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**Freedom and Desire: From Mute to #MeToo.
An Aftermath of Nabokov's *Lolita* in the 21st Century.**

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1. Introduction

Nabokov's novel *Lolita* was published in the middle of the 20th century, almost 70 years ago. In this work, I would like to trace how its critical perception has changed due to the #MeToo phenomenon of the 21st century. Furthermore, this paper explores the literary voices that emerged in response to Nabokov's *Lolita*. Moreover, I am going to delineate and examine in which way modern re-interpretations of *Lolita* reflect the contemporary perception of trauma and traumatic stress responses. The fact that this story was recently rewritten multiple times from a feminine perspective indicates that this topic is of current interest and relevant for modern readers. This introduction serves to outline the research topic, displaying the structure of the thesis as a whole, as well as the content of the individual chapters.

Before analyzing Nabokov's novel written from a masculine perspective, I am going to review the literary perceptions of masculinity and femininity of the last centuries, focusing on the representations of desire, in order to locate correlations and disparities of these theories with the original text and modern re-interpretations written from a feminine perspective. The central question is in which way the change of perspective affects the reading and understanding of the text. Do protagonists conform to common stereotypes of masculinity and femininity of the 20th century or is there an emergence of new tendencies in the novels written in the 21st century?

Nabokov calls every great novel a fairy tale, and every fairy tale "offers the potential to surpass present limits, so in a sense, the fairy tale offers you freedoms that reality denies."¹ Reading Nabokov's *Lolita*, we surpass many limits, plunging into the abyss of lust and suffering. I will explore whether this novel offers us freedoms that reality denies or makes us understand how lust defrauds one's freedom. Using careful close reading, I will elucidate what freedom means for Humbert Humbert and what it seems to mean for Dolores Haze. Finally, I am going to address the incompatibility of their wants and needs, disclosing the reasons behind the resulting clash of desires.

¹ Nafisi, p.47.

Sexual objectification displayed in *Lolita* – inter alia, ownership, instrumentality, reduction to the body, and silencing, meaning a denial of autonomy and self-determination – signifies, in other words, loss of freedom. In this chapter, I am going to explore and analyze the notions of freedom and desire, its possibilities and limitations, tracing how Nabokov’s major work has imprinted the following generations of readers and writers. Is there an emergence of a “better generation in a safer world,” ironically mentioned by John Ray in the foreword to *Lolita*, and if so, are “vigilance and vision” enhanced or inhibited by the freedoms of our time?

What happens when a heart’s desire cannot be fulfilled, and one is unable to become free, after all? Coming back to the image of *Lolita* as a fairy tale, the reader realizes very soon that a fairy tale becomes a nightmare, and this abrupt shift from pleasure to suffering is the third focal point I would like to investigate, using the methods of close reading and the contextual analysis. Before stepping forward into the 21st century, I would like to step back into the 19th century for a moment first, in order to unearth the roots before scrutinizing buds and blossoms. The theme of freedom, as man’s ultimate essence, “attains equal acuteness and unsurpassed profundity of expression in Dostoevsky” whom Nabokov called a mediocre writer.² However, I am not going to dwell on Nabokov’s deliberately scandalous attacks on Dostoevsky. Instead, in this part, I am going to draw parallels and examine the intertextual references between Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime and Punishment*, comparing Humbert to Raskolnikov and Dolly to Sonia. Analyzing *Lolita* it would be impossible to concentrate on the female figure only, bypassing the male protagonist, for the main issue is the interaction between the two of them. Bringing Dostoevsky into the discussion is crucial because Nabokov called himself an American writer born in Russia and educated in England before spending 15 years in Germany, thus intentionally diminishing the impact of Russian cultural and literary traditions on his works. However, I would argue that Dostoevsky’s influence on Nabokov is striking, which could partly explain the presence of misogyny and

² Knight, p.42.

mansplaining in these two novels. What are the consequences of breaking free from any and all rules or regulations? Is Humbert a new type of villain, “as disgusting and deplorable as any ever written” or do we find any prototypes in the world literature?³ Or is it possible that he is “not a villain at all,” as Dmitry Bykov, a prominent Russian writer and critic, has claimed?

The language of seduction and its manipulative power is another key aspect I am going to consider and elaborate in my research. Who seduces and manipulates whom in *Lolita*? In *The Art of Seduction* Robert Greene describes and categorizes the most common types of seducers and victims, using historical and literary examples and explaining the most popular seduction techniques. I would like to explore whether the multiple personalities exhibited by Humbert throughout the novel could be put in some of those categories and whether Dolly fits any description of a stereotypical victim or seductress.

Freedom and desire are two central issues of *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras that has appeared almost 30 years after Nabokov’s *Lolita*, offering a feminine perspective on a similar topic. In this chapter, I would like to address the theme of feminine desire, making a comparative analysis of the two novels. Additionally, I will investigate whether Duras’s protagonist is able to achieve liberation, following her desire.

The absence of voice is another aspect of oppression and loss of freedom I am going to dwell on, in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of Lolita’s relationship with Humbert. A reader has easy access to the inner sanctums of his desires, whereas an insight into Dolly’s inner world is distorted and blurred by Humbert’s perspective. In this chapter, I will extract and analyze the fragments of Lolita’s voice, attempting to discern whether *Lolita* is an “anti-polyphonic” novel. In addition, I would like to study in which way her role as an objectified Other influences her voicelessness.

³ Reissenweber, p.30.

Addressing the somber issue of sexual harassment, one cannot evade the recent #MeToo phenomenon, which I would like to introduce in this discourse because it shaped both the perception and the production of literary works written in the 21st century that abord this topic. #MeToo gave many women freedom of expression, making their voices heard. Regarding derivative works, first, I will focus on a controversial parody of Nabokov's *Lolita*, namely, Pia Pera's *Lo's Diary* (1999), harshly criticized by Dmitri Nabokov. Furthermore, I will have a closer look at the latest reinterpretations of *Lolita*: Kate Elisabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), Sofka Zinovieff's *Putney* (2018), and *Being Lolita* by Alisson Wood (2020), uncovering the intertextual links with Nabokov's original novel.

Finally, I am going to analyze the metaphysical background of Nabokov's *Lolita*, using the term "the butterfly effect" and drawing parallels with Ray Bradbury's short story "A Sound of Thunder." In which way is "the Lolita effect" - a term coined by Gigi Durham – similar to "the butterfly effect"?

Based on the close reading of the English original of the novel (1955) and its Russian translation composed by Nabokov (1967), this study will focus on the verbal and non-verbal interaction between the two protagonists, Humbert Humbert and Dolores Haze, disclosing the differences in wording that influence the connotation and interpretation. According to Alexandrov, in his afterword to *Lolita* Nabokov has suggested reading the Russian version of the novel for a better understanding of the English one:

"По крайней мере однажды, а именно в послесловии к «Лолите», Набоков указал, что для верного понимания его англоязычной прозы нужно читать книги, написанные по-русски. Почему именно, он не пояснил, но можно допустить, что это замечание каким-то образом связано с ложным, хотя и широко распространенным прочтением «Лолиты» как порнографического романа, — упрек, который Набоков всячески старался отвести."⁴

Alexandrov believes that this suggestion is connected to the common misconception among English-speaking critics that *Lolita* is a pornographic novel, which I would like to inspect.

⁴ Alexandrov, p.4.

Nabokov himself said in his *Lectures on Russian Literature* that the only right way of reading literature is rereading: “Литературу надо принимать мелкими дозами, раздробив, раскрошив, размолот, — тогда вы почувствуете ее сладостное благоухание в глубине ладоней.”⁵ I am going to follow his advice, carefully examining the texts in small portions on multiple levels, in order to display how *Lolita* represents an unfulfilled quest for freedom. For the purpose of this project, only the works that provide the most consistent and cohesive messages focusing on the notions of freedom, desire, and finding one’s voice were considered for further examination. By selecting these four novels, I have aimed to gain a view of their differences and similarities with Nabokov’s original as well as explore each novel’s perspective on sexual abuse and its aftermath. The central question is: can women, traditionally the objects of desire, become the subjects of their own narration?

The decision to write on Nabokov, notwithstanding the existing solid corpus of literary criticism on his most famous novel *Lolita*, comes from personal admiration of his talent and strong sentiment that his work might reveal an unexplored facet, being put in the context of the twenty-first century.

⁵ Nabokov, *Лекции по русской литературе*, p.132.

2. Gender and Desire in Contemporary Literature

In Nabokov's *Lolita*, as well as in the majority of novels that deal with passion and obsession, a male desire usually lies at the heart of the plot, whereas a female desire remains in the dark, unseen and unknown. For instance, Theresa DiPasquale, amongst other critics, points out that the desiring subject is typically envisioned as a male, while the objects of his longing are gendered feminine. There is a correlation between man's sexual desire for a woman and "his sublimated desire for authority, fame, power, or enlightenment."⁶ However, there are hardly any parallels between a feminine desire and heroic aspirations. As a man sparks off and conquers, a woman surrenders to her fate and his vigor.

Before analyzing the elements of feminism and chauvinism in Nabokov's *Lolita* and derivational novels, I would like to offer a brief introduction to gender theory, highlighting the most common stereotypes discussed in detail during the literary analysis of the novels. In "The Metamorphosis of 'Lolita' Identity Within the Transformed Gender Discourse," Milena Čomić asserts that Lolita's figure represents a specific construct of female identity within the context of modern consumer culture, which should be studied "as marginal gender and luminal identity based on the mechanism of constituting female subjectivity as continuous transformation: 'neutral' gender position of a child/girl is being transformed into a sexualized subject which then gains the characteristics of a commodity for glamorous consumption."⁷ In other words, Lolita's identity is defined through her role in the life of the male protagonist – Humbert Humbert, who objectifies and consumes her.

Views of masculinity and femininity are bound by time and culture. The notion of gender is so deeply rooted in society – in our actions, beliefs, and desires – that it seems to be completely natural. Before the time of the first publication of *Lolita* in

⁶ DiPasquale, p.356.

⁷ Čomić, p.287.

1955, gender was equated with biological sex. Čomić mentions that the belief that men's and women's mode of operation in society is governed by their biology is known as 'biological essentialism'. However, gender is not an inborn feature but something we perform according to the preassigned roles. Gender is constructed within cultural and social discourse. Consequently, discourse analysis has been used as a research method on topics concerning gender identity.

In *Language and Gender*, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet state that actual differences between males and females tend to be scalar rather than dichotomous. However, it is pointed out that "the eagerness of some scientists to establish a biological basis for all gender difference and the public's eagerness to take these findings up" result in producing and enforcing the dichotomous categories of male and female.⁸ Freud's early theories were developed within a patriarchally established gender system that puts men on one end of the gender spectrum while placing women in the position of an "other." Until now, scientific research of gender differences in the brain is based on insufficient samples and shaky evidence, which makes it far from conclusive. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet quote Simone de Beauvoir who stated: "Women are not born, they are made," adding that the same is true of men.⁹ With different treatment, boys and girls have no choice but learn to become different. The authors conclude that although the basic capabilities of women and men are far less different from each other than assumed, the social treatment, their experiences, and others' expectations of them are much more divergent than widely presumed.

Till coming of age, the emphasis remains on the opposition of two genders. Ensuingly, a sudden change occurs in the nature of dichotomous thinking, as opposites are supposed to attract: "And with this comes the introduction to gender of the conscious element of desire."¹⁰ Images of perfect couples are omnipresent and pervasive, and from a very young age, most children and teenagers learn to desire an ideally matched partner of the other sex. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet assert: "This

⁸ Eckert; McConnell-Ginet, p.5.

⁹ Eckert; McConnell-Ginet, p.7.

¹⁰ Eckert; McConnell-Ginet, p.16.

concentration of desire, or cathexis, is an extraordinarily powerful force in the maintenance of the heterosexual gender order,” which leads to forming oneself in a particular mold as an object of desire.¹¹ Furthermore, consumption is mainly driven by desire, which is highly gendered, too. The authors maintain that desire is not natural, but highly structured and learned, whereas the products we consume and our activities represent extensions of the self, driven by desire.

Still, some popular contemporary bestsellers, such as *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* by David M. Buss, claim that antagonistic gender differences in mating strategies do exist. Buss presents his study as the largest one ever undertaken, encompassing more than 10,000 people of all ages from thirty-seven cultures worldwide. Basing his argument on a wide range of examples of mating behavior, he creates a mostly dichotomic model. Buss attempts to allure the reader, promising to disclose what women and men desire while explaining why their desires radically differ. For instance, he asserts that women mainly desire a longer commitment and an emotional bond, whereas men are often motivated by the desire for sexual variety. All in all, Buss argues that love has a central place in human sexual psychology, but competition and manipulation greatly affect human mating.

Despite its universality, desire does not represent a constant value but is believed to be mobile and fluid. Similarly, masculinity and femininity represent historical constructs, which are multiple and variable. For Peter Brooks, desire is a blind and uncomprehending pressure, inherently insatiable and therefore painful. Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan assert that all people, irrespective of their sex, are governed by irrational unconscious desires.

In the article “The Problem of Desire,” Bronwyn Davies explores how desires are constituted in compliance with one’s gendered identity, working towards the deconstruction of the link between the concept of desire and the notion of gender. In doing so, she relies on Kristeva, who calls on the reader to investigate the

¹¹ Eckert; McConnell-Ginet, p.17.

organization of desire, re-constructing our identities outside the mass of *womanness* or *manness*. Finally, Davies states that feminism gives women the voice to discover and rewrite new storylines, “invert, invent, break the bounds of old structures and old discourses.”¹² Poststructuralist discourse has allowed women to be a subject that realizes, speaks, and writes her subjectified views, thus moving to “a celebration of desiring – as opposed to being a desirable object” – playing with new patterns and new meanings.¹³

It should be mentioned that masculinity studies similarly challenge deep-rooted assumptions concerning gender roles in literature, deconstructing the narrative fictions of masculinity that used to structure diverse literary genres. Contemporary researchers claim that masculinity was developed as a mask to create an impression of leveling up with conventional masculinity’s visual and performative standards. Michael Kimmel states in his comprehensive work *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* that the early 20th century, which represents a time of fluctuating gender norms, had generated much of the gender ideologies “that only in recent years have been challenged.”¹⁴ The issue of masculinity was repeatedly addressed by such prominent American writers as Lawrence, Fitzgerald, Carter, Hughes, and Hemingway, who incorporated gender issues into their works, representing masculinity in a manner that both confirms and questions the conventional gender norms of their time. A double-edged portrayal of women, who often act as mere sexual objects within the competing discourses of men, corresponds with conventional patriarchal aesthetics that celebrates manhood. Kimmel states that masculinity was often defined through its antithesis to femininity, stating: “Manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us.”¹⁵ Concerning masculine desire, in his other book *Men and Masculinities: A-J*, Kimmel quotes George Gilder (1986), who believes that male sexuality is, by nature, “wild and lusty, insistent and incessant, caring out of control and threatening

¹² Davies, p.508.

¹³ Davies, p.508.

¹⁴ Kimmel, MiA, p.103.

¹⁵ Kimmel, MiA, p.26.

anarchic disorder,” unless it is controlled and constrained by women.¹⁶ If a woman refuses to accomplish this task, pursuing a life outside the domestic sphere, it means a denial of their “natural” social function. Furthermore, Kimmel points out that masculinity is still often associated with “technical mastery, aggression, competitiveness, and cognitive abstraction, whereas femininity is associated with emotional nurturance, connectedness and passivity.”¹⁷ He concludes his argument, claiming that although men frequently acts as the agents of oppression of women, their interests in the gender order are “not pregiven but constructed.”¹⁸ In this way, Kimmel attempts to excuse men for their oppressive behavior, shifting the blame on society.

In her famous essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf ponders on the disparity between a massive volume of male writers writing about women while exploring the topic of female inferiority and a scarce amount of female writers who barely write about men. She points out:

“Sex and its nature might well attract doctors and biologists; but what was surprising and difficult of explanation was the fact that sex – woman, that is to say – also attracts agreeable essayists, light-fingered novelists, young men who have taken the M.A. degree; men who have taken no degree; men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women.”¹⁹

Similarly, in her book *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* Barbara Heldt remarks that “all of the most memorable heroines of Russian literature appear in works by men.”²⁰ Feminist literary scholar Judith Fetterley adds that in many cases, women are given a voice from a male perspective, shaping the image of women in male terms.²¹ Virginia Woolf finds deplorable that almost nothing is known about women before the 18th century. Besides, she admits that values of women differ greatly from those of men, whereas masculine values prevail in our society, which is transferred from life to fiction.

¹⁶ Kimmel, MaM, p.xix.

¹⁷ Kimmel, MaM, p.xxi.

¹⁸ Kimmel, HSMM, p.15.

¹⁹ Woolf, p.23.

²⁰ Heldt, p.3.

²¹ Fetterley, p. ix.

I would agree with Woolf who believes that it is absurd to blame or demonize any sex as a whole. She presumes that both men and women are driven by strong instincts, being bred of the conditions of life, which are not within their control. Still, she remarks that men have always had easier access to education, money, and power. In addition, men used to have more knowledge of the world and more practical experience, unlike female writers such as Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot, who spent their lives in social isolation. Such great novelists as Dickens or Balzac have written magnificent prose, drawing excitement and satisfaction exercising their art. In contrast, women writers stumbled upon “lack of tradition” combined with “a scarcity and inadequacy of tools,” that negatively influenced their writing.²² Similarly, in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Professor Humbert, who was born in Paris in a bourgeois family that enabled him access to high education, is presented as “the Subject, the Bearer of High Culture, the Consumer;” whereas Dolly is pictured “the Other, the Consumer and the Bearer of Popular culture and the Commodity consumed by him.”²³ She exists solely within his discourse, being molded and defined by the male hero.

