to himself in the rarefied reality of the confession.

(52)

As Kennedy suggests, there is a discrepancy between the *type* of immortality afforded to the muse and to the narrator, and what use anyway is immortality to a dead girl in a book? Real immortality is reserved for the writer—the one who makes their mark upon the page in order to assert their own existence. To be represented without access to representation, to be spoken of and not to speak—even if those words outlast the gilded monuments—is no claim to transcendence. Rather, the dead girl of seventeen and her stillborn daughter personify the absolute finitude of life, and of women's lives particularly, for had Lolita's baby *in utero* represented something as trite as hope for a new beginning for Dolly Schiller, her fruitless and fatal labour ensures that her life and lineage do not exceed the confines of Humbert's narrative. He dies ergo she dies, she has no existence beyond her creator; the story ends and she goes with it. This idea, whereby the muse's usefulness is exhausted and she is extinguished, is a recapitulation of another Nabokovian trope. Like the sub-Pygmalion theme of the fantasy woman who is imagined by the protagonist before she is realised, this idea appears in the first instance in Nabokov's first novel, where having sought to rekindle his past romance with the titular Mary who is now married to another man, Ganin eventually realises that in thinking of her, he has used

his lover up and rendered her no longer desirable: "he had exhausted his memories, was sated by them, and the image of Mary [...] now remained in the house of ghosts, which itself was already a memory" (149). Ganin reverts to a Nabokovian solipsism in which, "Other than that image no Mary existed, nor could exist" (149). The muse is ontologically dependent on the whims of the male protagonist's desire. His rejection of her completely invalidates her existence; she exists only within his imagining, and once the muse no longer inspires or excites, she is forgotten, vanished.

Part IV: Destruction as Creation

While the deific metaphor appears to be primarily concerned with the author's godlike creative capacity, this life-giving power is necessarily counterbalanced by the power to take life away, and in Nabokov, the power to destroy and the power to create are at least equally weighted. The author is not a benign deity, but rather a prolicidal patriarch, and for Nabokov the power to destroy might be the ultimate expression of authorial mastery. The devastating power of the author is epitomised in the parenthetical nutshell of Humbert's mother's death, "(picnic, lightning)" (*Lolita* 10): an entire tragicomedy contained in just two words and three punctuation marks. Death is the apogee of Nabokov's narrative chess game, it is the culminating point of his precise fairy tale plotting.

Nabokov shares with the reader a *jouissance* in death that is

more connected to sublimity than to sadism. The sublime is the aesthete's awe in the face of terror; it is the capacity of man to contemplate the majesty and grandeur of forces that share no mutual respect for his meagre existence, and in Nabokov, the deific writer, imbued with the power to create and to kill at will, embodies something of the aura of the insurmountable sublime. For Edmund Burke, the beautiful and the sublime have the opposing effects of pleasure and pain, with death being the ultimate object of the sublime (39-40), while for Schopenhauer, the apotheosis of the sublime occurs when the subject encounters the life-threatening force of nature:

Then in the unmoved beholder of this scene the twofold nature of his consciousness reaches the highest distinctness. Simultaneously, he feels himself as individual, as the feeble phenomenon of will, which the slightest touch of these forces can annihilate [...]; and he also feels himself as the eternal, serene subject of knowing, [...] the fearful struggle of nature being only his mental picture of representation [...]. This is the full impression of the sublime. Here it is caused by the sight of a power beyond all comparison superior to the individual, and threatening him with

annihilation” (205).

The subject’s capacity to contemplate his imminent extinction by forces immeasurably more powerful than himself affirms both the transience of life and the transcendence of intellect for Schopenhauer. Another impression of the sublime is achieved when the subject regards their own insignificance in the “infinite greatness of the universe in space and time” (205). Foreshadowing Nabokov’s proclamation about the minuteness of the cosmos in comparison to human thought and language (*SM* 9), Schopenhauer goes on to say that, “against such a ghost of our own nothingness [...] there arises the immediate consciousness that all these worlds exist only in our representation, only as modifications of the eternal subject of pure knowing” (205). In this reckoning, the subject stands firmly at the centre of the universe, and the supreme subject must be the master of representations—the artist or writer who recreates the world as a reflection of his own perception.

While for Schopenhauer, the beautiful and the sublime are mutually exclusive, in Nabokov their effects of pleasure and pain can coexist¹⁰⁵. This idea is crystallised in *The Original of Laura*, where

¹⁰⁵ In this respect, Nabokov is arguably more closely aligned with a Kantian understanding of the sublime. While the sublime and the beautiful are mutually exclusive for Kant, pleasure and pain coincide in the feeling of the sublime. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant describes the sublime as consisting at once of a displeasure arising “from the inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation” of that which is “absolutely great”, and of a concurrent pleasure derived from the superiority of reason over nature (Kant and Guyer 141).

destruction is posited as the sublime inverse of creation, and where the process of self-annihilation undertaken by the protagonist is infused with a distinct auto-eroticism. The unfinished novel is subtitled “Dying is Fun” and reads as a treatise on the transcendent power of masculine consciousness. Its theme of “the process of dying by auto-dissolution” (173) is the very denouement of Nabokov’s elemental mind/body dualism, whereby the idea of self-destruction by will alone and suicide as artistic expression galvanise the supremacy of the active, masculine faculty of mind over that of passive, feminine matter. The author of the book within the book, *My Laura*, “destroys his mistress in the act of portraying her” (123) while Flora’s cuckolded husband, Philip Wild, sets about dismembering himself from the toes up using only the power of meditation. Destruction and creation are thus posited as analogous, as they were in *Lolita’s* schemata of dead mothers and dead babies. However, while

In Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, the two phenomena are opposed as day and night (47), and this opposition extends and manifests itself in expressly gendered ways, with woman being associated with the beautiful and man with the sublime (76). For Kant, women “prefer the beautiful to the useful” and are captivated by “adornment and glitter” (77). Men, conversely are “noble”, serious creatures. He draws strange moral conclusions from this dichotomy, stating that a woman “will avoid the wicked not because it is unright, but because it is ugly” (81). Unlike men, women are without reason or principle; they are motivated simply by that which “pleases them” (81). However, Kant reassures us that although woman’s faults are many, they are “so to speak, *beautiful faults*” (82). Kant’s binary logic takes unexpected and seemingly unfounded turns, claiming, for instance, that blondes are beautiful, while brunettes are sublime (54). While this strange gendering of the beautiful and the sublime is somewhat beside the point I wish to make here about Nabokov’s destructive literary tendency, it will prove significant in due course with discussion of Kristeva’s theory of the abject, in which a masculinised concept of the sublime is presupposed, while abjection is ideologically infused with notions of feminine materiality.

maternal death underlined woman's materiality and mortality, *Laura's* patriarchal vision of destruction as creation treats both events as emanations of man's conscious thought and desire. Nabokov's last protagonist seeks to master death, to confront and control his own materiality. *The Original of Laura* posits "the art of self-slaughter" (267) as a nihilistic act of defiance in the face of one's encroaching death. Wild's destruction is composed and sterile, devoid of the gore and horror associated with maternity, that gushing repugnance that Julia Kristeva identified as the abject.

The abject is Kristeva's counterpoint to the sublime. While Burke's descriptions of the sublime are concerned with terror and the terrible, Kristeva's treatise on the abject is concerned with horror. The sublime is concerned with the subject's emotional response to that which might damage or destroy him. However, this emotional response is tempered by an aesthetic response so that the subject's existence is affirmed at the moment he faces annihilation. The abject is not concerned with an external "other" that might destroy the subject from without, but rather with that which threatens *subjectivity itself* from within. While death is the ultimate expression of sublimity for Burke, abjection is epitomised for Kristeva in the figure of the corpse, which she describes as:

death infecting life. Abject. It is something
 rejected from which one does not part, from
 which one does not protect oneself as from an

object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat,
it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.

(Powers of Horror 4)

The abject is the pus that oozes, the vomit that expels the inside out, the wound that gushes—that let's the outside in—exposing the subject to infection, to pollution by foreign bodies. The abject is “that which disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Abjection is the subject's repulsion at the realisation of his own susceptibility to dissolution.

In Nabokov, the abject is depersonalised, displaced and situated in the female body. The notion of “death infecting life” is personified in the maternal body and verbalised succinctly in the pronouncement, “wounds procreate” (*Ada* 83). In this supposedly unintended slip towards Freudianism, Nabokov imagines the vagina as a gaping wound, a breach in the border between life and death. The female sex organ is open and pregnable. In intercourse, it accepts the outside in: foreign fluids flood the vagina, break through the cervix and colonise the womb. In menstruation, the inside flows out. Blood—life's essence—is shed, along with endometrium—the cultivating membrane for new life: wounds procreate. Further to this, as discussed in chapter three, Nabokov's depictions of the feminine are thoroughly imbued with a sense of the abject—of death encroaching on life, of decay and decomposition, of porous, odorous, overripe flesh, of excesses of flesh, bulging and spilling and

exceeding the limits prescribed by the aesthete-author. The female body is characterised by deterioration. At seventeen, Lolita is “pale and polluted, and big with another’s child” (278). No matter, Humbert says: “even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be tainted and torn”, he would love her still. But Lolita’s accelerated corrosion is halted by her untimely demise: mythic creatures should not die slowly, and nymphets should certainly never become old women. Fetishised youth and the fetishised young body are totemic safeguards against the abject, as are the cult of virginity and the fallacy of the sealed hymen. The pure, unopened female body is the ideological inverse of the abject, sexualised, maternal body. It poses no threat.

Women’s bodies, being permeable and prone to rot, represent for Nabokov the threat of disintegration of self. While the phallus stands for the “I”—the unified and impenetrable subject—the female sex organ embodies both the Freudian “lack”—that castration wound that Nabokov echoes—and the idea of multiplicity. Woman is what Luce Irigaray called the “sex which is not one”, and the maternal body is not a fortress but a vessel, an environment, it contests the very idea of the ego, of self-containment, of the “I” as distinct from and closed-off to all others. In patriarchal and psychosexual discourse, only madness is analogous to this perceived feminine *disunity*.

In *The Original of Laura*, Philip Wild visualises himself as a

“chalk white ‘I’” (165) on a mental blackboard which he works to erase bit by bit. Ironically, the long, lean line of the “I” that Wild chooses to represent himself *to himself* is at odds with the man’s physicality. Wild describes himself as “an obese bulk with formless features and a sad porcine stare” (137) and his will to self-erasure is a will to be freed of his “wretched flesh” (161). He says:

I loathe my belly, that trunkful of bowels, which
I have to carry around, and everything
connected with it—the wrong food, heartburn,
constipation’s leaden load, or else indigestion
with a first installment (sic) of *hot filth pouring
out of me* in a public toilet three minutes before
a punctual engagement. (151, emphasis added)

Wild’s exercise in “willpower, absolute self domination” (211) is conceived as an assertion of the unified “I” against those excesses of flesh and filth that we might call the abject. Wild’s attempt to master matter is ultimately negated by fatal heart attack (189).

Further to this, Nabokov’s concepts of self-containment and egoistic self-determination are brilliantly vivified in the following passage from *Pnin*, where the author seems to describe what would become the very essence of Kristeva’s theory of abjection: the notion of the limits of the self, and of the abject’s oozing through those ontological boundaries—threatening both the subject and subjectivity

itself.

Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space traveller's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment. Death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape but to do so is the end of the tender ego. The sensation poor Pnin experienced was something very like that divestment, that communion. He felt *porous and pregnable*. (*Pnin* 12, emphasis added)

Further to this, we are told that Pnin lived in horror of his own heart, feared the tell-tale pulse in his wrist, and regarded that most vital organ, "with a queasy dread, a nervous repulsion, a sick hate, as if it were some strong slimy untouchable monster that one had to be parasitised with" (13). Pnin, much like Wild, feels himself at the mercy of his own body, with the heart's mechanical beat beyond his control or comprehension. He feels that, "the repulsive automaton [...] had developed a consciousness of its own and not only was grossly alive but was causing him pain and panic" (13). The language Nabokov employs in this passage speaks strongly to that guttural response associated with the abject. The heart is reimagined as an odious entity, a mysterious and possibly malignant force that has seized control of Pnin. He is helpless to regulate it, yet cannot live

without it. It is the dualist's nightmare: the body in betrayal of the mind, nature usurping intellect by demonstrating its capacity to destroy it. While the sublime is man's reaction to some external apocalyptic force, e.g., the hurricane or the flood, the abject is his reaction to that which is not *other* to the self but which threatens it from within. This is the particular horror that Pnin experiences.

For Kristeva, the philosophical discourse of the sublime acts to sublimate the abject; ambiguity is supplanted by ontological affirmation and the thin membrane that separates the self from his obliteration is reinforced by the assertion of his phenomenological centrality. This is opposed to the abject's disruptive de-centring. Kristeva sees literature as a direct confrontation of the abject, and writerly transcendence—achieved in canonicity and only *after* the writer's death—is the ultimate triumph over abjection. Literature “claims to expend” the abject “while uttering it” (*PoH* 16). As if to make this very point about the expurgatory function of literary expression, Charles Kinbote says of John Shade in his foreword to *Pale Fire*:

His misshapen body, that, grey mop of abundant hair, the yellow nails of his pudgy fingers, the bags under his lustreless eyes, were only intelligible if regarded as the waste products eliminated from his intrinsic self by the same forces of perfection which purified and

chiseled his verse. He was his own
cancellation. (*Pale Fire* 21)

These surface imperfections, extirpated from the artist's soul, are for Nabokov analogous to the marks of the writer-editor's pen. Both poet and poem are refined by his conscious will. This is conceptually precursory to *The Original of Laura's* theme of self-destruction as a form of creation. While that posthumous novel is fragmentary, those fragments—even in their most preliminary form—provide at least one coherent ideological thread. One of the published index cards, a preliminary note by the author to himself, reads, "Sophrosyne, a platonic term for ideal self-control stemming from man's rational core" (157). This word and its provided definition seem to crystallise Nabokov's central concept: the idea of mind over matter, of the body succumbing to the power of the will, the key to life and death expressed in an intellectual exercise.

The concept of *spirality*, touched upon in Chapter Three, is also integral to Nabokov's ideological melding of creation and destruction. In *Speak, Memory*—the autobiography which, you recall, opens with a cradle rocking over an abyss (5)—he talks of Hegel's triadic series of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, a concept that is reprised in the final chapter of *Lolita* where "A kind of Hegelian synthesis¹⁰⁶ linking up two dead women" (307) occurs. As Carol T

¹⁰⁶ As Williams explains, Nabokov's interpretation of Hegel's dialectic is a misrepresentation of the philosopher's ideas. In fact, in *Speak, Memory*

Williams notes in her article on “Nabokov’s Dialectical Structure”, the recurring figure of the doppelgänger represents the antithesis of the self (254). Likewise, she posits that Dolores Haze is thetic, while Lolita is antithetic (262). In *The Original of Laura*, Nabokov presents a dialectical triad composed of self-actualising literary creation, the antithetical act of self-slaughter, and the synthesis which ties destruction to creation and is expressed in what I will call “*self-love*”—a peculiar *jouissance* that amounts to a sublime inversion of “self-abuse”—a term that simultaneously connotes Philip Wild’s concerted efforts to destroy himself and the onanistic satisfaction he derives from this destruction. The “process of dying by auto-dissolution” we are told, “afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man” (173) and “more than masturbatory joy” (141). Auto-dissolution then is more or less equated to autoeroticism, and the synthetic event in Nabokov’s triadic series is the point at which supreme self-expression and nihilistic self-erasure culminate in a self-pleasure borne of absolute self-control.

This mirrors the narcissistic autoeroticism that characterised Nabokov’s Pygmalion motif, so that creation and destruction appear

Nabokov states that his ideas on spirality occurred to him as a child and are hence primarily his own. He later discovered Hegel’s triadic series which was “so popular in old Russia” (209). My use of the terms thesis, antithesis and synthesis here reflect Nabokov’s understanding and usage of those terms. As such, I do not wish to expatiate upon Hegelian philosophy in any great depth. When Nabokov spoke of a “Hegelian synthesis”, he meant simply the point at which one circle or series culminates and another is initiated: “Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series” (*SM* 209).

to be linked by *effect*. The masturbatory analogy for artistic creation typified in the Pygmalion myth posits creativity as egoistic, self-directed, and ultimately, *self-pleasing*. *TOOL* imagines destruction as the Nabokovian dark double of creation; as such, it provides an incomparable climax. In this usage, the word “climax” serves as a convenient *double entendre*, referring both to the onanist’s orgasm and to his death by self-annihilation, so, as in “*la petite mort*”, death and ecstasy are made analogous. This is the synthetic event in Nabokov’s triadic series, an ecstasy achieved in man’s mastery of death: he creates himself, he destroys himself, he re-affirms himself in self-love. Wild’s self-inflicted bliss¹⁰⁷ is a defiance of his physical pain and an affirmation of his own transcendence. The self conquers and withstands the body’s destruction¹⁰⁸, the synthesis marks this transcendence. However, Wild’s is not merely a masochist’s pleasure. He is in fact closer to the sadist who revels in his mastery over his own flesh. The Sadean binary is hence simultaneously reconciled and reinforced in Wild, for while he appears to represent both master and slave, he does so by splitting himself in two, by

¹⁰⁷ This oxymoronic juxtaposition is intended to illustrate the novel’s seeming equating of death and erotic euphoria.