There is a paradox: imaginatively, a woman’s character is meaningful, whereas practically, she is utterly insignificant, representing one of man’s precious possessions. Virginia Woolf ridicules the notion of chastity, stating that it “may be a fetish invented by certain societies for unknown reasons.”²⁴ Furthermore, she holds that the presence of sin is the legacy of our sexual barbarity. Similarly, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir points out that knowledge, culture, and art used to be predominantly of man’s making, calling men “the subjects” of their own lives and women “the objects” or “the other,” representing a negation of what a man would desire to become. Speaking of desire, de Beauvoir claims that women inevitably become “prey” for men, although sex should ideally be based on freedom and equality. She maintains that every human being should have the possibility to

²² Woolf, p.64.

²³ Čomić, p.289.

²⁴ Woolf, p.42.

experience both feelings of conquest and of being conquered to appreciate freedom fully:

“The dissimilarity that exists between the eroticism of the male and that of the female creates insoluble problems as long as there is a «battle of the sexes»; they can easily be solved when a woman finds in the male both desire and respect; if he lusts after her flesh while recognizing her freedom, she feels herself to be the essential, her integrity remains free in the submission to which she consents.”²⁵

De Beauvoir calls the reader to turn away from ingrained myths that rob women of their individuality, instead exploring ambiguities and paradoxes.

In the article “A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature” Cynthia Wolff states that literature reflects the prevalent social attitude towards women, remarking that a considerable proportion of prominent literary works deal with specifically masculine problems, such as establishing a masculine identity, performing a series of public roles, testing one’s courage or independence, and “accepting the inevitable loss of power and potency that accompanies old age.”²⁶ However, feminine problems are seldom the principal subject of literary interest. The depiction of relationships between women and men is often treated in literature as if it was the only meaningful relationship a woman can have. Moreover, Wolff points out that characterization of women is usually dominated “by what one might call the male voice,” whereas the definitions of women’s most serious problems are “tailored to meet the needs of fundamentally masculine problems.”²⁷ She asserts that the stereotypes of women in literature vary in response to different masculine needs.

Furthermore, Wolff addresses the dichotomy between the chaste woman, who “is identified with positive elements in a man’s life,” and the sensuous woman, who is associated with a sexual desire and “other forms of non-virtuous behavior.”²⁸ Unfortunately, sensual women in a classical novel do not end well: they are either “killed off, or move on, or they enter a convent.”²⁹ Similarly, Virginia Woolf tackles

²⁵ De Beauvoir, p. 401.

²⁶ Wolff, p.206.

²⁷ Wolff, p.207.

²⁸ Wolff, p.208.

²⁹ Wolff, p.209.

this dichotomy, stating: “However, the majority of women are neither harlots nor courtesans; nor do they sit clasping pug dogs to dusty velvet all through summer afternoon.”³⁰ In the following chapters I am going to come back to this dichotomy and explore it on the example of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and Duras’s *The Lover*.

Finally, Wolff describes “the liberated woman” that appears in 19th and 20th -century literature and represents an exact opposite of “the sentimental stereotype.”³¹ The first prominent spokeswoman of liberation was Mary Wollstonecraft, who aimed to disprove Rousseau’s claims about women’s essential emotionalism, asserting that women are not fundamentally different from men, and can by all means, be considered rational human beings. Rousseau’s ideas regarding the role of women in the bounds of marriage expressed in his book *Emile, or On Education* influenced European ideas, promoting a view of marriage as an unequal union:

“In the union of the sexes each contributes equally to the common aim, but not in the same way. From this diversity arises the first assignable difference in the moral relations of the two sexes. One ought to be active and strong, and the other passive and weak. One must necessarily will and be able; it suffices that the other put up little resistance. Once this principle is established, it follows that woman is specially made to please man. If man ought to please her in turn, it is due to a less direct necessity. His merit is in his power; he pleases by the sole fact of his strength.”³²

Rousseau’s vision of marriage rests on the assumption that men and women are inherently different. He asserts that men are stronger and more active while women are passive and weak, which allows men to use their strength dominating women, whereas women’s main duties consist of pleasing the men and submitting to their will. All in all, he believes that women’s sole strength and weapon is their charms, which can be used to attract men and gain power over them.

In addition, Wolff states: “If a liberated woman has potential, then her problem [...] is that she desires to find meaningful (usually public) employment of that talent.”³³ This stereotype presumes that a liberated woman has no interest in children and

³⁰ Woolf, p.74.

³¹ Wolff, p.212.

³² Rousseau, p.358.

³³ Wolff, p.213.

mothering. Concerning sexual desire, Wolff points out that ambitious women are often portrayed as sexually perverse, being promiscuous, lesbian, or frigid. A post-Civil-War liberated woman, labeled by Wolff “The American Girl,” is characterized by her accomplishments: she is an educated woman that “bears a torch of culture,” most often meaning being a teacher.³⁴ She is instilled with “a sense of purpose and moral destiny,” and men fear her strict and bossy ways.

Analyzing Russian novels of the 19th century, we can state that typical women characters display modesty, loyalty, industriousness, and self-sacrifice. Their role in society is mostly insignificant. For Tolstoi, a woman should be a mother in the first place. In contrast, those who do not have children are called “пустоцвет” (meaning “a barren flower.”) Still, Dostoevsky, who highly appreciated the image of a chaste and thoughtful beauty, embodied by Pushkin’s Tatiana, does not endow his heroines with the integrity of “an ideal woman,” which makes them complex and rather realistic characters. In Dostoyevsky’s works, pride and suffering are often combined with Christian humility relating to Madonna’s beauty. Yuri Lotman claims that a representation of a woman character is the most sensitive barometer of social life: “[...] женщина с ее напряженной эмоциональностью, живо и непосредственно впитывает особенности своего времени, в значительной мере обгоняя его. В этом смысле характер женщины можно назвать одним из самых чутких барометров общественной жизни.”³⁵ He identifies three stereotypes of female heroines in Russian literature: the first one is a tenderly loving woman with a broken heart; the second one is a demonic character that fights all the conventions created by men; finally, the third one is a powerful heroic woman who is opposed to a spiritually weaker man. Lotman asserts that women actively assimilated the roles assigned to them by novels and poems. In essence, literary works have formed the reality, creating an image of a man embodying social flaws and an image of a woman incorporating a social ideal.

³⁴ Wolff, p.216.

³⁵ Lotman, p.35.

Similar to American literature, in the 20th century a Russian literary heroine appeared increasingly independent and self-confident. Still, many women characters are willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others, take everything as destined and never grumble. For example, Solzhenitsyn's Matryona demonstrates boundless kindness despite her daunting fate, conforming to the portrayal of "the chaste woman" mentioned above. However, there are a few postmodern exceptions. For instance, Sorokin's Marina and Erofeev's Irina are Matryona's antipodes, who fit the description of a demonic character possessed by lust. To be precise, Marina is sexually liberated and economically independent protagonist, telling a story of her sexual awakening and early traumas. Irina Tarakanova is a beautiful femme fatale and a prostitute who tells a story of her erotic odyssey, which was called "a highly ironic nod to the tradition of female sacrifice in Russian literature."³⁶ In *The Artistic Censoring of Sexuality*, Susan Mooney points out that both Nabokov and Erofeev seek to make sexuality "a central social issue, a key to understanding our weaknesses and inequalities."³⁷ According to her, sexuality in literature has a double function: besides offering an aesthetic pleasure, it often draws attention to the status of women (dealing with "pornography, prostitution, marriage and relationships, reproduction and fertility,) and the status of men ("as purveyors, consumers, fantasists, and masters of sexuality") in our society.³⁸ Furthermore, Mooney claims that sexuality contains knowledge, power, and freedom, whereas the readers may achieve a certain truth or liberation through an artistic depiction of desire in literature.

Based on the selection of derivative novels that followed Nabokov's *Lolita* I would like to study whether the women characters portrayed by the modern female writers can be viewed as liberated women. Or could they be regarded as wholly new prototypes that reflect the current epoch?

³⁶ Matthews, p.435.

³⁷ Mooney, p.ix.

³⁸ Mooney, p.x.

3. Freedom and Desire in *Lolita*

Nabokov's novel *Lolita* tells a story of a middle-aged man, a literature professor named Humbert Humbert, who becomes lustfully obsessed with a 12-year-old girl, Dolores Haze, becoming her stepfather to remain close to her. After her mother's death, Humbert kidnaps Dolores, holding her captive until she escapes at the age of 14. The novel is structured as an autobiographical confession, written during Humbert's detention in prison while awaiting a trial. "Lolita" is the name Humbert coins for Dolores, seeing her as a perfect "nymphet" that embodies his first love Annabel.

Humbert begins his narrative by picturing his desperate and deplorable desire mixed with shame and guilt, directly addressing the driving force of his confession: "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."³⁹ This description of three steps correlates with three phases of their relationship: first, Humbert contemplates and carefully prearranges a devious plan of coming closer to Dolly; secondly, he captures and consumes her; and finally, he loses her. During the articulation, the tongue stays invisible inside the mouth, comparable with their secret affair that remains untold till Humbert's final confession. The mouth represents the cage, symbolizing the restriction of freedom in the novel that concerns both protagonists: Humbert is unfree to follow his desires that deviate from the social norm, whereas Dolly is dominated and silenced by his urge to possess her.

Nabokov's *Lolita* is presented to the reader as a confession of a white widowed male, whereas some critics argue that the first part of the novel is a pseudo-confession, for Humbert solely attempts to justify his actions and prove himself innocent in front of the jury; and only the second part represents an actual confession since he admits his crime and seems to repent. A confession could be viewed as an emotional liberation from psychological repression, representing the basic principle of psychotherapy.

³⁹ Nabokov, p.9.

The term “the talking cure,” coined by Josef Breuer and adopted by Sigmund Freud, reflects the essence of a confession: once the patient addresses the repressed trauma, expressing related emotions, the healing process begins. This appears to be Humbert’s case, for he successfully identifies the issues that cause his emotional distress and realizes the harm he had caused. The reader is directly addressed by the narrator on numerous occasions throughout the discourse, being encouraged to actively participate in the action: “I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called... ‘impartial sympathy.’”⁴⁰ In the article “The Viability of Narration in Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” Kaushal Sharma points out that the implied reader mentioned in the novel is not a homogenous entity, but a fluid organism that magically metamorphosizes from fellow intellectuals into members of the jury. By ascribing positive attributes to the implied reader, the narrator attempts to modulate the reader’s sympathy or empathy.

On the contrary, Susan Bernstein has a negative view on confession. She states that acts of confession are often framed by the heterosexualized power relations, forming a “closeted space of disclosure and concealment;” which is also “a coupled space of the inquisitor-victim.”⁴¹ This perspective could also be applied to the analysis of Humbert’s confession, for he can be viewed as an inquisitor who conceals a good lot of information, disclosing the perfectly filtered part. Bernstein regrettably remarks that women are frequently viewed as transgressors after having confessed wrongdoings committed against them, and this is the tendency addressed and combated by the #MeToo movement, which will be discussed later.

Nabokov’s *Lolita* is undoubtedly one of the most discussed novels of our times, attaining a near canonical status and inciting a polyphonic clash of critical responses. This novel was called a love story and a quest, a gothic tale, a labyrinth creation, a

⁴⁰ Nabokov, p.57.

⁴¹ Bernstein, p.5.

road novel, a parody, a joke, labeled as a highbrow pornography and categorized as a metaphysical tale or a myth by different critics.⁴² In her book *Shopping with Freud*, Rachel Bowlby asserts that *Lolita* is not about “guilt and innocence, seducer and victim, real love and perverse sexuality,” but rather about the clash of aesthetic and vulgar values embodied by Humbert and Lolita.⁴³ In his book *Postmodern Crises. From Lolita to Pussy Riot*, a prominent Russian critic Mark Lipovetsky calls *Lolita* a seminal novel that “marked the crisis of the transcendental cultural paradigm,” stating that Humbert’s life story is a tale of a transcendental escape “beyond the boundaries of reality, beyond time and death.”⁴⁴

Why do all these and many other researchers come to such contrasting conclusions while analyzing the same novel? The Finnish researcher of Nabokov Tammi Pekka explains this remarkable heterogeneity of critical responses in his book *Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics: A Narratological Analysis*, claiming that the “polygenetic” character of Nabokovian prose, in which the allusions have a different cultural context and hence are aimed at diverse addressees, is the main reason for the numerous and partly contradictory interpretations.⁴⁵ So how should we read *Lolita*, after all? An eminent literary critic Leland de la Durantay attempts to answer this question in his book *Style is Matter. The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, declaring:

“We should read it the way all great works deserve to be read: with attention and intelligence. But what sort of attention should we pay and what sort of intelligence should we apply to a work of art that recounts so much love, so much loss, so much thoughtlessness—and across which flashes something we might be tempted to call evil? ... Great literature offers us a lesson in empathy: it encourages us to feel with the strange and the familiar, the strong and the weak, the vulgar and the cultivated, the young and the old, the lover and the beloved. It urges us to see our own fates as connected to those of others, to link the starry sky we see above us with whatever moral laws we might sense within.”⁴⁶

De la Durantay argues that Humbert does not only seduce Lolita and/or is seduced by her, but as an unreliable narrator, artfully composes his confession to seduce the

⁴² Connolly, pp.143-150.

⁴³ Bowlby, p.61.

⁴⁴ Lipovetsky, pp.8-15.

⁴⁵ Pekka, p.193.

⁴⁶ Durantay, p.6.

reader “into complicity with his dark fantasies and even darker acts.”⁴⁷ I would argue that the notions of freedom and desire are the two foundational pillars upon which rests the psychological construction of emotions in the novel.

Lolita is a tragic story about a clash of desires and its disastrous consequences. In his book *Nabokov’s Eros and the Poetics of Desire* (2014), Marcel Couturier explores Nabokov’s adversary engagement with Freud, drawing on Lacan’s typology of psychological development. Couturier deals with “the cruelty of desire and the desire of cruelty,” arguing that Nabokov’s excellence as a writer owes much to his “sexual desire battling with his high aesthetic standards.”⁴⁸ However, I am not going to incorporate a study of Nabokov’s personal life into this work, being reluctant to approach literary works using biographical criticism. As mentioned in Chapter 8, I believe that in a fictional novel, the author’s private life should not be taken into account during literary analysis. I rather agree with the view that the author is dead, and critics should not attempt to furnish the text with final signification, imposing upon it a stop clause, as Roland Barthes puts it. In addition, Couturier studies the amorous and sexual behaviors of Nabokov’s characters, showing how each particular demeanor contributes aesthetically to the plot of the story and proceeds to claim that Eros, which means “desire” in ancient Greek, is a key figure in Nabokov’s works.

In his later book, *Le Rapt de Lolita* (2018), Couturier asks a tricky rhetorical question, inquiring why Nabokov’s poetic makes his readers recognize that they share some of the libidinous and lecherous desires vividly depicted in his novels:

“Et pourquoi fallait-il qu’il cherche à compromettre ses lecteurs en les apostrophant sans cesse, les invitant à reconnaître qu’ils partagent ses désirs libidineux, sinon criminels, les incitant même à l’absoudre de ses fautes par le jeu de la poésie ? Celle-ci, associée à ses facéties narratives et à son humour, quelque peu cynique, certes, transcende, en effect le contenu érotique du livre.”⁴⁹

Couturier believes that the author can freely yield to his desires only as long as he manages to seduce his reader, generating strong desires in him. He compares

⁴⁷ Durantaye, p.8.

⁴⁸ Couturier, p.3.

⁴⁹ Couturier, p.25.

Nabokovian text with a sophisticated engine that generates powerful desires. Couturier points out that Nabokov's poerotic strategies are subtle, elaborate and multifaceted, including narrative, phonetic and metaphorical games – and this is how he enchants and entices the reader. “I desire, therefore I am,” concludes Couturier, re-echoing Descartes. On the contrary, Roxana Robinson asserts that by subverting the form of the traditional erotic novel, Nabokov frustrates the reader instead of gratifying him. She remarks that the nauseating motels, prying neighbors, and skulking policemen act as dampers of desire.

Desire is a driving force of our lives that makes us act and react, sometimes irrationally. Naturally, literary characters also have desires that drive their action within a narrative: “It's the dynamic of desire that is at the heart of narrative and plot.”⁵⁰ Before proceeding with literary analysis, it might be helpful to review a few essential definitions of the notions of freedom and desire. While analyzing the concept of desire, many narrative theorists as well as psychoanalytic critics take sexual desire as their paradigm because sexuality is generally viewed as a universal aspect of human character. According to Freud, a human desire begins at the unconscious level. However, as mentioned above, it is a well-known fact that Nabokov detested Freud and parodied the Freudian concept of childhood fixation, and if we choose to focus on the text only, assuming that “the author is dead,” we would also find some textual evidence of Nabokov's attitude towards Freud: Humbert proudly announces several times that his profound knowledge of psychoanalysis helped him to fool the therapists treating him. Consequently, we will better put Freud aside and handle the pseudo-psychoanalytic references dispersed throughout the novel with caution.

In his book *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*, David Packman asserts that *Lolita* is a study of desire, maintaining that its very form is a literary adumbration of the process of desire. Analyzing *Lolita*, Packman attempts to show how “the desire represented thematically in the text mirrors the reader's desire for the

⁵⁰ Butler, p.40.

text.”⁵¹ But does every reader experiences the same desires? Nabokov’s former student Ross Wetzsteon calls him “The Professor of Desire,” claiming that after reading his works, “all the reader’s emotions are equalized, as in the supremest art, as in all of Nabokov’s art, in a burst of radiance — suffering and joy, grief and pleasure, tears and laughter, all transfigured into the sustained, immortal ecstasy of aesthetic bliss.”⁵² Undoubtedly, an attentive reader would notice these dichotomies, but what seems more important to me is the duality of desire and disgust, for Humbert’s desire is clearly unilateral. We should keep in mind that the story is written by a male writer and narrated by a male character; whereupon several critics pointed out that female readers are implicitly excluded from the immortal ecstasy. The implied female reader is rather accusing, judgmental and indignant, being unable to experience desire (“frigid gentlewomen of the jury.”⁵³) Thus ironic distance between the implied author and the dramatized first-person narrator is established, creating a discrepancy between expectation and reality.