¹⁰⁸ An early version of this theme is put forward by Nabokov in *The Eye*, where the protagonist shoots himself and believes that his imagination has survived his body’s demise. “What a mighty thing was human thought,” Smurov posits, “that it could hurtle on beyond death” (21). Of course, the novella’s tragicomic punchline is that Smurov is alive in body as well as mind, and that the entire narrative has been a disquisition on the relationship of subjectivity and reality. The titular Eye then, stands firmly for the homophonous “I” that would later appear on Philip Wild’s mental blackboard as a symbol of his material being.

liberating the mind from the body and by subjugating the body to the mind's brute force. Therein he derives his ecstasy.

Significantly, while Wild's self-obliteration is repeatedly likened to masturbation, it stands in marked contrast to the novel's many depictions of actual sexual intercourse, wherein pleasure is replaced by the perfunctory. Wild's relations with his young wife for example, were enacted in such a position so that "neither saw each other's faces" (201) and we are assured that the "procedure—a few bounces over very small humps—meant nothing to her" (199). Indeed, the partial portrait of FLaura that we glean from the text tells us that her general attitude to sex, and to men, is nonchalant. Sex is a pastime for Flora. She is summarised in crass all-caps: "TAIL" "DELTA" "SLIT" (87) and as Barbara Wyllie commented, this disordered mapping of her sexual anatomy "suggests that these are the only things of importance to her" ("Looking for Flora" 144). Undoubtedly, vaginal imagery is important in this fragmentary text, where a young Flora is haunted by Freudian nightmares of her "erotic torture in so called 'labs', major and minor laboratories with red curtains" (57). It appears that Flora's apparent sexual freedom is undercut by an unconscious fear of that sexuality. Moreover, she fears *conception*, as shown in the image of Flora towelling semen from her thighs "after the promised withdrawal" (27).

Responding to this image, Brian Boyd proposed that, "Nabokov covertly links Wild erasing his own life, rubbing out his

toes, with Flora briskly wiping off the possibility of new life. The Roman Flora was a fertility goddess; Nabokov's Flora, a sterility goddess" (Leving 267). While I fear that Boyd overreaches slightly in drawing this parallel—interesting though it might be—the idea of Flora as a paragon of sterility is worth considering in an intertextual context, for as we have seen, maternity, as figured by Nabokov, is something that a rational, self-preserving human being might well do to avoid. However, Boyd also argues that Flora's "*defloration*" is "somehow analogous to Philip Wild's self-erasure" (264). Although Boyd's wordplay here is tempting, it conceptually equates Flora's selfhood not just with her sexuality, but with something as flimsy and impermanent as her sexual purity, so that Flora self-destructs at the moment she loses her virginity, and reenacts this destruction with every repetition. Deliberately or not, Boyd has reduced Flora once again to her sexual parts.

Boyd pictures sex as a self-destructive act for Flora, while Wild's slow, procedural suicide is inversely thought of as sexually invigorating. However, it is important to remember that we have only Flora's jilted lovers' words of her, and, as we are told, "The 'I' of the book" within the book "is a neurotic and hesitant man of letters" (123), a vengeful lover, who seeks to destroy the woman he can no longer possess. He kills her in a book, a symbolic murder echoed in

the visceral murder of Wild's young love, Aurora Lee¹⁰⁹ "who was to be axed and chopped up at seventeen by an idiot lover" (207). Of course, this is not just Nabokov—an author famed for the unreliable narrator character—but *unfinished* Nabokov, and one of the main problems one encounters when reading *TOOL* is that we often don't know *who* we are reading. For instance, we do not know if the male narrator of chapter one is the writer of *My Laura*; we know only that he is one of FLaura's conquests. Revealingly, he says, "That first surrender of hers was a little sudden, if not downright unnerving" (15). Flora's ease and perceived disregard for feminine coyness is threatening; it opposes conventional purity and passivity and hence upsets the expectations of the conventional male. Boyd readily surmises that Flora's every sexual encounter with a man is an act against the self. He hence suggests that Flora engages in sexual activity not because she wants to, but because she is compelled to do so by some neurotic self-destructive force. Flora's promiscuity is hence *not analogous* to Philip Wild's meditative and premeditated self-destruction as Boyd suggests, but at odds with it. It is difficult, by

¹⁰⁹ Another metafictional element, little remarked upon by critics thus far, Aurora Lee is an interesting incarnation of the Annabel motif insofar as Wild dreams of discovering male genitals between the girl's "consenting thighs" (205). Wild assures us that this was "no homosexual manifestation but a splendid example of terminal gynandrisms" (207) whereby both lovers' anatomy's fuse in his fantasy to form "one creature" (207). In the contextual abyss of the unfinished text, it is hard to glean the meaning of this episode, but Wild's description of himself as "half-impotent" (207) does seem to speak to a narrative preoccupation with his dwindling virility and his perceived emasculation by Flora. The girl with the penis and scrotum might then stand for Flora, the woman with "masculine" sexuality who is promiscuous and emotionally detached.

the way, to imagine any critic feeling so compelled to provide a psychological motivation for Van Veen's numerous sexual escapades. But then, we have always Van Veen's own account of the matter. Perhaps if Flora were to write her own story it would be one in which sex was a means to self-affirmation or an assertion of her power; certainly, this possibility should not be discounted simply because it runs contrary to convention. Flora's defiance of sexual conventions is a defiance of the men who try to contain and control her; all the while Flora remains elusive and unattainable. It is because of this that her lover attempts to claim authoritative ownership of her in a novel that labels her "*My Laura*"¹¹⁰. It is because of this too, that he attempts to destroy her. But Flora lives, exceeding her lot as artistic muse, she exposes the fiction of her "wonderful death" (227) by simply refusing to read it. Flora's destruction then, is shown to be nothing more than one man's literary exercise, just as Wild's self-destruction is little more than a failed thought experiment, undermined by cardiac arrest.

Philip Wild's self-destruction is mirrored in the case of Adam Lind, Flora's father, who attempted to photograph his own suicide in order to make art of it (51). While suicide might be the ultimate concession to one's own mortality, Lind's death is an *enactment* of his self-destruction, the seeming contradiction being that he hopes to

¹¹⁰ Alas, in its unfinished form, Nabokov's text does not fulfil its titular promise of providing a portrait of the original of Laura, what we are left with are a number of sketches by an undefined number of male narrators.

be immortalised *by* and *in* the image of his own obliteration. Indeed, the artist's suicide is posited by Nabokov as the preemptive antidote to what is described in the case of Flora's painter grandfather as "the cancer of oblivion" (47)—a dimming of the creative faculty resulting in death by irrelevance. The potential eroticism of Lind's suicide is suggested by its setting: Lind, in a hotel room, focuses his camera to capture himself in the act of shooting himself (51). Alas, Lind's final flourish is not a success. Showing little appreciation for either the tragic or aesthetic value of the photographs, Lind's widow "sold them for the price of a flat in Paris to the local magazine" (53). Here, another artless, materialist and unsympathetic woman emerges. Herself a ballerina, we are told that Lanskaya's "art was not strong enough to survive the loss of good looks" (53). Entirely contrary to the type of art that affords the artist transcendence over his corporeal form, the ballerina's art is dependent upon and subject to the limitations of her ageing body. Flora's mother's talent is transient and superficial, an illusory effect betrayed by her dwindling sex appeal—not art but the surface semblance of it. Taking after her mother, "philistine Flora" (27) is portrayed as a fickle and heartless character, uninterested in her husband's not inconsiderable wit, "but mesmerized by his fame and fortune" (109).

The Nabokovian synthesis of what I have called "self-love"—or the auto-erotics of auto-dissolution culminating in affirmation of the transcendent intellect—is quintessentially solipsistic and patriarchal.

From the thetic self-assertion of artistic creation, to the antithetic self-destruction, and finally to the climactic synthesis, Nabokov's spiral circles inwards, always taking the male subject as its axis; his subjectivity is affirmed from start-point to end point. Moreover, it excludes the feminine. In the thetic instance of self-actualisation through literary creation, Nabokov's dialectic spiral displaces the mother. The author writes himself into being, he is *self-producing*. The mother is usurped in much the same way as she is by the figure of the heavenly father in the Creation myth, where sexual reproduction is supplanted by the concept of an *all-powerful creative male intellect*. In scripture as in literature, the world and all that occupy it, are simply *thought* into being. The mother, as an emblem of nature and of the male author-creator's materiality is denounced so that his materiality might be denied, perhaps even, defied.

This is furthered in the antithetical phase, where Philip Wild disposes of flesh and bone by using the power of his mind alone. Wild's meditative self-destruction is exhibitively of both his contempt for his corporeal shell and of his mind's muscular dominance over it—however illusory these effects might prove to be. Self-destruction is a rebellion against nature, a statement of man's command over it, for he, representing the intellect and culture, is immortal. While Nabokov's women are betrayed by their own biology, Wild reigns over his. The *synthetic effect* of this is ecstatic, comparable only to ejaculation but yet peculiarly asexual. This is man perfected, a self-

sufficient, self-contained, and self-pleasuring entity, having no need of woman, no need even of his own flesh. Wild's orgasmic rush is not the involuntary spasm of some "nocturnal emission" (*Lolita* 34); it is not the product of self-abandon but of supreme self-control—not some abject effusion, but the very expression of the enclosed ego, impermeable to external forces. It is sublimity encapsulated, the substantiation of "man's rational core" in the face of his own negation. The "I" prevails.

Conclusion

This research project was undertaken in order to examine the ways in which female gender identity is characterised in a novel famous for its portrayal of a sexualised, and sexually abused, adolescent girl. It sought to deconstruct the makings of *Lolita*'s iconic nymphet, and to pick apart the various mythological threads that lend themselves to Nabokov's textual constructions of femaleness and the feminine. It questioned the effects of the author's myth-borrowing and myth-making in his constructions of the gendered subject, and asked how gendered differences are produced in Nabokov's writing.

The methodology employed here—whereby a number of distinct but intrinsically linked cultural tropes were studied through explication of a central text—represented a new approach to the literature that was at once particularised and expansive. This integrated “deep reading” of the novel provided an interpretive avenue through which Nabokov's wider body of work could be explored. The machinations of the author's development of a gendered discourse throughout and across his writing were therefore made apparent. At the same time, his interactions with broader discursive trends and themes were elucidated, so that examination of gender characterisation *in a specific text* ultimately worked to illuminate how gender constructs operate *in general* and as cultural