What do we know about the passions and desires of Dolores Haze? “The discursive screens” placed by Humbert over her – “nymphet, lover, the beloved, work of art, goddess of love, daemon, fairy, witch, dominatrix” – practically muzzle and erase her actual personality.⁵⁴ According to the narrator, she likes sunbathing,⁵⁵ reading green-red-blue comics called the “funnies,”⁵⁶ (in the Russian version Nabokov uses a bulky construction “страницы юмористического отдела”⁵⁷) and going to the lake. She asks Humbert a week after he moves in: “Look, make Mother take you and me to Our Glass Lake tomorrow.”⁵⁸ In the Russian version the lake is named Очковое Озеро, which is an extremely rarely used adjective, contrary to the word “glass”. Nabokov had probably chosen this name because of his love of alliteration. However, the resulting connotation is entirely different from the original: the word

⁵¹ Packman, p.5.

⁵² Wetzsteon, p.13.

⁵³ Nabokov, p.132.

⁵⁴ Mooney, p.145.

⁵⁵ Nabokov, p.42.

⁵⁶ Nabokov, p.42.

⁵⁷ Nabokov, RV, p.57.

⁵⁸ Nabokov, p.45.

“glass” evokes a feeling of something fragile and transparent, whereas the word “очковый” meaning “spectacled” makes the reader think of a venomous spectacled cobra (очковая змея), which creates the anticipation of a dangerous threat. Moreover, the verb “очковать” means in slang “to be afraid of,” which sustains an atmosphere of fear in the face of impending disaster. Anyway, very soon, Humbert bans going to the beach altogether, stating: “I turned away – I headed my Lolita away – from beaches which were either too bleak when lone, or too populous when ablaze.”⁵⁹ All in all, the Wilds of America with numerous poisonous plants, nameless insects, “crablike seeds of ferocious flowers” and potential snakes turn out to be as dangerous and unwelcoming as the Puritan civilization, impeding Humbert to satisfy his desire.⁶⁰

Furthermore, Dolly enjoys active recreational activities, pleading with Humbert to let her go to a roller-skating rink. Instead, “indulgent Hum” allows her to visit the rose garden or children’s library across the street, which clearly does not interest her, for Dolly uses these short getaways to socialize with peers, described by Humbert as “gangling, golden-haired high school uglies, all muscles and gonorrhoea.”⁶¹ In the Russian version, “indulgent Hum” is translated as “насытившийся, снисходительный Гум” (meaning “satiated and condescending”), which makes it clear that Humbert allows any free-time activities as an exchange for some additional services, having the upper hand over his hostage.⁶² After long fights, they “wrangle out” compromises, which suit Humbert most, such as the use of swimming pools with other girl-children:

“She adored brilliant water and was a remarkably smart diver. Comfortably robed, I would settle down in the rich post-meridian shade after my own demure dip, and there I would sit, with a dummy book or a bag of bonbons, or both, or nothing but my tingling glands, and watch her gambol, rubber-capped, bepearled, smoothly tanned, as glad as an ad, in her trim-fitted satin pants and shirred bra.”⁶³

Humbert never participates in the activities she enjoys most, playing the roles of a passive observer and a wary warden, comparing his possession to other participants

⁵⁹ Nabokov, p.167.

⁶⁰ Nabokov, p.168.

⁶¹ Nabokov, p.160.

⁶² Nabokov, RV, p.204.

⁶³ Nabokov, p.161.

and guarding his Lolita against potential rivals. In the Russian version, “as glad as an ad” is translated as “радостная, как на каникульной рекламе” (meaning “cheerful as on a vacation advertisement,”) which creates a feeling of temporary freedom and happiness.⁶⁴ An advertisement is a manipulative and illusionary promise of an exceptional experience that takes advantage of consumers’ naiveté, which pretty much summarizes Dolly’s decision to embark on the road trip with her stepfather. Her so-called “vacation” represents a forced time-out from an ordinary teenage life, described by famous Russian writer Anatoly Aleksin in his bestseller *In the Country of Eternal Vacation*, in which a twelve-year-old protagonist realizes, after having visited a parallel reality where he could enjoy cinema, circus, zoo, and sweets as much as he wishes, that an ongoing entertainment on a daily basis soon becomes boring and destructive.

Dolly adores three film genres: musicals, underworlders, westerners.⁶⁵ Mooney interprets this penchant as follows:

“For Dolores, film and drama provide sources of education and possible life narratives. [...] None of her favorite genres are featured in Humbert’s competing array of dominant artistic discourses. The films favored by Dolores offer stories of transformation and triumphant resolutions. [...] Apart from the escapism of all three genres, attractive to many young viewers, but even more meaningful for an abused, trapped child, each genre seems to play out possible desires of Dolores.”⁶⁶

In musicals, a gifted daughter experiences a mind-blowing success on stage, triumphing over her initially reluctant father that reminds of Humbert. In the underworld genre, villains, who resemble Humbert, are chased by cops, caught and punished. Finally, in the westerns, the villain is defeated by the hero, who saves, embraces, and marries the female protagonist, which could represent Dolly’s desire to be saved and loved.

According to her mother, all Dolly “wanted from life was to be one day a strutting and prancing baton twirler or a jitterbug.”⁶⁷ The Russian version is slightly different: “Единственное, о чём Ло мечтает - это дрыгать под джазовую музыку или

⁶⁴ Nabokov, RV, p.206.

⁶⁵ Nabokov, p.170.

⁶⁶ Mooney, p.146.

⁶⁷ Nabokov, p.46.

гарцевать в спортивных шествиях, высоко поднимая колени и жонглируя палочкой.”⁶⁸ This description is longer because Nabokov feels bound to elaborate on Dolly’s alleged wish to “wiggle to jazz music and prance around, hoisting her knees high in the air during sports parades,” because those activities were alien to Russian readers. Both descriptions imply that Dolly is interested in purely physical activities, in which her ability to think and talk is not involved. Therefore, we could assume that Dolly’s mother, similarly to Humbert, does not have access to the secret garden of Dolly’s inner world, viewing her as an annoying object.

In the second part of the novel, Humbert offers the reader an enumeration of everything Dolly likes: “sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge Sundays, musicals, movie magazines and so forth – these were the obvious items in her list of beloved things.”⁶⁹ The Russian version is slightly different: Humbert describes jazz in a more negative way, calling it “сладкая, знойная какофония джаза”⁷⁰ (meaning “a sweet and sultry cacophony of jazz,” which clearly shows his visceral dislike of this musical genre.) Furthermore, Humbert points out Dolly’s obsession with novelties and souvenirs, which “simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt.”⁷¹ He ridicules her readiness to follow the tempting advertisements, making fun of her naiveté. However, on a deeper level, Dolly’s urge to experience and purchase something new on a daily basis reflects her desire to distract herself from a devastating motel routine. Advertisements bring carnival excitement to her tedious routine, promising a magic change of mood that hardly ever happens. In French, the word “souvenir” signifies “memory.” Buying endless souvenirs, she tries to replace the painful, traumatic memories with superficial colorful ones. Moreover, Dolly’s tendency to trust the ads reveals how easy she can be manipulated – a trait used and abused by Humbert for almost three years.

⁶⁸ Nabokov RV, p.62.

⁶⁹ Nabokov, p.148.

⁷⁰ Nabokov, RV, p.188.

⁷¹ Nabokov, p.148.

It is worth mentioning that Humbert finds pleasure in choosing Dolly's clothes himself, creating a new look that suits his taste: "check weaves, bright cottons, frills, puffed-out short sleeves, soft pleats, snug-fitting bodices and generously full skirts. Oh Lolita, you are my girl."⁷² In "Relationship, Identity and Mass Media: the Consumer Culture in Nabokov's *Lolita*" Xi Nan asserts that Humbert's refashioning Dolly to be "his girl" reflects two levels of signified symbols: namely, commodity symbol and patriarchal symbol, making Lolita's body the aesthetic "object of men's erotic delusion through the clothing consumption and body appreciation."⁷³ The notions of seduction and desire are quintessential for understanding of both the dynamics of *Lolita* and the mechanism of a marketplace. In her essay "'She It Was to Whom Ads Were Dedicated': Materialism, Materiality and the Feminine in Nabokov's *Lolita*," Laura Byrne maintains that the novel's division into two parts reflects Lolita's "twofold nature" described by Humbert as a mix of "dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie, snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures."⁷⁴ She claims that the first part of the novel mythologizes Lolita, whereas the second one replaces "the magical with the mundane."⁷⁵ Numerous critics have previously considered Humbert's contempt with Dolly's mindless consumerism an analogy to a dichotomy between his Old-World aestheticism and her tasteless American modernity, discussing a clash between a high and low culture. However, Byrne goes one step further and claims that consumerism facilitated "a new discourse around the previously taboo subject of feminine desire," explaining the notion of the malleability of female desire, where the circuit of desire flows from woman to commodity.⁷⁶ Byrne adds that Nabokov's portrayal of Lolita illustrates an important point about woman's place in consumer culture: "Given the gendered connotations that arise from 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

⁷² Nabokov, p.131.

⁷³ Nan, p.182.

⁷⁴ Nabokov, p.44.

⁷⁵ Byrne, p. 50.

⁷⁶ Byrne, pp.51-52.

consumption that is merely passive in nature.”⁷⁷ In addition, she maintains that consumerist modernity had a disruptive effect 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 they desired.”⁷⁸ I would suggest that spending money on sweets, entertainment and clothes may represent Dolly’s effort to gain some agency in her choices, struggling with Humbert’s dominance and control. Additionally, it could represent Dolly’s desire to “make him pay” for his deeds.

Furthermore, Čomić claims that being placed into a “hierarchically lower and disempowered position,” Dolly uses her body as the means of manipulation, sacrificing her own feminine sexuality:

“Only very listlessly did she earn her three pennies per day; and she proved to be a cruel negotiator whenever it was in her power to deny me certain life-wrecking, strange, slow paradisaal philters without which I could not live more than a few days in a row [...]. Knowing the magic and might of her own soft mouth, she managed to raise the bonus price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks.”⁷⁹

I would argue that Humbert is no less dependent on the sensual and aesthetical consumption of his captive nymphet than she is on the consumption of sweets, goods and entertainment.

On the other hand, compulsive spending or omniomania is linked to mental distress. Spending, sex, and eating are pleasurable activities that activate the brain’s reward centers, stimulating dopamine release. Therefore, Dolly’s excessive consumption of sweets might be linked to her lack of sexual desire and stressful living conditions. Moreover, a diet high in sugar has been linked to emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety. Emotional eating is an attempt to satisfy an emotional need, reflecting the desire to mitigate the effects of stress. In our modern society, food has gained a hedonic value because its consumption brings immediate psychological gratification, whereas the desire to feed is modulated and triggered by our

⁷⁷ Byrne, p.51.

⁷⁸ Byrne, p.54.

⁷⁹ Nabokov, p.184.

brain. Similar to sex and dopamine, sugar and dopamine are heavily linked, too. When an individual consumes sugar, the brain produces ample amounts of dopamine. It seems that for Dolly, sweets represent a substitute for satisfaction she probably never gains from the sexual intercourse with Humbert.

Interestingly, scientific research has shown that sugar can also disrupt memory formation because high sugar diets affect the hippocampus – a key memory center: “rats eating high-sugar diets were less able to remember whether they had previously seen objects in specific locations before,” as stated in the article “The impact of sugar consumption on stress-driven, emotional and addictive behaviors.”⁸⁰ Recent findings have confirmed that the consumption of sugar and the subsequent release of dopamine reduce working memory performance due to “overdose” effects that might disrupt “the balance between working memory maintenance and gating processes,” as stated in the article “Working memory, cortical dopamine tone, and frontoparietal brain recruitment in post-traumatic stress disorder: a randomized controlled trial.”⁸¹ The value of memory and an attempt to arrest the process of forgetting are two central topics in Nabokov’s fiction. As a matter of fact, Nabokov quotes Proust twice in his *Lectures* when talking about memory: “What we call reality is a certain relationship between sensations and memories which surround us at the same time.”⁸² This implies that memory is volatile and highly subjective. Nabokov writes these memorable lines in *Speak, Memory*: “The nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood.”⁸³ Ironically, Dolly is the one who loses her childhood, but what we are given is Humbert’s nostalgic elegy dedicated to his own foregone childhood.

During the first sex scene in the *Enchanted Hunters*, Dolly is described as jovial and presumptuous, without “a trace of modesty.” According to Humbert, “she saw the stark act merely as part of a youngster’s furtive world,” being eager to impress him

⁸⁰ Ali; Bartlett; Belmer; Chaaya, p.180.

⁸¹ Ballard; Rodriguez; Westphal, 2021.

⁸² Nabokov, *Lectures*, p.249.

⁸³ Nabokov in Sicker, p.543.

“with the world of tough kids.”⁸⁴ However, Dolly’s subsequent disgust with Humbert’s desire is quite obvious: in Chapter 1 Part 2 we learn that Dolly is made to “lend for a few seconds her brown limbs” after hours of threats and promises when they travel from one cheap motel to another one.⁸⁵ In Beardsley she has to earn “the hard and nauseous way” Humbert’s permission to participate in the school’s theatrical program.⁸⁶ Dolly is torn out of her childhood and familiar surroundings, cut off from her school friends and forcefully pushed into adulthood; struggling with the experiences she is still unable to process:

“On especially tropical afternoons, in the sticky closeness of the siesta, I liked the cool feel of armchair leather against my massive nakedness as I held her in my lap. 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, a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis racket, and was too indolent to remove.”⁸⁷

Dolly’s indifference towards Humbert’s penis as if it was “a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis racket” reveals her overall indifference to the sexual activities with him. Of course, if *Lolita* hadn’t been frigid, the whole story would have been different. As a butterfly, she undergoes a metamorphosis: from being an energetic and curious child into an apathetic and cynical teenager. However, she is not the only one undergoing a metamorphosis. As Lance Olsen points out in “A Janus-Text: Realism, Fantasy, and Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” Humbert’s love is transfigured into lust, lust into guilt, guilt into grief, “while the text itself undergoes a series of metamorphoses” from a romantic novel of idealized love to tragedy, creating “the instability of truth and meaning.”⁸⁸

In the Magnolia Garden in a southern state, which was acclaimed by John Galsworthy as “the world’s fairest garden,” it becomes clear that Dolly cannot find pleasure in beauty. She stays grim and defensive, making it clear that nature cannot improve her mood. Humbert is ready to pay four bucks for a visit, because “children (and by Jingo was not my *Lolita* a child!) will ‘walk starry-eyed and reverently

⁸⁴ Nabokov, pp.133-134.

⁸⁵ Nabokov, p.147.

⁸⁶ Nabokov, p.185.

⁸⁷ Nabokov, p.165

⁸⁸ Olsen, p.121.

through this foretaste of Heaven, drinking in beauty that can influence a life. ‘Not mine,’ said grim Lo, and settled down on a bench with the fillings of two Sunday papers in her lovely lap.’⁸⁹ Humbert expects a wonder that never comes into being: he cannot make Dolly happy in the long run while keeping her captive. All he can do is try to keep her distracted, employing the pop culture and cheap thrills he despises. So why can Dolly find distraction in movies, musicals, and magazines rather than in classical literature and nature? According to the text, she shows some common symptoms of depression: an “empty” mood, anxiety, feeling of hopelessness, irritability and difficulty concentrating. Indubitably, serious reading demands much concentration, whereas leafing through magazines does not require an intellectual effort. Theoretically, exposure to nature is believed to benefit one’s mental health; however, a forced getaway can quickly become arduous and painstaking. Moreover, in case of depression, short trips with no pressure are recommended, whereas Dolly goes on a journey with no foreseeable end. As Tweedie points out, she desperately desires a meaningful daily routine, whereas Humbert has no choice but accede to her wishes, “creating daily micronarratives to satisfy her desire for a purpose”:⁹⁰

“Every morning during our yearlong travels I had to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time for her to look forward to, for her to survive till bedtime. Otherwise, deprived of a shaping and sustaining purpose, the skeleton of her day sagged and collapsed.”⁹¹

This common coping strategy creates a temporary illusion of doing something pleasant or meaningful to distract oneself and appease oppressive thoughts. According to theorists, “a traumatic event – or ‘traumatic stressor’ – produces an excess of external stimuli and a corresponding excess of excitation in the brain,” whereas the mind of the traumatized person is often unable to manage or respond appropriately.⁹² Consequently, the brain must find ways to cope with the tension, using diverse techniques, such as dissociation or numbing. On the whole, survivors of sexual abuse often experience a lack of trust in the world, struggling for meaning.

⁸⁹ Nabokov, p.155.

⁹⁰ Tweedie, p.165.

⁹¹ Nabokov, p.151.

⁹² Suleiman, p.276.

In addition to sexual abuse, Dolly is abused physically and emotionally. Her mother neglects her emotionally, seeing Dolly as a dangerous rival, if we believe Humbert saying: “I was aware that mother Haze hated my darling for her being sweet on me.”⁹³ In addition, the reader can guess that Lolita is habitually beaten by her mother from the following passage: “[...]Mrs. Haze strolled up and said indulgently: “Just slap her hard if she interferes with your scholarly meditation.”⁹⁴ Charlotte Haze is called “a nightmare mother” or “a toxic mother” by various critics, who point out her hostile and violent attitude towards her daughter. Humbert calls Charlotte “big cold Haze,”⁹⁵ “phocine mama”⁹⁶ and “detested mamma”,⁹⁷ whereas she calls her daughter “a miserable brat.”⁹⁸ As Humbert recalls, in a questionnaire in *A Guide to Your Child’s Development*, Charlotte Haze “had underlined the following epithets, ten out of forty, under ‘Tour Child’s Personality’: aggressive, boisterous, critical, distrustful, impatient, irritable, inquisitive, listless, negativistic (underlined twice) and obstinate.”⁹⁹ At first, when Humbert picks Dolly up at the camp and brings her to The Enchanted Hunters, she seems cheerful, compliant and enthusiastic, simultaneously anticipating an adventure and fearing retribution: “Because, my dahrling, when dahrling Mother finds out she’ll divorce you and strangle me.”¹⁰⁰ Initially, Dolly does not consider Humbert harmful, being excited about the generous gifts and his attention and seeing her mother as the only source of danger. Dolly’s attitude dramatically changes after their intercourse when she calls Humbert a dirty old man, threatening to report the rape to the police. In “The Representation of Trauma in *Lolita*’s hypertexts,” Valeria Invernizzi asks: “Is Nabokov’s nymphet traumatized by Humbert’s exploitation?”¹⁰¹ Invernizzi points out that although Dolly initially traps herself in a downward spiral of revictimization by fleeing with Quilty,

⁹³ Nabokov, p.51.

⁹⁴ Nabokov, p.51.

⁹⁵ Nabokov, p.53.

⁹⁶ Nabokov, p.42.

⁹⁷ Nabokov, p.49.

⁹⁸ Nabokov, p.88.

⁹⁹ Nabokov, p.76.

¹⁰⁰ Nabokov, p.110.

¹⁰¹ Invernizzi, p.234.

finally she gains resilience by marrying Richard Schiller and emerges from the trauma more whole.

What else does Dolores enjoy? Humbert recalls: “Lo was a late sleeper, and I liked to bring her a pot of hot coffee in bed.”¹⁰² In the Russian version, it is not Humbert, but Dolly who loves and demands this morning coffee: “Лолита всегда спала поздно и любила, чтобы я приносил кувшинчик горячего кофе в постель.”¹⁰³ Dolly prefers staying in bed as long as possible, most probably because she does not have any motivation to get up, being deprived of desire and still knowing that her “duties” await her. In contrast to her, Annabel is depicted as being overfilled with desire:

“There, on the soft sand, a few feet away from our elders, we would sprawl all morning, in a petrified paroxysm of desire, and take advantage of every blessed quirk in space and time to touch each other: her hand, half-hidden in the sand, would creep toward me, its slender brown fingers sleepwalking nearer and nearer; then, her opalescent knee would start on a long cautious journey; sometimes a chance rampart built by younger children granted us sufficient concealment to graze each other’s salty lips; these incomplete contacts drove our healthy and inexperienced young bodies to such a state of exasperation that not even the cool blue water, under which we still clawed at each other, could bring relief.”¹⁰⁴

Still, there is no freedom or relief in their desire: on the contrary, Humbert and Annabel are paralyzed and tortured by its violent force. In addition, Annabel’s body parts are disjointed and possessed by this powerful emotion: her creeping hand reminds us of the Thing from *The Addams Family*, a creepy disembodied hand.

Moreover, Dolly clearly has difficulties falling asleep, according to Humbert’s account of her “sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep.”¹⁰⁵ In any case, Dolly could never enjoy her morning coffee, because her “thoughtful friend,” “a passionate father” and “a good pediatrician” would cynically abuse his power: “How sweet it was to bring this coffee to her and then deny it until she had done her morning duty.”¹⁰⁶ All in all, there is not much Dolores can enjoy freely while being together with Humbert.

¹⁰² Nabokov, p.164.

¹⁰³ Nabokov, RV, p.210.

¹⁰⁴ Nabokov, pp.14-15.

¹⁰⁵ Nabokov, p.176.

¹⁰⁶ Nabokov, p.164.

As Miss Pratt, the headmistress of Beardsley school, summons Humbert to un-veto Dolly's nonparticipation in the dramatic group, she states: "I mean it is all part of the fun of being young and alive and beautiful."¹⁰⁷ In the Russian version, Nabokov chooses to use the words "pretty" ("хорошенькой") and "full of life" ("полной жизни,") replacing the word "fun" by "happiness" ("счастье").¹⁰⁸ These changes transform the meaning of the statement, making it more profound, because Dolly might have fun once in a while, but she is definitely profoundly unhappy, gradually becoming less and less "full of life." Humbert's derogatory description of Miss Pratt contrasts with her above statement, because she is depicted as old, scruffy and unattractive: "A huge woman, gray-haired, frowsy, with a broad flat nose and small eyes behind black-rimmed glasses."¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Humbert portrays her as farcical and simple-minded, although she delivers a detailed and insightful report of Dolly's behavior, making for the most part correct conclusions about her perturbed emotional state.

Although tennis is not Dolly's favorite pastime – "she preferred acting to swimming, and swimming to tennis"¹¹⁰ – every time while playing she looks free, happy and relaxed, ("всегда свободно держась, всегда оставаясь спокойно-веселой,")¹¹¹ which was seldom the case in the "dark life" she led with Humbert.¹¹² Although she seems to have a talent, Dolly never attempts to win, which Humbert retrospectively considers being his fault: "had not something within her been broken by me – not that I realized it then! – she would have had on the top of her perfect form the will to win, and would have become a real girl champion."¹¹³ Recent research has shown that victims of emotional and sexual abuse tend to lose confidence and their sense of self-worth: "By transferring the blame and crushing a child's self-esteem the abuser

¹⁰⁷ Nabokov, p.196.

¹⁰⁸ Nabokov, RV, p.251.

¹⁰⁹ Nabokov, p.193.

¹¹⁰ Nabokov, p.232.

¹¹¹ Nabokov RV, p.297.

¹¹² Nabokov, p.231.

¹¹³ Nabokov, p.232.

is attempting to put up permanent barriers preventing that child from speaking out.”¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the lack of motivation, interest, and enjoyment of life experienced by Dolly, are also common aftereffects of continual abuse.

“How to write of unspeakable desire?” asks the reader Susan Mooney in *The Artistic Censoring of Sexuality*.¹¹⁵ She asserts that the reader witnesses Humbert’s own battle with revelation, resistance and repression, whereas the “the tension between control and freedom of expression” is perceptible in every paragraph of the novel.¹¹⁶ As much as I would like to focus on Dolores primarily, it seems impossible to ignore the narrator and the protagonist of the story. Pursuing his desires, Humbert wholly disregards Dolly’s desires, encroaching on her freedom. Humbert reminds me of the ambitious heroes of the nineteenth-century novel, conceived as “desiring machines,” whose presence “creates and sustains narrative movement through the forward march of desire, projecting the self onto the world through scenarios of desire imagined and then acted upon.”¹¹⁷ The weight of his unfulfilled desires makes him flee into the realm of imagination, coming up with the most improbable scenarios: “A shipwreck. An atoll. Alone with a drowned passenger’ shivering child.”¹¹⁸ Humbert confesses that he could list a considerable number of these “one-sided diminutive romances.”¹¹⁹ When he first meets Lolita, another incredible scenario is presented to the reader:

“...as if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnapped, discovered in gypsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. With awe and delight (the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring, the nurse drunk) I saw again her lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused...”¹²⁰

In this passage, Humbert clearly confuses Dolly with Annabel, with whom he had a short summer teenage romance twenty-five years ago that allegedly imprinted his

¹¹⁴ Bird; Kelly, p.76.

¹¹⁵ Mooney, p.112.

¹¹⁶ Mooney,p.152.

¹¹⁷ Brooks, p.312.

¹¹⁸ Nabokov, p.20.

¹¹⁹ Nabokov, p.20.

¹²⁰ Nabokov, p.39.

sexual preferences. Humbert solemnly calls Annabel “my dead bride,” making the reader wonder how much of this brief romance is actually true and how much is imagined.¹²¹ Additionally, this could be interpreted as Humbert’s attempt to tag Annabel as one of his possessions. Jason Lee calls Humbert’s desire “overwhelming and cannibalistic,”¹²² fantasizing of devouring her: “My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys.”¹²³ In the above passage, Humbert acknowledges that the access to Dolly’s heart and her inner world remain barred to him, whereas all he can do is putting his lips on every part of her body, staying on the surface. Additionally, Humbert emphasizes that this highly violent act would be the only one against nature, hoping to make all his other deeds seem entirely unexceptional or even natural. In the Russian version, the ambiguous word “matrix” is replaced by an unequivocal word “womb” with a diminutive suffix (маточка), which gives an impression of something small and undeveloped.¹²⁴ Traina describes a specific pattern in abusers: “a hungry desire that reaches out to grab and possess the good in an effort to fill up the aching emptiness inside us,” instead of giving up the control in order to attain peace.¹²⁵ Traina claims that mere intellectual awareness of the addiction is not enough to cure it. Still, she maintains that “the act of contemplation” – acknowledging a deep desire without action on it – is a precondition to moral freedom.¹²⁶

I am going to focus solely on pleasure-based theories of desire, which postulate that “a person moved by a desire always enjoys what is desired, or eagerly anticipates the desire’s satisfaction, whereas a person moved only by judgement of goodness does not share these feelings.”¹²⁷ Humbert is torn between at least three entities residing

¹²¹ Nabokov, p.39.

¹²² Lee, p.105.

¹²³ Nabokov, p.165.

¹²⁴ Nabokov, RV p.211.

¹²⁵ Traina, pp.196-197.

¹²⁶ Traina, p. 199.

¹²⁷ Schroeder, “Desire”.

within his psyche: firstly, there is the inner moralist that tries to be good and bypasses the issue “by clinging to conventional notions of what twelve-year-old girls should be”; secondly, the inner child therapist that regurgitates “Neo-Freudian hash” imagining “a dreaming and exaggerating Dolly” (in the Russian version she is called “экзальтированная” meaning “exalted, excited” which creates a parallel to Humbert’s desire); and finally, there is the inner sensualist, “a great and insane monster” that would like to discover some “depravity in his prey.”¹²⁸ In the Russian version, the sensualist is called “сексуалист” (meaning “sexologist,” a specialist that facilitates sexual growth of his clients by offering them sexual education, tools and techniques), which confers the passage a new connotation.¹²⁹ Humbert wishes to see himself in the role of the educator, but Lolita violently rejects any knowledge coming from him. A sensualist, on the contrary, is a person devoted to physical, especially sexual, pleasure – that is, a person moved by desire, as mentioned in the above definition. Each entity emerges and unfolds in specific situations, and I am going to trace which entity dominates the discourse in particular parts of the novel.

To begin with, let us consider the first entity, the inner moralist. Even long before the apparition of Lolita, in his twenties and thirties, Humbert suffers from an internal struggle between his desire and common sense, stating: “While my body knew what it craved for, my mind rejected my body’s every plea.”¹³⁰ He is afraid and ashamed of his desires, being strangled by taboos. Richard Arneson claims that shame, stigma, and disgust are necessary tools of social control in a just society.¹³¹ According to Durkheim, who elaborated the Kantian notion of duty, there is a dual movement of obligation-desire in any individual, whereas one mostly experiences the societal influence as exterior and constraining.¹³² However, Durkheim remarks that although a rebellion against the moral principles of society is indeed possible, the rejection of norm would only confirm the existence of the taboos and can potentially harm the

¹²⁸ Nabokov, p.124.

¹²⁹ Nabokov, RV, p.162.

¹³⁰ Nabokov, p.18.

¹³¹ Arneson, p.31.

¹³² Scheff, p.395.

rebel, who is still bound by the societal laws. Humbert's inner moralist holds him back for over three decades, fearing exposure and punishment. Yet after his encounter with Lolita, he rebels against the norm and consequently muffles the voice of this inner entity. Finally, Humbert takes additional pleasure in outsmarting society, mocking almost everyone he encounters and deriding the contemporary American culture on the whole.

Secondly, let us scrutinize the Freudian therapist. With Freud, we have moved from *l'homme machine* to *l'homme moteur*, a dynamic model representing the interplay of forces: on the one hand, there are drives or instincts, whereas on the other hand, there is "the counteractive force of repression."¹³³ This model perfectly illustrates the bifurcation Humbert goes through. Freud analyzes the consequences of long-lasting repression, claiming: "Just as a satisfaction of instinct spells happiness for us, so severe suffering is caused us if the external world lets us starve, if it refuses to sate our needs."¹³⁴ He maintains that by influencing instinctual impulses, one might be liberated from suffering. In this chapter, I will investigate how Humbert tries to regulate his desires and whether he could become free from suffering.

Thirdly, let us examine the sensualist driven by desire. The strength of a desire is determined by the amount of pleasure derived, and the stronger it is, the more we are inclined to act upon it. Moreover, according to Freud, the higher the inhibiting factor is, the greater is the pleasure if attained. Humbert is dragged around and governed by his desires throughout the novel, even though he often pretends to be an architect of his own fortune: "So Humbert the Cubus schemed and dreamed – and the red sun of desire and decision (the two things that create a live world) rose higher and higher..."¹³⁵ When he hears Lolita running up the stairs, he is overwhelmed with desire: "My heart expanded with such force that it almost blotted me out."¹³⁶ In the Russian version, his heart almost blocked out the whole world: "Сердце во мне

¹³³ Brooks, p.313.

¹³⁴ Freud, p.731.

¹³⁵ Nabokov, p.71.

¹³⁶ Nabokov, p.66.

увеличилось в объёме так мощно, что едва не загородило весь мир.”¹³⁷ The reader feels the immense power of his desire that puts everything else in the shadow. In the article “Human Freedom and Inhuman Art,” Ellen Pifer cites Kermode and Glass, who criticize Nabokov for depriving his characters of free will, making them act like puppets or clowns, which “appears to be an attack on the reader’s own dignity and autonomy.”¹³⁸ Of course, it depends on how we define free will. There are various theories exploring whether we have control over our choices and whether these choices can or cannot be adequately explained. After all, such a portrayal of a man haunted by his desires does not seem as utterly unrealistic as Kermode and Glass claim, which I am going to justify, relying on philosophical and psychological works.

Can Humbert distinguish between good and bad? Nietzsche claims that we do not have freedom of will and therefore cannot be held responsible for our actions if we are unable to distinguish between good and bad: “No one is accountable for his deed, no one for his nature; to judge is the same thing as to be unjust.”¹³⁹ Moreover, he suggests that “freedom means that the manly instincts ... dominate over other instincts,”¹⁴⁰ giving Julius Caesar as an example of a powerful warrior.”¹⁴¹ According to modern philosophers, being *orthonomous* means aligning one’s desires with normative requirements to be satisfied; therefore, one has to “come into line with something outside the realm of desire”: namely, “with the reasons in favor of the relevant evaluative claims.”¹⁴² Humbert repeatedly tries to persuade himself, Lolita and the reader that his desires do not deviate from the classic norm, postulating that the modern Western norm is a deviation from the natural world order. Humbert laments that “the old link between the adult world and the child world has been completely severed nowadays by new customs and new laws.”¹⁴³ In

¹³⁷ Nabokov, RV, p.87.

¹³⁸ Pifer, p.53.

¹³⁹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p.39.

¹⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p.38.

¹⁴¹ Oaklander, p.211.

¹⁴² Pettit; Smith, p.442.

¹⁴³ Nabokov, p.124.

this passage, he calls himself Jean-Jacques, clearly alluding to Rousseau, whose famous saying is: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,”¹⁴⁴ (“L’homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers,”) which means that society represses our freedom, inflicting numerous rules and laws on its members. Moreover, Rousseau claims that once the state of innocence is disrupted by society, we are doomed to move away from virtue towards vice and from bliss toward misery. Humbert imagines himself as a revolutionary thinker, willing to create his own world, “umber and black Humberland,”¹⁴⁵ an imaginary terrain beyond any laws. Black often has a negative connotation, being connected to darkness and evil deeds. The color umber, according to poet and cultural critic Kelly Grovier, symbolizes sin and debauchery, owing its origin to the Latin ‘*umbra*’, meaning ‘shadow’. According to Nietzsche, “The truly free individual can overcome the paradox of freedom if he has the will to assume responsibility for self-created values by living in accordance with them.”¹⁴⁶ So has Humbert managed to become a truly free individual in this sense, after all?

Humbert is constantly torn between two poles. Bertram and Leving analyze this dichotomy in their book *Lolita – The Story of a Cover Girl*, citing on the one hand, “the tension between Humbert’s near-erotic revulsion for women vs. his miasmatic desire for girls, his human despair vs. his demonic joy,” and on the other hand, “the sharp tonal oppositions in her ‘two-fold nature,’” the tender childishness of Lolita vs. her eerie vulgarity.¹⁴⁷ The dual nature of Humbert’s desire, emphasized by the images of heaven and hell, is forcing him to do an impossible split between pleasure and pain. In a twinkling, his dreamy heavenly desires become destructive and diabolic, whereas the infernal images reflect and emphasize his burning craving: “[...] I would crowd all the demons of my desire against the railing of a throbbing balcony [...]” Humbert wishes to escape a spiral of suffering, in which a divine pleasure is mixed with a damnable desire, by trying to separate them into detached entities: “I am trying to describe these things not to relive them in my present

¹⁴⁴ “Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men,” 1762.

¹⁴⁵ Nabokov, p.166.

¹⁴⁶ Oaklander, p.220.

¹⁴⁷ Bertram, p.6.

boundless misery, but to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world – nymphet love.”¹⁴⁸ In the following chapter I am going to concentrate on the portion of hell, revealing the conflict between his unbearable desire to possess Lolita and his wish to be free.

The torturing desire experienced by Humbert is not specifically directed at Lolita, but accompanies him for many years before her appearance. He recounts his pre-dolorian past:

“...my adult life during the European period of my existence proved monstrously twofold. Overtly, I had so-called normal relationships with a number of terrestrial women having pumpkins or pears for breasts; inly, I was consumed by a hell furnace of localized lust for every passing nymphet...”¹⁴⁹

The reason Humbert never dares to approach any of them is his fear of law and, consequently, of a probable punishment. Therefore, his lust for Lolita is not as unique as he attempts to present later in his tale. The only special thing about their relationship is that it is the first and the last one to be transferred from the realm of fantasy into reality due to a mysterious pattern of fate.