standards. In simplistic terms, the central text might be understood as a mirror, reflecting external elements. But, as this thesis worked to show, *Lolita* is not merely reflective but responsive. Indeed, it reflects and responds, then reflects again—taking on new meanings with every new cultural incarnation—be they in print or in pictures. For the non-reader, the book is a cultural artefact “known” only in the context of these external impressions. As stated in Chapter Four, *Lolita* will always be preceded by some connotation of infamy—some foreknowledge or half-knowledge that the name on the cover denotes something dangerous. For the first-time reader, the novel responds to and refutes these external impressions—and, in accordance with Nabokov’s afterword to the text, defines itself foremost in terms of *what it is not*. Therein lies the great interpretive roadblock that every reader of Nabokov must choose to either circumvent or brazenly bulldoze through—for one finds that almost every line of critical inference has been preempted or dismissed by the author. This reader chose the latter approach, and the resultant research project challenged the author’s claims to *l’art pour l’art* self-containment by treating the central text as a *product* of its literary-cultural heritage and a *producer* of cultural symbols and ideas. The approach was multifaceted and multidirectional, with *Lolita* acting as the hermeneutic axis to various thematic and theoretical lines of inquiry. The dissertation’s title—“*Lolita* and the Mythologies of Femininity”—is similarly polyvalent. It conveys the idea that this is a study of

feminine mythologies as depicted in *Lolita*; but it also imparts the image of Lolita (the girl) as an archetype amongst archetypes. It imparts the idea that *Lolita* is being looked at *alongside and in relation to* these Mythologies of Femininity. She is derivative but also somehow new—general but specific—and the research methodology—which telescoped outwards from a central text and a central girl—was designed to reflect this. This dissertation treated gender as a cultural construct and a product of writing. In doing so, it demonstrated that gender norms and archetypes are—in part at least—the synthetic effects of literary in-breeding. *Lolita* is an overtly intertextual work, and by dismantling the literary structures that lend its depictions of gender validity and meaning, this dissertation offered an insight into how ideals and stereotypes are accumulated and disseminated between texts and across literary history.

The first three chapters of the dissertation addressed the question of Nabokov's characterisation and construction of the gendered subject through an explication of three of the novel's major themes. These chapters developed the idea of a composite femininity derived from a number of man-made archetypes. *Lolita* was shown to be part Eve, part fairytale damsel, and part a product of post-war America's commodity fetishism. These apparently disparate cultural motifs were shown to be underpinned by a shared discursive tendency towards binary gender hierarchies. Nabokov's Edenic framework, as explicated in Chapter One, framed *Lolita* as

inherently secondary while positioning the male narrator as an Adamic reflection of his authorial creator's verbal mastery and wit. In this respect, Humbert was shown to be a typical Nabokovian protagonist—male, intellectual, of European extraction, and believing firmly in his own superiority. The female lead on the other hand, was shown to be always at one remove from her creator. Just as Eve came after and *from* Adam, Lolita was not made in her author's image but in an image deemed desirable by the text's paedophile protagonist—she was created as a “help meet” for Nabokov's Adamic narrator.

Integral to Nabokov's use of the creation myth was a more pervasive theme of male artistic creativity—of a transcendent male intellect analogous to God. Chapter One introduced the idea that this concept was reinforced by a concurrent, opposing motif of failed or fatal female biological procreation. While previous commentators have noticed and noted these two motifs in isolation, this dissertation marked a significant development in the literature by treating them as opposing facets of the same elemental idea. This dissertation presented a theory of binary opposition between Nabokov's deific model of male creativity and his conspicuous negation of woman's reproductive capacity.

This concept of gendered hierarchies was carried throughout the dissertation. Chapter Two's explication of fairy tale mythology identified a foundational active/passive gender dichotomy as the

common thread in a body of literature that is diverse and at times even subversive. The paragon of feminine desirability in fairy tale lore was shown to be an absolute passivity reified in the necrophiliac image of a Sleeping Beauty—realised first in the image of Annabel's beautiful young corpse and subsequently in the image of a drugged and drowsy Lolita, primed for rape. Inertia implied sexual innocence, while the moral core of the dead or dormant beauty motif was located close to Edenic notions of blissful ignorance and the opposing sinfulness of knowledge. Therefore, the ideal imparted by the Sleeping Beauty motif is not inaction alone, but inaction encompassing unconsciousness. Idealised femininity is pictured as the perfect objectivity of an unthinking and undoing entity, so that Nabokov's fairy tale interactions are shown to encompass two complementary gender dichotomies—that between masculine activity and feminine passivity, and that between his subjectivity—expressed in and through his narrative—and her objectivity.

Chapter Three showed how the active/passive divide was complicated by the highly gendered discourse of production and consumption, wherein the ideal consumer was not only active, but avid, and typically female. The rhetoric went that shopping was for women because it was desire-led, not rational, and Humbert's supercilious observations on Lolita's wide-eyed consumerism reinforced this bias. His culture was important and enduring, hers was as disposable as bubblegum. This chapter posited that

underlying the modern and explicitly gendered discourse of production and consumption was ancient hylo-morphism, whereby woman's supposed materialism was conceived as an expression or manifestation of her essential materiality. Again, Nabokov's association of the feminine with mortality was key here, and his language when talking about women's bodies was the language of visceral revulsion. In the parlance of consumer culture, Nabokov's women had a sell-by-date, beyond which they ripened and decayed. This is where the necrophiliac mythology of *Lolita's* fairy tale motif had its ideological counterpoint, for while the aestheticisation of dead girls discussed in Chapter Two symbolised a developmental stasis, the corresponding denigration of the ageing woman marked a misogyny that was revealed to be neither specific to Humbert Humbert nor limited to *Lolita's* nympholept narrative. Further to this, the form/matter dichotomy at the heart of Nabokov's invocations of commodity culture was itself loaded with implications about activity and passivity—form being that which gives matter its essence (a concept that would be revisited in Chapter Five's explication of the Pygmalion motif). What this illustrates is that the gendered hierarchies implicit to the linguistic ordering of binary opposition are grounded in a self-supporting logic, whereby the supposed validity of one such dichotomy serves to validate the next.