According to Humbert, “nymphets” live on an enchanted “intangible island of entranced time,” which reminds the reader of Peter Pan’s Neverland.¹⁵⁰ Peter always remains a child while his friends grow up. The term “Peter Pan complex,” coined by psychologist Daniel Kiely, refers to a syndrome that commonly occurs among contemporary men who do not want to enter adult life with its obligations and responsibilities. The affected persons demonstrate low emotional maturity, impulsive behavior and emotional outbursts, which seems to describe Humbert’s personality. Here is a description of one of the fights he has with Dolly:

“She sat right in the focus of my incandescent anger. [...] I snatched away the stool she was rocking with her heel and her foot fell with a thud on the floor.

‘Hey,’ she cried, ‘take it easy.’

¹⁴⁸ Nabokov, p.135.

¹⁴⁹ Nabokov, p.18.

¹⁵⁰ Nabokov, p.17.

‘First of all you go upstairs,’ I cried in my turn, — and simultaneously grabbed at her and pulled her up. From that moment, I stopped restraining my voice, and we continued yelling at each other, and she said unprintable things. [...] It was a strident and hateful scene. I held her by her knobby wrist and she kept turning and twisting it this way and that, surreptitiously trying to find a weak point so as to wrench herself free at a favorable moment, but I held her quite hard and in fact hurt her rather badly for which I hope my heart may rot, and once or twice she jerked her arm so violently that I reared her wrist might snap [...].”¹⁵¹

As we see in the above passage, Humbert and Dolly behave on the same immature level, insulting and hurting each other. Of course, Humbert is physically stronger than Dolly, using his strength to overpower her. Mooney suggests that in Peter Pan’s state of imprisonment, his “freedom” is idealized.¹⁵² Imagining his life on the enchanted island among numerous nymphets, Humbert flees from reality and simultaneously confirms that he never intended to find The One and Only, as he frequently suggests in the novel: “Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let them play around me forever. Never grow up.”¹⁵³ As Humbert sees Dolly for the first time in the “breathless” garden, he passes by her in his “adult disguise,” meaning that he does not really consider himself an adult.¹⁵⁴ Barbara Wyllie investigates Humbert’s idealization of a childlike existence, mentioning his “own sense of arrested development,” as he recalls his love affair with Annabel, feeling again as a thirteen-year-old lover.¹⁵⁵ The word “breathless” evokes a feeling of a cardiac arrest, which may refer to the spirit of Humbert’s dead bride or to Humbert’s wish to stop the time, freezing the moment.

Jacques Lacan compares desire with “being caught in the rails – eternally stretching forth towards the *desire for something else* – of metonymy.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, satisfaction can never be achieved. Even after possessing Lolita, Humbert keeps on fantasizing about other girls. During their road trip, Humbert continuously collects the information about schools immediately after their arrival to the next town, parks his car at school bus time at a strategic point, and watches the girls leave school, demanding from Lolita to caress him “while blue-eyed little brunettes in blue shorts, copperheads in

¹⁵¹ Nabokov, p.186.

¹⁵² Mooney, p.125.

¹⁵³ Nabokov, p.21.

¹⁵⁴ Nabokov, p.10.

¹⁵⁵ Wyllie, p.27.

¹⁵⁶ Clayton, p.39.

green boleros, and blurred boyish blondes in faded slacks passed by in the sun.”¹⁵⁷ Moreover, Humbert measures the girls on his scale of “desirability”, comparing Lolita “to whatever other nymphets parsimonious chance collected around her for my anthological delectation and judgment,” confessing that on several occasions those girls surpassed “his sweet fool” Dolly in desirability.¹⁵⁸ Having settled down in Beardsley, Humbert is excited to meet Dolly’s new girlfriends and is enthralled by Eva Rosen, whose “glossy copper hair had Lolita’s silkiness, and the features of her delicate milky-white face with pink lips and silverfish eyelashes were less foxy than those of her likes.”¹⁵⁹ Humbert confesses to the reader (whom he calls “dear reader” in the Russian version – “милый читатель”, thus trying to evoke sympathy and create kinship) that he would like to be surrounded by “a bevy of page girls, consolation prize nymphets.”¹⁶⁰ Similarly, in the final poem Humbert reads out to Quilty, he recounts his dream of a perfect life in a mountain state with “a litter of Lolitas.”¹⁶¹ The word “litter” is customarily applied to describe a group of young animals brought forth at one birth. This term mocks and dehumanizes Dolly, whereas her name, rendered in the plural form, acts as an umbrella term, depriving her of any individuality whatsoever. Another standard meaning of “litter” is “trash”, which reminds the reader of Humbert’s arrogant and condescending attitude towards Lolita’s fondness of a trash pop culture. He confesses: “Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl,”¹⁶² thus opposing her declaredly dull and ordinary personality to his allegedly extraordinary one.

In Buddhism, desire is considered the source of all misery, whereas pleasure without pain is impossible to find. Vivekananda asserts: “Happiness presents itself before man, wearing the crown of sorrow on its head.”¹⁶³ Even before the first night in “the

¹⁵⁷ Nabokov, p.161.

¹⁵⁸ Nabokov, p.161.

¹⁵⁹ Nabokov, p.190.

¹⁶⁰ Nabokov, p.190.

¹⁶¹ Nabokov, p.300.

¹⁶² Nabokov, p.148.

¹⁶³ Vivekananda, p.192.

hermetic seclusion of *The Enchanted Hunters*”¹⁶⁴ Humbert senses that “nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture.”¹⁶⁵ In the Russian version, the hotel is called “Зачарованный Привал” meaning “a layover, a halt.” In this way, a dynamic image of the hunt, where Humbert assumes the role of a hunter, assigning Dolly the role of prey, is substituted by a standstill image of a freeze moment, which echoes Humbert’s wish to keep Lolita pinned as a caught butterfly, eternally unchanging. In addition, another synonym of “a halt” is “an arrest,” which has a double meaning, signifying either a sudden cessation of motion, as mentioned above, or the act of catching a criminal by the police, which resonates with Humbert’s constant fear.

The concept of suffering was a center of interest of many philosophers, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche. He stated that the meaning of life is intimately connected with the meaning of suffering. He believed that human existence is filled with pain, anxiety, loss, fear or grief, and ends in death, not in happiness. He wrote: “Man, the bravest of animals, and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not repudiate suffering as such; he desires it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering.”¹⁶⁶ I believe that we can apply Bersani’s analysis of Marquis de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom* to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, which eroticism is also of a “particular, limited type.”¹⁶⁷ Humbert isolates Lolita and kills his rival Quilty, being driven by his torturous desire. Bersani maintains that narrative sexuality is often characterized by “frictional” linear movements towards an explosive climax, which are aided by the “isolation and imprisonment of the object of desire” and crowned by a violent act.¹⁶⁸ This is partly the case in *Lolita*, till Chapter 23 (Part 2), in which Lolita flees. For the following twelve chapters that describe three years, with the exception of Chapter 29, where a grownup Mrs. Schiller makes a brief reappearance, the narration is fragmented and fractured.

¹⁶⁴ Nabokov, p.113.

¹⁶⁵ Nabokov, p.125.

¹⁶⁶ Nietzsche, p.162.

¹⁶⁷ Clayton, p.43.

¹⁶⁸ Clayton, p.43.

Bersani claims that a linear narrative tends to restrict the mobility of desire, whereas nonnarrative or antinarrative structures teach the reader an “interstitial” form of sensuality.¹⁶⁹ Mark Scheid states that Humbert is “at odds with time” throughout the novel, trying to “render time powerless by suspending its effects.”¹⁷⁰ But where is the climax of the novel? Ironically, there is Lake Climax, mentioned in Chapters 25 and 32 (Part 1), situated close to Camp Q, in which Dolly’s first lover Charlie “sported a fascinating collection of contraceptives.”¹⁷¹ Scheid claims that the structure of the book intentionally misleads the reader, calling the novel a “parody of a murder mystery.”¹⁷² He considers the scene, in which “Humbert is seduced by Lolita” to be the climax of the story. However, I would argue that the climax of the novel is neither their first sexual rapport in “The Enchanted Hunters” nor Quilty’s murder, but rather Lolita’s escape from Humbert. This is the highest point of action during the story, followed by the falling action – “three empty years.”¹⁷³ For Nabokov, a pattern outrivals a climax: in this case, Camp Q is linked with Quilty, who already appears at the Enchanted Hunters hotel. According to Freise, if there are climaxes, the appearances of potential rivals (Charlie, Quilty, Dick Schiller) are all climaxes.

This is the point where Humbert once again evokes the notion of freedom – just after getting the message from the hospital that Lolita has checked out with her uncle Mr. Gustave, he experiences a violent fit of insanity and drives to the hospital, damaging another car on his way. On arrival, Humbert has to sign a “symbolic receipt, thus surrendering my Lolita to all those apes.”¹⁷⁴ He performs this symbolic ritual, seeing a policeman in the hallway, and exclaims: “But what else could I do? One simple and stark thought stood out, and it was: ‘Freedom for the moment is everything.’”¹⁷⁵ In the Russian version, Nabokov writes: “Одна простая мысль стояла как бы

¹⁶⁹ Clayton, p.44.

¹⁷⁰ Scheid, p.131.

¹⁷¹ Nabokov, p.137.

¹⁷² Scheid, p.138.

¹⁷³ Nabokov, p.253.

¹⁷⁴ Nabokov, p.247.

¹⁷⁵ Nabokov, p.247.

нагишом передо мной: главное – остаться на воле.”¹⁷⁶ The thought, which is a feminine word in Russian, is standing naked in front of Humbert, whereas he chooses “воля,” which has multiple meanings, ranging from “freedom” to “will, willpower or volition.” This sentence, once again, gives the reader the sense of dichotomy: on the one hand, there is a naked notion of freedom, whereas on the other hand, there is his naked lust. Later on in this paragraph, Humbert whispers that he is still a free man – “free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy my brother.”¹⁷⁷ Therefore, to him freedom means liberty to steal other’s freedom or even life. This attitude correlates with the libertine ideology that rejects moral boundaries, advocating life “at liberty” from constraint and external conditioning. Sade criticizes the traditional system of values, proposing an original concept of human freedom. Sadean universe introduces a revolutionary relationship between philosophy and sexuality, describing the secret desires of his characters as natural needs that should be satisfied. In “Libertinage and Figurations of Desire: The Legend of a Century,” Benrekassa and Aslanides maintain that there is a link between desire, language mastery and libertine life, for elaborate language plays a central role in the expression of libertine desire. Similar to Humbert, libertine authors were *hommes de lettres*, questioning the norms and demonstrating the vacuity of the ideas of virtue, chastity and morality enforced by the society. However, a fantasy of satisfaction is often futile, whereas dramatic misery inevitably arises as “desire becomes a strange, solitary hunter.”¹⁷⁸ Benrekassa claims that desire is caught “among the constant emergence of illusions [...] and the repercussions on our freedom of the perpetual search for the obscure object of desire.”¹⁷⁹

The realization of desire often “comes in sinister forms, destructive of the self,” as asserted by Brooks.¹⁸⁰ In *Lolita*, we can find both Humbert’s shattered self and his mobile desire, whereas the representation of the desire is based on the male sexual paradigm. Michael Wood states that Humbert’s crime is “Jamesian one *par*

¹⁷⁶ Nabokov, RV, p.318.

¹⁷⁷ Nabokov, p.247.

¹⁷⁸ Benrekassa, p.41.

¹⁷⁹ Benrekassa, p.51.

¹⁸⁰ Brooks, p.318.

excellence, the theft of another's freedom."¹⁸¹ Whereas Jamesian notion of freedom, in its turn, derives from Schopenhauer's philosophy, who considers two sorts of experiences: first, the experience of negative freedom and secondly, the experience of positive freedom. "In negative freedom, the individual is in the service of the will, while in positive freedom, he frees himself from the servitude of the will. In positive freedom, the individual recognizes the object in a non-egoistic manner."¹⁸² Couturier claims that in the first part of the novel, Humbert's desire is narcissistic and auto-erotic, whereas in the second part, Lolita becomes a provider of pleasure, instead of being an object of desire. For Couturier, *Lolita* is a story of the transformation of a frustrated desire (provoked by Annabel) into a perverse desire for Dolly, which ends in demand for love. I would argue that Humbert had been in the service of his desire all his life till the final encounter with grown-up Lolita, when his freedom becomes positive.

As we know, a fascinating and complex story must have not only action but also counteraction. Glover claims in *The Erotics of Restraint* that desire should meet resistance to create an intense story. In *Lolita*, there are numerous inner and outer restraints and obstacles: first and foremost, the societal norms, secondly, Lolita's mother, and finally, Humbert's rival Quilty. However, the main obstacle is Lolita's lack of desire. According to Clayton, "desire originates in a gap", the gap between what Lacan calls "need" and "demand", whereas one appeals to the Other for satisfaction.¹⁸³ Humbert makes every effort to fill this gap, but it is a bottomless jug that cannot be replenished:

"I recall certain moments, let us call them icebergs in paradise, when after having had my fill of her – after fabulous, insane exertions that left me limp and azure-barred – I would gather her in my arms with, at last, a mute moan of human tenderness...and moan in her warm hair, and caress her at random...and at the peak of this human agonized selfless tenderness..., all at once, ironically,

¹⁸¹ Wood, p.140.

¹⁸² Shamsi, p.3.

¹⁸³ Clayton, pp.39-40.

horribly, lust would swell again – and “oh, no,” Lolita would say with a sigh to heaven, and the next moment the tenderness and the azure – all would be shattered.”¹⁸⁴

Humbert’s desire is impossible to satisfy because it is reposed on “phantasmatic scenarios of satisfaction,” is linked to the childhood memories, and “seeks its realization in the hallucinatory reproduction of indestructible signs of infantile satisfaction.”¹⁸⁵ Lolita is not Annabel and cannot offer him any affection that came in the past from a different person under very different circumstances. All in all, Humbert’s confession, which represents a narration of his life story, is based on the desire to be heard, that is, “the desire for the recovery of a buried memory, a lost trauma.”¹⁸⁶

Teresa de Lauretis analyzes the obstacles in myths and fairy tales, stating that man is always cast in the role of the subject, whereas woman represents the object of desire, finally, concluding that “the obstacle, whatever its personification, is morphologically female, and indeed, simply, the womb.”¹⁸⁷ Consequently, Lolita’s womb represents simultaneously the object of desire and the obstacle, which results in a paradox, an unavoidable dramatic dead-end, in which Humbert finds himself. All in all, *Lolita* features a male plot of ambition, in Brooks terms, depicting Humbert as an ambitious hero, “figuring the self’s tendency to appropriation and aggrandizement, moving forward through the encompassment of more,” striving to have something he cannot quite attain.¹⁸⁸ Proffering himself as a romantic hero, Humbert composes Quilty’s sentence in the poetical form, calling it “poetical justice.”¹⁸⁹ In this typescript, Humbert alludes to the original sin, stating that he “stood Adam-naked” when Quilty took advantage of his “inner essential innocence” and cheated him of his redemption.¹⁹⁰ Evoking the notion of collective guilt, Humbert absolves himself of the responsibility for his sins, while allocating the

¹⁸⁴ Nabokov, p.285.

¹⁸⁵ Brooks, p.322.

¹⁸⁶ Brooks, p.325.

¹⁸⁷ Lauretis, p.119.

¹⁸⁸ Brooks, p.312.

¹⁸⁹ Nabokov, p.299.

¹⁹⁰ Nabokov, p.300.

blame on Quilty. Lolita is thus presented as the forbidden fruit, an object, whereas Quilty is cast in the role of the snake. Humbert assumes the role of an innocent character who is deceived and seduced. The original sin, according to Spero, represents two things:

“On one hand, it represents the necessarily transgressive rupture that initially distinguishes the subject and the signified-object/other and the delimitation of the boundaries of the presignified void. On the other hand, it indicates the primitive (or psychotic) effort to deny symbolization of want and lack, in the hope of recapturing the original but unknowable Object of symbiosis.”¹⁹¹

Humbert’s efforts to create a symbiotic relationship with Lolita in an enclosed world, in his little artificial Garden of Eden, fail. However, the transgressive rupture, that is, Lolita’s escape, named by Humbert “Dolorès Disparue,” is not a theft of an object, as implied by the passive construction. Quite the contrary, Lolita actively participates in the plotting and implementation of her breakout. “Dolorès Disparue” is an allusion to the novel *Albertine Disparue* by Marcel Proust, in which a captive lover becomes fugitive and eventually dies, which presages Dolly’s tragic fate. Proust repeatedly tackles the problematics of desire, claiming that a homosexual, similarly to a pedophile described by Nabokov, must be satisfied by exaggeration, never achieving what he ultimately desires. In *Search of Lost Time*, he declares:

“We believe that we can change the things around us in accordance with our desires—we believe it because otherwise we can see no favorable outcome. We do not think of the outcome which generally comes to pass and is also favorable: we do not succeed in changing things in accordance with our desires, but gradually our desires change.”¹⁹²

According to Brody Smith’s article “Understanding Marcel Proust’s Law of Desire,” pure desire “defies any norms or markers related to morality.”¹⁹³ Proust is called “Theoretiker des Begehrens” (a theorist of desire) by a German researcher Dagmar Bruss, who examines the way Proust describes a crowd of young and attractive girls.¹⁹⁴ This description echoes with Humbert’s description of a crowd of girls leaving school, which he used to observe in every town they stopped during their

¹⁹¹ Spero, p.503.

¹⁹² Proust, p.75.

¹⁹³ Smith, p.59.

¹⁹⁴ Bruss, p.205.

road trip with Dolly – “always a pretty sight” – and his desire to attain a climax while watching them: “blue-eyed little brunettes in blue shorts, copperheads in green boleros, and blurred boyish blondes in faded slacks passed by in the sun.”¹⁹⁵ A similar description of colorful girls is found in Chapter 18, where Humbert and Dolly visit a summer theater in Wace:

“The only detail that pleased me was a garland of seven little graces, more or less immobile, prettily painted, bare-limbed – seven bemused pubescent girls in colored gauze that had been recruited locally [...] and were supposed to represent a living rainbow, which lingered throughout the last act, and rather teasingly faded behind a series of multiplied veils.”¹⁹⁶

As in the first case, Humbert immediately seeks sexual satisfaction after the visual stimulation, pulling and pushing Dolly toward the exit, which stands in contrast to Proust’s aesthetic admiration. However, there is a shift in Humbert’s attitude as he loses Lo in Wace in Chapter 19: “The noncommittal mauve mountains half encircling the town seemed to me to swarm with panting, scrambling, laughing, panting Lolitas who dissolved in their haze.”¹⁹⁷ The verb “swarm” implies a large group of insects, which reminds the reader of a recurrent image of butterflies in Nabokov’s prose. The word “panting” appears twice, making the reader pay attention to the sound of short gasps of breath, which confers an erotic touch to the passage.

The writing styles of Proust and Nabokov in these particular excerpts bear a striking similarity. Bruss analyses this style, calling it impressionistic, pointing out that the object of desire becomes thus elusive and ephemeral, gradually fading into the background, whereas the artistic process is brought to the fore:

“Im Unterschied zu dem malerischen Impressionismus, dem es tendenziell um eine Übereinstimmung der im Bild repräsentierten Momenthaftigkeit mit der Schnelligkeit der Repräsentation geht – wobei mit darstellerischen Mitteln wie der Dicke der Pinselstriche nicht mehr rein repräsentative Zwecke verfolgt werden, sondern der malerische Prozess als solcher in den Vordergrund rückt – zielt der Impressionismus à la Proust nicht auf die Abruptheit und Opazität der sprachlichen Darstellung, sondern auf die stets wechselnde Perspektive, die sich in phänomenologischer Weise in der mäandernden Suchbewegung des wahrnehmenden Subjekts niederschlägt.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Nabokov, p.161.

¹⁹⁶ Nabokov, pp.220-221.

¹⁹⁷ Nabokov, p.224.

¹⁹⁸ Bruss, pp.17-18.

Nabokov's literary style is characterized by long sentences with multiple adjectives, filled with poetic flair, crafty allusions, and trilingual puns.

In *Lolita*, desire is often associated with the theme of the original sin. The image of an apple first appears in Chapter 11, when Humbert is spying on Lolita from a safe distance: "From a vantage point (bathroom window) saw Dolores taking things off a clothesline in the apple-green light behind the house."¹⁹⁹ The depicted movement reminds of picking apples from a branch, whereas the green color implies the unripeness of the fruit. In addition, a direct allusion to the forbidden fruit can be found in the sofa scene in Chapter 13, where Lolita makes her appearance, holding "in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple."²⁰⁰ She is just playing with it and has not taken a bite yet when Humbert intercepts the apple. Lolita pleads him to give it back to her and clearly has no intention either to share the apple with Humbert or to obtain satisfaction from "the magic friction." Moreover, Humbert intentionally drapes his narration in religious discourse, exclaiming at the end of the scene: "Blessed be the Lord, she had noticed nothing!"²⁰¹

Needless to say, the definition of freedom depends on the cultural context and therefore may change over time and space. In the Western European tradition, freedom is defined in terms of "the ability of the agent, for anything they do, always to have done otherwise."²⁰² Humbert feels being pushed by fate in the direction that cannot be changed: once he brings Lolita to the Enchanted Hunters, there is no way back. However, even long before that, Humbert believes in following the predetermined route, viewing his life as a mysterious pattern woven by McFatum. Fatalism means being a puppet on a string in a drama, where every action is deprived of free will. Whether we call Humbert's philosophy determinism or predeterminism, it is perspicuous that this viewpoint frees him from the responsibility for his actions, therefore, endowing him with freedom from culpability.

¹⁹⁹ Nabokov, p.41.

²⁰⁰ Nabokov, p.58.

²⁰¹ Nabokov, p.61.

²⁰² Pettit; Smith, p.444.

Humbert longs for freedom but initially confuses liberation with lust. What he craves is an “abstract freedom” – freedom to do anything one desires without any restrictions, disregarding its consequences for others, a selfish and destructive ambition resulting in solipsism. Thus, both subject and object, the person and the world, find themselves in an antagonistic relationship. Humbert describes the moment he suddenly felt free after all the years of self-constraint and pretense, stating: “[...] my real liberation had occurred much earlier: at the moment, [...] when Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta, had appeared to me, golden and brown [...]”²⁰³ In this passage, the narrator is confusing names, dates, and events, making an impression, whether intentionally or not, of being highly unreliable. It seems like a blurred vision, where some fragments from the past overshadow the present: like “an alternate vision, as if life’s course constantly branched” (in the Russian version is written: “в вариантном поле зрения, как если бы линия жизни то и дело раздваивалась.”)²⁰⁴ The term “линия жизни”, meaning “the lifeline,” is used in chiromancy, a practice of palm reading and fortune-telling. A widespread interpretation of a branched life line is that the person is a dreamer that would end up nowhere because of the inability to keep feet on the ground: “This type of configuration is more commonly seen in the hands of men than women, and usually corresponds with the ‘forties’ on the Life Line timescale. Well, men are at ‘a funny age’ then, and it is normal for them to branch out, physically, morally and spiritually, during this age range.”²⁰⁵ This is coincidentally exactly Humbert’s age: he is standing at crossroads, trying to figure out which path to take. Sartre states that freedom is the right of all men to choose his own destiny.²⁰⁶ This situation is similar to the one described by Robert Frost in his poem “The Road Not Taken”: an individual reaches a critical juncture in his life, a fork in a road, and once the road is taken, there is no return. Similarly to Frost’s protagonist, Humbert is telling his story “with a sigh”, both regretting and relishing his choice. On one side, he triumphs,

²⁰³ Nabokov, p.167.

²⁰⁴ Nabokov, p.163, RV p.209.

²⁰⁵ Douglas, p.122.

²⁰⁶ Sartre, p.43.

describing his state of bliss – “*beyond happiness*” – claiming: “It is *hors concours*, that bliss, it belongs to another class, another plane of sensitivity.”²⁰⁷ On the other side, he remarks that the skies of this elected paradise “were the color of hell-flames,” complaining: “I am squirming and pleading with my own memory,” “I have still other smothered memories, now unfolding themselves into limbless monsters of pain.”²⁰⁸ According to Clayton, mobile desire might try to disguise itself under the mask of freedom, but instead of liberation, it would suffocate and enslave the craving person: “Despite the appearance of freedom, however, the movement of desire keeps falling into the same abusive patterns.”²⁰⁹ Pain is a loyal companion of lust in *Lolita*.

Jealousy combined with forbidden desire annihilates the sense of freedom and adds even more pain to an already painful experience. Even before their first intercourse in the hotel, Humbert is wandering through the corridors, holding the key in a “hot hairy fist” and agonizing: “for the look of lust is always gloomy; lust is never quite sure – even when the velvety victim is locked up in one’s dungeon – that some rival devil or influential god may still not abolish one’s prepared triumph.”²¹⁰ The Russian word for “lust” Nabokov had chosen in his translation is not “страсть,” but “вожделение.” This word is predominantly used in the Christian discourse, for example, in Matthew 5:28 we read: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart,” (“А я говорю вам, что всякий, кто смотрит на женщину с вожделением, уже прелюбодействовал с нею в сердце своём.”) Kant writes in the *Lectures on Ethics* that a sexual impulse makes of the desired person an object of appetite, plunging them into the deepest unhappiness: “as soon as the person is possessed, and the appetite sated, they are thrown away as one throws away a lemon after sucking the juice from it. [...] So humanity here is set aside.”²¹¹ In *Lolita* we observe quite the opposite: although Dolly represents the object of appetite for Humbert, he seems

²⁰⁷ Nabokov, p.166.

²⁰⁸ Nabokov, pp.366-368.

²⁰⁹ Clayton, p.42.

²¹⁰ Nabokov, p.125.

²¹¹ Kant, p.156.

never to get enough of her till she escapes with Quilty, throwing him away. One could argue that had she stayed with him until her adulthood, his desire might have been weakened or even extinguished by then, but their last meeting in the Hunter Road scene refutes this allegation. Humbert's desire seems unshaken as he proposes to Dolly Schiller: "Come just as you are. And we shall live happily ever after."²¹² This is a typical romantic closure of fairy tales, which is juxtaposed with an actual tragic ending mentioned in the fictional foreword "for the benefit of old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of the 'real' people beyond the 'true' story."²¹³ Mrs. "Richard F. Schiller" dies in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, which shows the impossibility of a happy ending, even if pregnant Dolly had made those twenty-five steps, riding with Humbert into the sunset.

Let us have a closer look at the poem composed by Humbert in his retreat after Dolly's escape. It begins with "Wanted, wanted," which has a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to a wanted poster, which is distributed to find an alleged criminal wanted by the law or a runaway slave; which implies that Dolly's escape is illegal and she should be returned to her owner. On the other hand, "wanted" means "desired," signifying that Humbert wishes to possess her, which brings us back to Dolly's image of a treasured object. The repetition of the word "wanted" evokes a feeling of an agonizing obsession. Her description given by Humbert is very general and would not be very helpful when actually searching for her:

"Hair: brown. Lips: scarlet.

Age: five thousand three hundred days."²¹⁴

The bright red lip color suggests sex appeal, whereas the color scarlet reminds the reader of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, an epitome of a fallen woman. The age is deliberately presented in days instead of years to make Humbert's lover look older, masking her being under the age of consent.

²¹² Nabokov, p.253.

²¹³ Nabokov, p.6.

²¹⁴ Nabokov, p.255.

There is no indication of Dolly's eye color, and we find her weight (ninety pounds) and her height (sixty inches) at the very end of a long poem (thirteen stanzas) that rather describes Humbert's feelings than the appearance of the lost girl, which additionally highlights his egocentrism. Another possible reason for putting these details at the end of the poem could be Humbert's wish to conceal her miniature forms (height 152 cm, weight 40 kg) that point at her childishness and immaturity. Normally, there would be a description of the person's clothes in a wanted poster, but in this poem, the reader only learns that "her socks are white," which gives an impression of the missing girl being practically naked.

Throughout the poem, Humbert asks a lot of similar questions:

"Where are you hiding, Dolores Haze?"

"What make is the magic carpet?"

"Where are you riding, Dolores Haze?"

"And where are you parked, my car pet?"²¹⁵

These questions make one think of a childhood game of hide-and-seek, however, becoming more and more ominous with each repetition. Referring to Dolores as a "pet" once again humiliates and dehumanizes her, demonstrating Humbert's thirst for power and dominance. Everything in the poem revolves around Humbert's suffering. He bewails his loss, grumbling:

"I talk in a daze,

I walk in a maze."

Further, Humbert adds suffering from acoustic pain to his physical and emotional shock, moaning:

"Oh Dolores, that juke-box hurts!

[...] And I, in my corner, snarlin`."

The word "snarling" makes the reader think of a threatening animal making an aggressive growl with bared teeth. This image of a fierce wild animal correlates with

²¹⁵ Nabokov, p.256.

Humbert's presentation of his savage and untamed desire. On the whole, he attempts to justify his aggression by his allegedly unbearable pain. His intolerance of juke-box music indicates his aversion to modern pop culture.

Humbert's melodramatism is skyrocketing when he announces:

“Dying, dying, Lolita Haze,
Of hate and remorse, I'm dying.
And again my hairy fist I raise,
And again I hear you crying.”²¹⁶

Reading the first line, the reader might assume that it is Lolita who is dying. However, the second line abruptly inverses the meaning. The word “hate” comes before the “remorse,” taking precedence over it and overshadowing the reported repentance. Moreover, the last two lines call Humbert's remorse into doubt, displaying a violent scene in which he is beating Dolly while she is crying. The repetition of the word “again” has a double impact on the reader: it gives an impression of habitual and repetitive action, sinisterly foreboding that it could happen again once Humbert finds her. The words “hairy fist” sound bestial and brutal, by the same token, alluding to his inhuman treatment of Dolly.

In his afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov recounts that he was inspired by a newspaper story about a caged ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, “after months of coaxing by a scientist,” produced a sketch showing the bars of its cage.²¹⁷ That is, the ape used the artistic freedom of expression to portray its unfreedom, which reminds us of the plot of *Lolita*. In his diary, Humbert confesses how it feels to be a slave of the all-engrossing desire that cannot be stilled. Dale Peterson draws a parallel between this ape and a nympholept, remarking that literacy and desire created for Humbert “what looks like an endless imprisonment in the zoo of words.”²¹⁸ Morlan agrees that Humbert the Artist, just as this ape, can only write about the metaphorical bars of his

²¹⁶ Nabokov, p.256.

²¹⁷ Nabokov, p.311.

²¹⁸ Peterson, p.96.

cage – “his obsession with nymphets and the spell that the past is holding him under.”²¹⁹ He is turning in an infinite cycle of restlessness and denial.

Furthermore, Humbert applies the word “ape,” describing himself when he sees Dolly for the first time: “A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory.”²²⁰ Later on, when he meets Rita in a bar, he says: “she placed her trembling little hand on my ape paw,” which becomes “an orangutan’s paw” (“орангутанговая лапа”) in the Russian translation, adding even more size and power to the narrator.

Humbert exclaims: “my own desire for her blinds me when she is near,” dolefully declaring that “the look of lust is always gloomy.”²²¹ He is in agony because of his inability to describe Lolita – “her face, her ways” – reminding us of a famous poem “Letter to a Woman” by Sergey Esenin:

“Лицом к лицу
Лица не увидеть.
Большое видится на расстоянии.
Когда кипит морская гладь,
Корабль в плачевном состоянии.”

“When face to face
We cannot see the face.
We should step back for better observation
For when the ocean boils and wails
The ship is in a sorry situation.”²²²

Ironically, in 2013 a prosecutor in Stavropol proposed to ban both Nabokov’s and Esenin’s works from school libraries because they negatively influence teenagers and might evoke some forbidden desires. Fortunately, the process was not carried out, after all.

Reich-Ranicki states that the cage with an imprisoned ape symbolizes Humbert’s pathological passion: “Er ist in einem Käfig gefangen: dem Käfig seiner

²¹⁹ Morlan, pp.2-3.

²²⁰ Nabokov, p.39.

²²¹ Nabokov, pp.44, 125.

²²² Vagapov, A.C. (translation)

pathologischen Leidenschaft zu Mädchen, die nicht einmal Backfische genannt werden könnten.”²²³ But why are little immature girls called “baked fish”? There are several possible explanations. First, they are so small that can neither be cooked nor fried; alternatively, these fish are not suitable for consumption at all and are thrown from the deck (über die Back) back to the sea. Both explanations imply the notion of consumption – in the first case, you swallow them anyway, just the way of preparation is different, whereas in the second case you decide against the consumption. Wood points out that Humbert compares Dolly to a fish: “The wan face, the eyes like myopic fish.”²²⁴ And indeed, throughout the novel Lolita is consumed, staying as silent as fish. Her mother Charlotte, previously consumed by Humbert, is compared to a fish, too: when she comments on Humbert’s waterproof watch, she is talking “softly, making a fish mouth.”²²⁵ Dana Brand claims that in the process of consumption Humbert senses the vanishing control over his gratification: “When Lolita becomes, in this process, a commodity, Humbert becomes a consumer leaving the patrimonies of poets and entering the market place.”²²⁶ At the beginning of the novel Humbert claims that poets don’t kill, but finally he does kill his rival, which is another sign of his psychological transition from *savant* to *sauvage* in the course of the narration.

A feminist critic Linda Kauffman asks the question —“Is there a woman in the text?”²²⁷ She argues that from the beginning to end, Dolores remains an enigma to Humbert and consequently, to the reader: “she does not exist for Humbert precisely because he fails to imagine her except as a projection of his desires.”²²⁸ According to her, Humbert repeatedly pushes himself and his desires in the foreground, “elid[ing] the female by framing the narrative through [his] angle of vision.”²²⁹ In fact, the first part of the novel is dominated by Humbert’s solipsistic view of those around him, while part two suggests his “gradual release from this condition,” which allows the

²²³ Reich-Ranicki, p.27. H

²²⁴ Wood, p.141.

²²⁵ Nabokov, p.89.

²²⁶ Brand, p.19.

²²⁷ Kauffman, p.131.

²²⁸ Kauffman, pp. 150, 155.

²²⁹ Kauffman, p.157.

reader to view Lolita as having distinct motivations apart from “the enchantment of his imagination,” leaving Humbert alone “in his tragic freedom.”²³⁰ Humbert contemplates on the notion of freedom on several occasions: during his first “innocent” intercourse with Dolly he already imagines her being a slave, deprived of her freedom: “I was a radiant and robust Turk, deliberately, in the full consciousness of his freedom, postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of the slaves.”²³¹ In the Russian version, the words “freedom” almost immediately follows the word “free,” thus emphasizing its importance for Humbert (“умышленно, свободно, с ясным сознанием свободы.”)²³² Freedom means for him the power to act out his desires without restraint, disregarding wishes and feelings of other people involved in the interaction. Grishakova remarks: “Not unlike the protagonists of psychological SF, Humbert refuses to accept the alien world and feels anger or anxiety when the world does not submit to his will and desires.”²³³ The comparison of Humbert to the protagonists of science fiction will be elaborated later, in the chapter dealing with the Butterfly Effect.

When Charlotte interrogates Humbert about his Christian faith, in the Russian version, he considers answering that he is free from any prejudice (“Я мог бы ответить, что в этом смысле я был свободен ото всяких предубеждений.”)²³⁴ This statement conveys the message that freedom means to him being free from following the commandments. Moreover, atheism implies a disavowal of a higher power that might punish one for one’s sins, making one free to act as one wishes, following one’s darkest desires. Later on, as Charlotte announces that Lo would go straight from the camp to a boarding school, Humbert is shocked and shattered, recounting: “I remember reaching the parking area and pumping a handful of rust-tasting water, and drinking it as avidly as if it could give me magic wisdom, youth,

²³⁰ Triggs, p.1.

²³¹ Nabokov, p.60.

²³² Nabokov RV, p.80.