Chapter Four represented something of a shift in focus as it turned towards paratextual and extra-textual considerations. Up until

this point, the dissertation had focused on Lolita's textual construction as a composite of preexisting feminine archetypes. Here however, Lolita was treated as an archetype in and of herself; a girl from a book whose name became shorthand for something sordid. Ideas surrounding gender dynamics and gendered difference remained a central concern in this chapter, as the prevailing popular image of Lolita proved to be one in which the balance of power between girl-victim and man-abuser had been upended. Lolita's public image is one of a sexually emboldened and alluring teenage girl. Humbert, conversely, hardly has a public image to speak of. The 'palatable' version of Lolita initiated by Stanley Kubrick and assimilated by popular culture proved to be one in which the gendered notions of activity and passivity had been inverted. Humbert had been domesticated, Lolita had been 'empowered'.

In a culture where sexuality is equated to power, the sexing-up of Lolita's public image effectively created an alternate narrative where her victimhood was completely cancelled out. The same conclusions were drawn from Pia Pera's reimagining of Lolita's story, in which the girl is presented as a knowing, willing and sadistic seductress. Pera's Lolita even self-identifies as Eve, so that the girl's perspective in Pera's retelling amounts to a vindication of Humbert's nymphet myth-making. While Humbert claimed that he was seduced by Lolita, his narrative of misdirection and obfuscation never amounted to a complete erasure of the girl's circumstances. Lolita

remained a parentless child, dependent on her abuser. As this chapter showed, most effective artistic re-interpretations of the novel illustrate these circumstances rather than attempting to overturn them.

Lolita's enduring iconography, as epitomised in Kubrick's film poster, proved symptomatic of a broader visual culture in which youth is fetishised and the young sexualised. Humbert's comparative lack of popular image on the other hand, reveals a contrasting unwillingness to conceptualise that which is inferred by this visual culture—that is, the desiring gaze of the adult spectator. The archetype of corrupt femininity to which *Lolita's* image conforms emerged as a more acceptable and more appealing alternative to the grim image of the man lusting after a twelve-year-old girl. Eve remains the eternal scapegoat.

The final chapter revisited the author-god theme first introduced in Chapter One. Here, ideas surrounding male artistic creativity were explored first in the context of *Lolita's* muse motif, and later as the ideological current that ties the author's biographical writing to his fiction, culminating in an analysis of his final, posthumously published novel, *The Original of Laura*. In the first instance, the relationship of artist to muse was revealed to be an explicitly gendered one in which the inherent maleness of creative genius was presupposed and reinforced by the opposing image of an aestheticised and eroticised female muse-object. *Lolita* was characterised as a Pygmalion-type

narrative; Humbert is Lolita's creator insofar as she is a projection of his narrative. He even gives her a name. In a societal context, he also acts as the girl's father. But he is also her lover, and when he moulds her in the image of his subjective desire, he effectively renders her an object for his sexual use.

This explication of the Pygmalion motif also illustrated a subtextual affinity between the various mythological texts that Nabokov drew upon, for intrinsic to both the Judeo-Christian creation myth and the story of the sculptor who falls in love with his statue, is the displacement of the maternal for a paternal model of creation. In both myths, biological reproduction is supplanted by intellectual creation. The distinct gendering of the mind/body dualism is vividly dramatised in these narratives where a male god thinks humanity into being, and a male artist creates a woman who is superior to any born of a woman. In Western patriarchal discourse, the earthly semblance of the heavenly creator was not the mother with her natural capacity to give life, but the artist, whose progeny were made to last an eternity. In Nabokov, the deific metaphor was buttressed by the systematic decimation of the mother and the fruits of her womb, so that his godlike creation was set in relief against the mother's destruction. Maternity was equated to materiality and hence mortality, while artistic creation was framed as a means to life everlasting.

In *The Original of Laura*—a novel whose completion was prohibited by Nabokov’s deteriorating health in his final years—creation and destruction were presented as homologous effects of the artist’s will. In the context of this dissertation, the protagonist’s concerted mental efforts to erase his own body were understood as an assertion of the mind’s supremacy over the body. They also expressed a type of artistic self-determination, whereby the self-creating artist who writes himself into being imagines his own methodical obliteration. In *The Original of Laura*, the author’s encroaching death is met with defiance; dying, he insists, “is fun”. This concept of auto-dissolution extends from the ideology of paternal creation. In it, man’s mind retains its place at the centre of the universe, and the “two eternities of darkness” (*Speak, Memory* 5) that bookend his existence are demystified. Birth and death—the indelible marks of man’s finite materiality—are conceived as the products of his (or His) subjective will.

The Original of Laura posited a concept of self-directed and self-affirming destruction that is at complete odds with Nabokov’s matricidal motif in which the maternal body *succumbs* to its essential materiality. In the matricidal model, death is birth’s cancellation; woman’s life-giving capacity is perverted and nullified. In *The Original of Laura*’s model of destruction as an expression of male intellectual creativity, dying becomes an *act of will*. In essence, it is an opposition of active and passive dying, encompassing parallel

gendered binaries of mind/body, subject/object, and form/matter. These same dichotomies permeated each of the mythological motifs studied in this dissertation, so that the thematic treatment undertaken here has worked to expose a fundamental phallogocentrism in Nabokov's intertextual constructions of the gendered subject. Each of the myths borrowed and propagated in *Lolita* serve the cultural subjugation of the female, while the deific metaphor that characterised Nabokov's projected self-image as much as his fictive constructions of male creativity, worked to naturalise man's cultural dominance as a consequence of his innate superiority.