²³³ Grishakova, p.278.

²³⁴ Nabokov RV, p.98.

freedom, a tiny concubine.”²³⁵ This statement could be an allusion to Brothers’ Grimm fairy tale “The Water of Life” that tells a story of magic water that can cure any malady. However, only a person with a kind heart and good intentions can get it. Rust symbolizes decay and destruction, making the reader assume that the water Humbert is drinking would unlikely make any magic happen. Thus rust reflects his evil intentions. The word “freedom” is placed between the words “youth” and “tiny concubine,” evoking the impression that Humbert yearns for freedom, wishing to restore the admired and idealized “old link between the adult world and the child world,” in order to use “tiny entertainers” as one pleases.²³⁶

When Humbert and Dolly are traveling in the mountains, and he believes seeing Detective Paramour Trapp, he decides to put his weapon in the pocket “to be ready to take advantage of the spell of insanity when it does come” (in the Russian version Nabokov calls it “свобода безумия,” that is, “a freedom of insanity.”)²³⁷ If one is recognized as insane, then punishment cannot be imposed, because one cannot be considered fully accountable for his crimes. Furthermore, a fantastic feeling of freedom is described at the end of the appointment with Dr. Quilty, where Humbert pretends to order a set of dentures but finally tells the doctor that he prefers to go to a better dentist: “I do not know if any of my readers will ever have a chance to say that. He experiences and relishes a delicious dream feeling,” which was called a miraculous feeling of dreamy freedom in the Russian version (“это дивное чувство сонной свободы”).²³⁸ This passage refers to the freedom from conventional rules, such as etiquette that prescribes the accepted social behaviors.

Reich-Renicki claims that Humbert is much more dependent on Lolita than she is on him: „Nicht sie ist ihm ausgeliefert, sondern er ihr.”²³⁹ This dependency makes him fragile, or in his own words: “[b]ut I was weak, I was not wise, my schoolgirl

²³⁵ Nabokov, p.84.

²³⁶ Nabokov, p.124.

²³⁷ Nabokov, p.229, p.295.

²³⁸ Nabokov, p.291, p.375.

²³⁹ Reich-Ranicki, p.70.

nymphet had me in thrall. With the human element dwindling, the passion, the tenderness, and the torture only increased; and of this she took advantage.”²⁴⁰ Steven Brown examines the case when a person has an unstable relationship, in which the feelings of euphoria and dysphoria interchangeably arise, stating: “The vacillation between the two forms of ordering gives rise to the ambiguity or doubt of dissonance. Hence in jealousy a loved thing whose faithfulness is questioned may acquire hateable qualities.” Similarly, Lolita has two polar opposite effects on Humbert. Before he possesses her, Humbert has vivid dreams about “knowing, cheerful, corrupt and compliant Lolita,” and cannot calm down after waking up: “My heart is still humping. I still squirm and emit low moans of remembered embarrassment.”²⁴¹

After Charlotte dies, Humbert is constantly afraid of losing his darling and being caught, and this powerful fear of losing both a desirable object and freedom is gradually driving him insane: “Despite my manly looks, I am horribly timid. My romantic soul gets all clammy and shivery at the thought of running into some awful indecent unpleasantness.”²⁴² Besides that, his surreptitious and unilateral desire causes him intolerable pain. At this point, Humbert introduces the devil in his discourse and shifts the responsibility on him: “It will be seen [...] that for all the devil’s inventiveness, the scheme remained daily the same. First, he would tempt me – and then thwart me leaving me with a dull pain in the very root of my being.”²⁴³ Furthermore, Humbert presents himself as a powerless object in devil’s hands: “The passion I have developed for that nymphet ... would have certainly landed me again in a sanatorium, had not the devil realized that I was to be granted some relief if he wanted to have me as a plaything for some time longer.”²⁴⁴ As stated in his confession, Humbert’s desire is the source of his mental disorder: his life with Lolita puts him in “a state of excitement bordering on insanity,”²⁴⁵ whereas the feelings of

²⁴⁰ Nabokov, p.208.

²⁴¹ Nabokov, p.54.

²⁴² Nabokov, p.53.

²⁴³ Nabokov, p.55.

²⁴⁴ Nabokov, p.56.

²⁴⁵ Nabokov, p.58.

shame and despair allegedly dominate over pleasure. He writes in his diary: “I shall probably have another breakdown if I stay any longer in this house, under the strain of this intolerable temptation, by the side of my darling — my darling — my life and my bride.”²⁴⁶ Using the word “bride” while addressing a person he has first seen ten days ago, sounds like determinism, which implies the absence of both freedom of will and freedom of action, according to incompatibilist theories. Freedom of action equates with external freedom, both positive and negative, while freedom of will refers to inner freedom. As mentioned earlier, the theme of temptation supported by the devil imagery correlates with the story of the original sin that places a fundamental emphasis on moral conflict.

However, the reader should not forget that all of the above is intended to be self-advocacy in front of the jury. It is a classic insanity defense, in which the defendant admits the action, simultaneously asserting his lack of culpability based on his mental illness. According to Criminal Law, the insanity defense is quite controversial, being subject to much debate, because it excuses even the most sinister conduct. Yet Humbert does not meet the criteria of its policy. Neither does an insane defendant have the ability to control his behavior, nor can he understand that his behavior is evil and unacceptable by the societal norms. However, Humbert understands very well that his actions are inappropriate and outlawed, which is why he is so scared of legal consequences.

Brown proceeds by explaining that fear means inconstant dysphoria, and hope inconstant euphoria, both of which arise “from the image of a thing future or past of whose event we are in doubt.” Indeed, love and pain are “the two pillars upon which this story is built.”²⁴⁷ The notion of pain is encoded in Lolita’s real name, Dolores that actually means suffering or pain. Although Humbert refers to her using manifold names throughout the novel, he reserves “Lolita” exclusively for her part in his

²⁴⁶ Nabokov, p.44.

²⁴⁷ Chrenkova, p.34.

fanciful fantasies.²⁴⁸ Matthias Freise underlines the importance of the names of literary characters both for the plot development and the interpretation of the novel, stating:

“Wer Namen nicht semantisch kodiert, verschenkt ein großes Potential der Literatur. [...] Die literarische Namensgebung und damit auch die Namensinterpretation ist keine Marginalie des künstlerischen Textes, sondern sie steht im Zentrum seines Sinnaufbaus, nämlich genau am Schnittpunkt zwischen Sujetfunktion und semantischer Funktion.”²⁴⁹

In fact, as Nabokov explains in *Strong Opinions*, he has chosen this name because it implies roses and tears as opposed to liquid, delicate and tender “Lolita.” Roses symbolize the flower of Venus, which is repeatedly associated with Lolita, whereas “the ambivalence of roses (soft petals and thorns) reflects that of Lolita’s life: she inspired intense desire that brought only pain to herself.”²⁵⁰ As stated by Nabokov, the surname “Haze” is a mixture of Irish mists and a small German bunny (hare), which implies a timid, fearful creature, half-seen, half-hidden in the fog.

Venus by Botticelli is a recurrent motive in *Lolita*. This is a painting of a nude female figure that has an anatomically improbable body and an impossible pose, which emphasizes the contradiction between fantasy and reality. Venus was conceived when Chronus castrated his father Uranus, which reminds us of the Oedipus complex and the castration complex, devised and elaborated by Freud. The art historian John Berger analyzes the role of the female nude in classical art and points out that a naked female body represents a perennial patriarchal ploy: “to bare the female body was to shore up masculine power in society.”²⁵¹ In this context Durham evokes the tragic destiny of Saartje Baartman, who was forced to pose naked under the stage name “Hottentot Venus.” This name was a moniker given to women exhibited in sexually suggestive shows in England and France in the nineteenth century. There is a painterly similarity between Dolly and Botticelli’s Venus, as perceived by Humbert. It is mainly a “blurred beauty” and the swollen, reddish lining of her lips and inflamed nostrils:

²⁴⁸ Sweeney, p.1.

²⁴⁹ Freise, pp.1-5.

²⁵⁰ Grela, p.108.

²⁵¹ Durham, p.77.

“She had been crying after a routine row with her mother... she had one of those tender complexions that after a good cry get all blurred and inflamed, and morbidly alluring. I regretted keenly her mistake about my private aesthetics, for I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips, those wet, matted eyelashes...”²⁵²

This excerpt demonstrates that for Humbert, Dolly’s desolation and dolor mean aesthetic pleasure. Neither has he compassion for Dolly’s distress nor is he interested in its reasons. For him, When Humbert meets Dolly again, as Mrs. Schiller, he remarks: “Curious: although actually her looks had faded, I definitely realized, so hopelessly late in the day, how much she looked — had always looked — like Botticelli’s russet Venus — the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty.”²⁵³ The word “blurred” signifies that Humbert is unable to recognize the real person under the haze of his fantasy. In addition, “blurred” is a synonym of “hazy,” which correlates with Dolly’s fictional surname Haze. In this passage, Nabokov uses a technique called ekphrasis, blending image and text, which helps to depict Dolly’s “metamorphic nature” reflected in her transforming body.²⁵⁴ Marie Bouchet points out that “resemblance is here expressed through duplication, via the anaphora and the alliterations in [s] and [b].”²⁵⁵ She explains that Humbert resorts to a pictorial reference to create an illusion that he can produce the metamorphic image of the nymphet within the frame of a painting. According to Egorova, the comparison to the eternal image of Botticelli’s Venus raises Lolita to an unattainable height, deifies and immortalizes her. In this way, Humbert tries to immortalize the name of his beloved in his confession, following the romantic tradition of the unsurpassed master of the Renaissance:

“Вырвавшийся из подсознания вечный образ поднимает Лолиту на недостижимую высоту, обожествляет и увековечивает ее облик не только в сочинении Гумберта, но и — ретроспективно — на картине непревзойденного мастера эпохи Возрождения. С. Боттичелли запечатлевал лик Симонетты Веспуччи по памяти, после ее смерти, чтобы навечно сохранить ее красоту, подобно тому, как Гумберт пытается своей повестью обессмертить имя возлюбленной.”²⁵⁶

²⁵² Nabokov, p.43.

²⁵³ Nabokov, p.270.

²⁵⁴ Bouchet, p.3.

²⁵⁵ Bouchet, p.5.

²⁵⁶ Egorova, p.98.

Like Botticelli who captured the image of Simonetta Vespucci after her death, Humbert uses art and his memory to preserve Lolita's beauty forever. Thus, the birth of Venus is juxtaposed with the death of her prototype.

"Being a character in one of Vladimir Nabokov's fictions is not much fun," observes William Carroll, bewailing their "inherently fragile" life paths paved with blows of fate. Moreover, being a Nabokov's reader is not much fun either, implies Ellen Pifer, because such tragic stories may unsettle the readers, reminding them of their own fragile existence.²⁵⁷ Toker criticizes *Lolita* because she suspects a novel that deals with a broken sexual taboo either of "sensationalism or of a defiantly callous aestheticism that promotes insensitivity to crime and suffering."²⁵⁸ Toker elaborates her argument by stating: "Nabokov's brand of 'aesthetic bliss' is, to a large extent, a Schopenhauerian notion. It is as if he had drawn the conclusion about the ennobling effect of art from Schopenhauer's belief in the power of aesthetic enjoyment to put to sleep the insistent urging of the malevolent will."²⁵⁹ However, I would argue that Nabokov's fiction does not necessarily make its readers depressed or insensitive to violence, but may have a favorable effect on their *Weltanschauung*, giving some food for thought. Wians believes that aftermath of a brilliant work of fiction can be felt as a private revelation, *kalon* (perfect beauty), similar to Nabokov's aesthetic bliss, despite its emergence from violence.²⁶⁰ Moreover, Robert Appelbaum goes as far as to claim in his book *The Aesthetics of Violence* that violence is a necessary condition of art in the world of mimetic play, remarking that we should bear in mind that violence has always been a key element of visual and narrative arts since Greek antiquity.

In her book *Reading 'Lolita' in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi explores and inspects the notion of freedom in a literary and cultural context. She analyzes famous Western literary works forbidden by the Islamic regime while portraying the current Iranian reality.

²⁵⁷ Pifer HF, p.55.

²⁵⁸ Toker, p.198.

²⁵⁹ Toker, p.198.

²⁶⁰ Wians, p.21.

Nafisi describes the restrictions imposed by the Islamic State on women's lives that display astonishing parallels with Humbert Humbert's suppressive behavior: girls who are not allowed to run in the school yard or lick ice cream in public are robbed of their childhood, too, similarly to Nabokov's *Lolita*.²⁶¹ An American researcher Christine Grogan claims that Nafisi "makes *Lolita* a synecdoche for great Western literature and a model text for exposing solipsists who deny their subjects humanity."²⁶²

Nevertheless, there seem to be a moment of transformation when Humbert sees the pregnant and worn *Lolita* and confesses:

"I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. . . . I insist the world know how much I loved my *Lolita*, this *Lolita*, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine."²⁶³

Dolinin believes that this proclamation means that "Humbert Humbert gains the ability to love, which liberates him from his maniacal fear of time."²⁶⁴ If we believe this statement, Humbert undergoes a double liberation: he becomes free of his blazing desire and of the chronophobia.

But what about *Lolita's* liberation? Already as early as in the Foreword, she is in advance deprived of any sort of future, having died "in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952," long before the reader is instructed about her "immortality."²⁶⁵ Admittedly, this information can be deciphered on a second reading, because of *Lolita's* marriage and her subsequent name change. There is juxtaposition between her premature death and its date symbolizing the emergence of hope after a great period of darkness. Christmas is a celebration and simultaneously a time of spiritual reflection. In *Lolita*, a Christmas baby dies, figuratively carrying away the hope of a "better generation in a safer world" promised by John Ray in the

²⁶¹ Nafisi, p.67.

²⁶² Grogan, p.53.

²⁶³ Nabokov, p.277.

²⁶⁴ Dolinin, p.25.

²⁶⁵ Nabokov, p.4.

Foreword. In “Orality and Social Memory in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” Nicole Burgoyne asserts that “these deaths perfectly suit Humbert’s desires,” because he possesses the last word with no witnesses that could have objected to his testimony, “limited to a homodiegetic character’s perspective.”²⁶⁶

James Tweedie maintains that Dolores Haze is unfree as long as she is textualized as Humbert’s *Lolita*, despite her efforts to create a world apart from Humbert, constructing her own fictions.²⁶⁷ It is left unclear whether Dolly experiences a sexual liberation in her marriage, subsequent to a forced intercourse with Humbert or Quilty. Ariel Levy suggests that a real sexual liberation means freeing children and teenagers from “the constraining, exploitative, and commercially motivated construction of sex” that defines female sexuality; furthermore, she claims that we need to “make room for a range of options as wide as the variety of human desire,” allowing ourselves “the freedom to figure out what we internally want from sex” instead of imitating whatever popular culture forces upon us as sexy.²⁶⁸ Nabokov himself was reportedly against the use of seductive or provocative pictures of young girls on the book cover of *Lolita*, because he originally planned this novel to be about a tragic destiny of a grown-up man. He said: “I want pure colors, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls.”²⁶⁹ So the novel debuted in Paris clad in a plain green cover, yet a majority of modern covers go for cute, complains Bertram, listing “whimsical buttons on bright red, an ejaculating pink plastic gun, a crenellated candy-pink shell, a leopard-print mascara wand, a paper-doll leg, a crushed red lollipop.”²⁷⁰ Interestingly, he claims that exactly this tasteless cuteness, paradoxically, come closest to the book’s cruel heart, because it represents a heartless and static ideal, exactly as was Humbert’s creation of his nymphet. Additionally, it could also represent the trash culture Dolly loves. Lipovetsky

²⁶⁶ Burgoyne, p.109.

²⁶⁷ Tweedie, p.161.

²⁶⁸ Durham, p.131.

²⁶⁹ Bertram; Leving, p. 12.

²⁷⁰ Bertram; Leving, p.7.

concludes in *Paralogii* that Humbert resorts to art in order to compensate the unfulfilled desire:

“Герои *Лолиты*, *Ады* и *Бледного Огня* обращаются к искусству, чтобы ‘залатать дыры’ в собственной жизни: их трагическое желание не может быть соотнесённость реальными объектами; в сущности именно невоплотимость их желаний и делает их трагическими.”²⁷¹

If Humbert gains an ability to love as an aftermath of his “tragic desire,” then Dolly gains an ability to mask as a trauma response, hiding from everyone who she really is. Not only she hides her “secret garden” from Humbert, but also she never discloses any details about her traumatic past to her husband, who is her only significant other: “Dick did not know a thing of the whole mess. He thought she had run away from an upper class home to wash dishes in a diner. He believed anything.”²⁷² This altered version gives Dolly a desired autonomy considering her past choices. It sounds like a reckless adventure of a spoiled girl seeking independence and real-life experiences. Dolly refuses talking about her real past, feeling reluctant about “racking up all that muck.”²⁷³ The word “muck” implies that she is ashamed of having been abused, considering it filthy and wretched.

A common definition of trauma is “an exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving learning about unexpected or violent death experienced by a family member,” or any situation that involves “extreme shame, fear, helplessness, boundary violations, or loss of identity,” which can be experienced as a symbolic death of self.²⁷⁴ Dolly learns about her mother’s sudden death, and immediately afterwards, still being under shock, she is abducted and abused by her only attachment figure. Masking is a common coping strategy, meaning creating a façade to conceal one’s real emotions and thoughts. Dolly’s case represents a masked trauma, conforming to the following criteria: 1. Memories of the trauma were repressed; 2. The person does not consider the event traumatic when in fact it was; 3. The person does not think the trauma is significant in the present context.²⁷⁵ Indeed,

²⁷¹ Lipovetsky, p.54.

²⁷² Nabokov, p.271.

²⁷³ Nabokov, p.271.

²⁷⁴ Schermer, p.254.

²⁷⁵ Schermer, p.257.