As each literary depiction of birth and maternity betokens an authorial creator, the theory developed here leaves considerable scope for further inquiry into the uses and implications of matricidal writing in other texts. I am particularly interested in exploring depictions of the maternal body as it intersects with the peculiarly American theme of self-making, and the apparently antithetical theme of self-destruction. As demonstrated in Chapter Five's discussion of *The Original of Laura's* theme of self-immolation as self-assertion, these seemingly contradictory concepts are both depicted by Nabokov as expressions of the male subject's will. Meanwhile, maternal deaths are depicted as a complete divestment of the self—individuation sacrificed for oneness with nature, matter, 'Mother Nature'. Maternity is posited as the quintessential dualist's nightmare, wherein the subject is enveloped by a body whose

primary function is to nurture *another*. This body is no longer a corporeal receptacle for the individual mind; it contains multiples. The sublimation of self made manifest in pregnancy culminates for Nabokov, in maternal and foetal death.

The Nabokovian equation of maternity with objectivity (as opposed to subjectivity) was countered or at least complicated in his contemporary America by literary portrayals of abortion. While, in the Nabokovian context, the maternal body represented an affront to personhood—that which Kristeva called the abject—representations of reproductive choice¹¹¹ in twentieth-century American literature might be read as a reassertion of the self on the woman's part. That is to say that if Nabokov's matricidal motif equates woman with matter and mortality in an absolute way, the abortion narrative¹¹² reinstalls the female subject by creating a narrative of the female will. Ideas surrounding reproductive choice and expressions or assertions of female individuation offer a compelling counterpoint to a Nabokovian model that posits the maternal body as an emblem of woman's *generality*, or her biological aversion to self-containment. In twentieth-century American literature, the safely (and discreetly) attained abortion can amount to an act of self-preservation—"a choice of pains" (111) in the words of Audre Lorde. In Lorde's

¹¹¹ The word "choice" is used here in a personal rather than political context, as abortion was illegal in the United States until 1973.

¹¹² There are instances of abortion in Nabokov (e.g. Cordula's; see page 208) but there are no *abortion narratives* or attempts to engage with the female experience—there are only quips, allusions, asides.

autobiography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*—the abject horror of her abortion is rendered in detail. She survives the gut-wrenching pain, her troubles “wash[ed] away” in a profusion of blood (110).

Lorde’s abortion narrative is antitheetical to Philip Wild’s sterile self-erasure in *The Original of Laura*. While for Nabokov, the zenith of authorial individualism was expressed in corporeal transcendence, Lorde’s visceral first-person narrative represents a taboo-breaking insight into interrelated ideas of authorship, selfhood, internalised otherness, abjection, and *embodied identity*. Materiality—even abject, life-threatening materiality—is not *other*-ed but owned, *authored*.

Survival is the single precondition to selfhood in the abortion narrative; the illicit act of self-preservation is elevated to one of self-affirmation. The other type of abortion however, the type that causes April Wheeler to haemorrhage to death in Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*, bears with it a sense of futility—the act of will, of self-determination, collapses into one of self-destruction. Yet again, and in bloody fashion, the maternal body consumes the self.

Naturally, there are not only different types of abortion narrative but different types of narrator, and questions of gendered perspective and gendered authorship would be integral to any study of abortion as a literary trope. In John Updike’s *Couples* for instance, abortion is portrayed not only from a male perspective, but as a deal done between two men, in which Piet Hanema permits his dentist to sleep

with his wife in exchange for his services as an abortionist. The abortion is not for his wife, but for his lover, so that two women's bodies are implicated in this arrangement. *Couples* engages directly with the rise of individualism and the cult of hyper-sexualisation in "post-pill" 1960s America, and is an example of how focused explication of abortion as a literary theme might offer greater insight into attitudes to the maternal body in a culture posited on notions of sexual revolution and personal liberation. While authorial gender is an important consideration, an intersectional reading of the texts, incorporating race, sexual orientation, religion and social class would provide a greater depth of understanding into how ideas of identity and alterity are represented in the abortion narrative.

The narrative of the failed or fatal abortion carries with it questions of morality and insinuations of moral judgement. Likewise, if abortion is to be read as an assertion of female autonomy, the failed abortion narrative might be read as a cautionary tale, in which woman is made to pay for her act against (her) nature. In Mary McCarthy's *A Charmed Life*, for instance, the protagonist's efforts to organise an abortion are thwarted by a car crash—the fairy tale plotting of which is somewhat reminiscent of the 'accident' that befalls Charlotte Haze in *Lolita*. At the time of Martha's death, she is pregnant with a child whose father may be either her current or former husband. She is carrying in her pocketbook borrowed cash for an abortion, along with the address of the clinic. Her tragedy, it might

seem, is of her own making, or perhaps more precisely, of her *choosing*.

All of this harks back the Madonna/Whore problem discussed in Chapter One, for while female sexuality is reduced to female reproduction in patriarchal discourse, heteronormative culture endorses only a certain type of motherhood. Likewise, the concept of a female desire has been largely ignored or reduced to a biological imperative, so that the childless woman, or the woman who *chooses* not to bear children, is an aberration. Indeed, childlessness is equated to *selfishness*—a term which implies gendered notions about *selfhood*, for the childless man faces no such accusations—the preservation and promotion of *his self* being the very cornerstone of patriarchal, capitalist culture. This concept, is I believe, particularly pertinent in the American idolatry of the self-made man. Women, on the other hand, do not or should not *self-make*, for women are supposed to *make* babies. Further to this, the maternal body represents *selflessness*, or, literally, a lessening of the self. The self-affirming, choosing, or self-making woman, is hence anathema to the notion of woman's inherent generality, for while God has been displaced by the cult of the individual, the centrality of man has been retained in that framework. His identity, his lionised individuality, holds her as its object and its opposite. The self-made man is hence analogous to Nabokov's self-creating author. The matricidal narrative sustains them both.

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