Dolly dismisses the traumatic memories “like a dull party, like a rainy picnic to which only the dullest bores had come, like a humdrum exercise, like a bit of dry mud caking her childhood.”²⁷⁶ Furthermore, Dolly goes as far as telling Humbert that he had been “a good father,” after all, filtering all negative memories that she considers “of no importance now.”²⁷⁷ Moreover, she denies and downplays the tragic nature of her experience, announcing that “this world is just one gag after another,” presuming that “if somebody wrote up her life nobody would ever believe it.”²⁷⁸ In the Russian version the words “this world” are replaced by “life,” which more specifically refers to her tragic existence masked as a comic one (“жизнь - серия комических номеров.”)²⁷⁹ In addition, Nabokov replaces the word “somebody” by “a novelist” (“романист,”) which makes the utterance even more ironic. In other words, Dolly expresses a pervasive denial and a persistent mistrust that anyone would ever believe her.

Coming back to the question of final liberation, I would conclude that Humbert is inwardly liberated by the end of the novel, despite being imprisoned: he gains liberation through his confession and Dolly’s absolution. In “Liberating Eros: Confession and Desire,” Papanikolau claims that confession – whether by a friend to a friend, an alcoholic in AA, a survivor of trauma to a therapist, or by a participant on the Jerry Springer Show – inevitably affects “the landscape of one’s emotions and desires,” helping to regulate and pacify impulsive desires.²⁸⁰ In other words, a confession offers “the hope of freedom from the tyranny of desire,” liberating the desire to be responsible while healing.²⁸¹ Additionally, Dolly’s absolution releases Humbert from the guilt of sin, removing an eternal punishment in Hell, evoked by him on multiple occasions. Finally, Humbert manages to die “a few days before his

²⁷⁶ Nabokov, p.272.

²⁷⁷ Nabokov, p.272.

²⁷⁸ Nabokov, p.273.

²⁷⁹ Nabokov, RV, p.351.

²⁸⁰ Papanikolau, p.136.

²⁸¹ Papanikolau, p.117.

trial was scheduled to start,” escaping both the official judgment and the punishment.²⁸²

Dolly, on the contrary, is left in an impossible balancing act of being simultaneously dead and immortal against her will, symbolizing Humbert’s “American sweet immortal dead love” for the generations of readers to come.²⁸³ All in all, I would argue that *Lolita* is a quest for freedom, both for Humbert and Dolores. In her essay “On Human Freedom and Inhuman Art: Nabokov,” Ellen Pifer states: “We cannot read any of his fiction without recognizing the high value that Vladimir Nabokov placed on individual liberty. Perhaps it was his fierce love of liberty which made him so keenly aware of the transgressions all human beings commit against each other as they pursue, and try to realize, their solipsistic dreams and desires.”²⁸⁴

Nabokov was often linked by critics to existentialism whose followers proclaim freedom to be the core of human existence. However, he dismissed this statement, calling Sartre’s philosophy “a fashionable brand of cafe philosophy” in his review of *Nausea* titled “Sartre’s First Try” (1949). Moreover, Nabokov harshly criticizes Sartre’s “very loose type of writing,” evoking once again poor Dostoevsky as he states that somewhere behind Satre’s writing “looms Dostoevsky at his worst.”²⁸⁵ Humbert believes at first that fulfilling his desire and living out his dream would signify freedom. However, very soon, he realizes that he has turned into the villain he initially did not intend to become, plagued by conscience, guilt, and fear of being discovered. According to Bykov, Humbert wanted to conquer the temptation by making Lolita his lover and fancying becoming her spouse, but he has lost everything – Lolita, freedom, and life. (“Гумберт думал победить соблазн, сделав Лолиту любовницей, а потом и женой, — но лишился и Лолиты, и свободы, и жизни.”)²⁸⁶ After all, Humbert admits that their road trip was quite superficial and

²⁸² Nabokov, p.3.

²⁸³ Nabokov, p.280.

²⁸⁴ Pifer HF, p.61.

²⁸⁵ Alexandrov, p.99.

²⁸⁶ Bykov, p.3.

meaningless: they had been everywhere and had seen nothing, whereas its “sole *raison d`être* [...] was to keep my companion in passable humor from kiss to kiss.”²⁸⁷ This attitude reminds the reader of existentialism mentioned above. It is worth mentioning that Nabokov’s short story “Terror” (1926) bears striking parallels with Sartre’s *Nausea*.

Being a teenager yearning for independence, Dolores first revolts against her cold and dominant mother, then against abusive and controlling Humbert, and finally escapes from Quilty, who just as well does not bring her the expected freedom. The liberty Dolores is looking for is not a sexual one. It seems that she could find some peace in her marriage with Richard Schiller. However, the lack of economic stability makes her turn back to Humbert to ask him for money: “I’m going nuts because we don’t have enough to pay our debts and get out of here.”²⁸⁸ For Dolly, as well as for many Americans, Alaska symbolizes freedom, wilderness and a possibility to start anew. I believe that Nabokov’s choice of the name of Dolly’s husband is intentional. In his *Letters*, Friedrich Schiller establishes a special connection between aesthetic value and freedom, claiming that “it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom.”²⁸⁹ According to Bersani, sexual violence is safe as long as it remains in the realm of desire – or in art.²⁹⁰ All things considered, we can conclude that through the text of *Lolita* the reader gains a deeper understanding of freedom, because the philosophical message of the novel overshadows the depicted violence.

Tweedie claims that both the foreword and the afterword “invite the reader to ignore the important implications of the story they purport to explain, as Dolores Haze becomes a footnote to a case study in sexual deviance or a conceit for aesthetic pursuits.”²⁹¹ He points out the contradictions between the standpoints advocated in the foreword and the afterword – “between desire and meaning, revel and revelation,

²⁸⁷ Nabokov, p.154.

²⁸⁸ Nabokov, p.266.

²⁸⁹ Matherne; Riggle, p.375.

²⁹⁰ Clayton, p.44.

²⁹¹ Tweedie, p.152.

reading and rereading.”²⁹² Nabokov compares the way a great writer sees things with the faceted eye of an insect, whereas the way an average reader or writer sees them as an ordinary representation of a common human vision:

“Thus the development of the art of description throughout the centuries may be profitably treated in terms of vision, the faceted eye becoming a unified and prodigiously complex organ and the dead dim ‘accepted colors’ (in the sense of ‘idées reçues’) gradually yielding their subtle shades and allowing new wonders of application.”²⁹³

Newman links Nabokov’s theory with the Darwinian classic concept of evolution of species, stating that attention to detail is “the key to discovering the nature of the textual or natural world.”²⁹⁴ I would like to believe that a modern reader would be able to detect subtle shades and gradations, being sensitive enough to tell apart design from deception, a romantic comedy from a tragedy, a therapist from the rapist, a Dolores from a Lolita.

²⁹² Tweedie, p.152.

²⁹³ Nabokov in Newman, p.64.

²⁹⁴ Newman, p.65.

4. Nabokov and Dostoevsky: Freedom and Desire

While analyzing *Crime and Punishment* in his book *Лекции по русской литературе* (*Lectures on Russian Literature*), Nabokov asks the reader to consider which feeling overweighs after reading the novel: an aesthetic pleasure or a shiver of disgust and an unhealthy interest in the details of the crime, implying that Dostoevsky never succeeded in making his novels a divine game (“божественной игрой”):

“Я бы хотел, чтобы вы оценили "Преступление и наказание" [...] именно с этой точки зрения: перевешивает ли эстетическое наслаждение, которое вы испытываете, сопровождая Достоевского в его путешествиях вглубь больных душ, всегда ли оно перевешивает другие чувства - дрожь отвращения и нездоровый интерес к подробностям преступления? В других его романах равновесия между эстетическими достижениями и элементами уголовной хроники еще меньше”.²⁹⁵

Nabokov asserts that Dostoevsky could not achieve a healthy balance between pleasure and disgust in his works. However, is there such a balance in *Lolita*?

Although Nabokov had repeatedly expressed his contempt for Dostoevsky, there can be found numerous direct and indirect allusions to the works of the classic in his novels, and *Lolita* is no exception. I aspire to demonstrate that Nabokov was influenced by Dostoevsky much more than he was willing to admit. On the whole, *Lolita* is a “confession of the other,” a genre often used by Dostoevsky.²⁹⁶ Michael Wood notices some apparent similarities between the famous protagonists of these two authors, stating that Humbert wants to see himself “and to project himself as supremely conscious of his grisly errors, as the sort of groveling Dostoevskian sinner Nabokov so detested.”²⁹⁷ I have chosen to draw parallels between two groveling sinners – Raskolnikov and Humbert – and subsequently examine the correspondence between the images of Sonia and Dolly, because grasping these allusions and reminiscences would contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between Humbert and Dolly. Both Sonia and Dolly are placed by McFatum in a

²⁹⁵ Nabokov, *Лекции*, p. 178.

²⁹⁶ Semyonova, p.35.

²⁹⁷ Wood, p.141.

highly abusive environment, regularly consenting to unwanted sexual intercourse. I would like to explore how they cope with this traumatic experience and its aftermath.

Russian critics repeatedly scathed Nabokov for his “nerusskost” (meaning “non-Rusianness,”) claiming that he demonstrated no interest in moral or regio-philosophical themes that characterized the most famous works of nineteenth-century Russian literature. Moreover, they asserted that in his works, Nabokov did not address existing, “real” problems.²⁹⁸ In the following chapter, I am going to deny this assumption, showing that *Lolita* deals with moral dilemmas and existential issues. In *Lolita*, Nabokov himself is winking at the reader, giving us a transparent hint of the half-hidden intertextuality with Dostoevsky in the following passage. After having destroyed Charlotte’s love letter, Humbert addresses “the gentlemen of jury,” exclaiming: “I felt Dostoevskian grin dawning (through the very grimace that twisted my lips) like a distant and terrible sun.”²⁹⁹ In the Russian version, it is rather a contemptuous sneer (“усмешечка”) that accompanies “the red sun of desire and decision” mentioned two paragraphs later.³⁰⁰ The reader anticipates an insidious plan being hatched by the “resourceful Humbert.” This moment of a sudden fusion with the classic, whose characters continually though ineffectively struggle with demons, serves as a premonition of disaster, intensified by the word “terrible.” Understanding this allusion would allow us to comprehend the complexity of motives and barriers behind this plan, which is why we must turn to Dostoevsky and dig deeper into the context.

Nabokov’s texts are compared to matryoshka dolls (Russian nested dolls of decreasing size placed one inside another) because of the variety of hidden layers: “Текст, внутри которого находится интертекст, приобретает модель типа ‘матрешка в матрешке.’”³⁰¹ Similarly, Alfred Appel mentions the self-referential devices of Nabokov in the introduction to *Lolita*, calling them “mirrors inserted into

²⁹⁸ Alexandrov, p.2.

²⁹⁹ Nabokov, p.70.

³⁰⁰ Nabokov, p.71.

³⁰¹ Davydov, p.8.

the books at oblique angles.” He claims that they create “dizzying inversions” within the text, offering the reader hidden messages.³⁰² In this chapter, I will try to find these hidden messages, tracing and analyzing the intertextual references between *Lolita* and *Crime and Punishment*.

O’Connor suggests that “no writer has commanded more violent attention from a reader than Dostoevsky has from Nabokov,” revealing some intricate intertextualities between *Lolita* and *Crime and Punishment*, such as the iconic theme of child violation, an image of America as a materialistic utopia (where Svidrigajlov would like to go and Humbert actually goes), the famous lap scene, in which Nabokov adds comic relief to the creepiness, the presence of a gun in the last scene where Svidrigajlov meets Dunja and Humbert meets Dolly and, finally, the ultimate revelation accompanied by the feeling of self-loathing. In addition to that, there are some more intertextualities I would like to unveil.

Nabokov continually criticized the flatness of Dostoevsky’s characters, claiming that “we get them all complete at the beginning of the tale, and so they remain without any considerable changes although their surroundings may alter and the most extraordinary things may happen to them.”³⁰³ According to him, Raskolnikov is a typical example of Dostoevskian ‘flat hero’ who “does not go through any true development of personality, and the other heroes of Dostoevsky... do even less so.”³⁰⁴ I would like to scrutinize this claim, analyzing the personalities of Humbert and Raskolnikov and tracing the development of their characters.

Both Raskolnikov and Humbert are proud, bitter and contemptuous characters. They consider themselves superior to others, having outstanding intellectual capacities, and therefore feeling entitled to a different set of rules than the rest of humanity. Raskolnikov asserts: “An ‘extraordinary’ person has a right... not an official right, of course, but a private one, to allow his conscience to step across certain... obstacles,

³⁰² Appel, p.xxix.

³⁰³ Picon, p.1.

³⁰⁴ Picon, p.1.

and then only if the execution of his idea ... requires it.”³⁰⁵ In his turn, Humbert claims: “I was above the tribulations of ridicule, beyond the possibilities of retribution.”³⁰⁶ Both of them contemplate on the opposition of *nomos* and *physis*, a sophistic contrast between law and nature, questioning why we should submit to the laws if they conflict with our natural needs and desires. Raskolnikov and Humbert challenge the established conventions and violate the law, believing themselves capable of living with the burden of guilt. Being desperately confused in his adult life, otherwise intelligent and good-mannered, Raskolnikov decides to test his theory about extraordinary people, murdering an old pawnbroker. In *Passion, Humiliation, Revenge: Hatred in Man-Woman Relationships in the 19th and 20th Century Russian Novel*, Rina Lapidus asserts that Raskolnikov kills Alena Ivanovna because she represses him, deprives him of satisfaction, “threatens to steal his masculinity and to castrate him.”³⁰⁷ The creditor’s attitude towards her debtor is “masculine, powerful, almost sadistic: painfully humiliating, expressed in an abusive and scathing tone.”³⁰⁸ Therefore, the frustrated protagonist feels obligated to attack her first, preventing her from destroying his personal dignity and masculine self-esteem.

Raskolnikov’s idols are Napoleon, Lycurgus, Solomon, and Mahomet because they have the power, courage, and will to transgress. In a similar fashion, Humbert glorifies Virgil, Dante and Petrarka, who could follow their passion, disregarding societal conventions. The aspirations of female characters and their role models in these novels are extremely modest compared to the males’ ones. Both Sonia and Dolly wish to have a normal life without sexual abuse. The very concept of “extraordinary man” is alien to Sonia, just as an idea of transgressing the “law of God.” For her, all men are equal and no one has the right to take one’s life. Virginia Woolf remarks: “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses, possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its

³⁰⁵ Dostoevsky, p. 308.

³⁰⁶ Nabokov, p.60.

³⁰⁷ Lapidus, p.27.

³⁰⁸ Lapidus, p.29.

natural size.”³⁰⁹ Furthermore, she asserts that the reason why both Napoleon and Mussolini insisted upon the inferiority of women is “if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge.”³¹⁰ She concludes that this looking-glass vision charges masculine vitality and stimulates their nervous system, making men feel confident, superior and desired. Thus both Sonia and Dolly seem to serve as looking glasses, functioning in the relationship with the protagonists as a powerless and nonscholarly Other, deprived of fundamental human rights, making Raskolnikov and Humbert look even more powerful and intellectual. In fact, many critics remarked that Dostoevsky’s female characters remain undeveloped and muted, being inextricably linked to the male protagonists and functioning as their mirror images. Sonia’s value is finally affirmed by her offer of self-sacrifice in the name of redemption for the anxious, tormented, and delirious male protagonist. As a woman, being associated with nurturing and compassion, she tries to rehabilitate a struggling Raskolnikov, playing a role of a caregiver traditionally limited to the female gender.

Many critics viewed Raskolnikov as a Romantic Hero, an outlaw, “who is always at odds with the surrounding world.”³¹¹ Humbert would also fit this definition, for he violates the Kantian principle, too, asserting his will over the restraint of social conventions. In *Romanticism in Perspective*, Lilian Furst claims that “the crux of the Romantic Hero’s tragedy is that his egotism is such as to pervert all his feelings inward onto himself till everything and everyone is evaluated only in relationship to his precious self.”³¹² Additionally, literary critic Northrop Frye remarks that other characteristics of the Romantic Hero include wanderlust, misanthropy, alienation, and isolation. Indeed, both Humbert and Raskolnikov are overly misanthropical and self-centered characters, whereas there is a certain duality one should not overlook. Another common trait of the Romantic hero, which will be analyzed below, is repentance or remorse combined with self-criticism.

³⁰⁹ Woolf, p.30.

³¹⁰ Woolf, p.31.

³¹¹ Fraser, p.52.

³¹² Furst, p.99.

On the contrary, a typical Romantic Heroine of the 19th century is free from egotism and self-centeredness. She is wholly committed to a love relationship, allowing it to dominate her life. Julie Shaffer states that authors intentionally created heroines “whose behavior could be seen as providing female readers with models to emulate to fit them for their role as subordinate dependents in male-dominating culture.”³¹³ Sonia is Raskolnikov’s spiritual guide, being compassionate and self-sacrificing. In the American context, love is still idealized by means of popular culture and media driven by consumerism. In the late 20th century, the literary landscape is slowly starting to change as more diverse writers join the industry, which results in a broader range of depicted experiences that often deviate from the stereotypical mold. Thus, a representation of a Romantic Heroine has gradually begun to change in many respects, bringing a shift towards sexuality that meets individual needs without necessarily involving a long-term relationship, thus separating personal attachment from sexual desire. A heroine is no longer waiting to be swept off her feet but instead has her feet firmly on the ground. Contemporary heroines progressively reflect a rich diversity of female lives, bringing recognition that a female experience can be as universal and manifold as a male experience.

The duality of man’s nature is a central topic in numerous Dostoevsky’s novels. The dramatization of the split personality is typical in his characters, who feel compelled to struggle with this duality through some form of self-assertion, the result of which is always an intense suffering.³¹⁴ In “Icon vs. Myth: Dostoevsky, Feminism and Pornography,” Janine Langan highlights the duality found in Dostoevsky’s novels, asserting that by interweaving Christian symbolism and self-mutilation, the author touches the human propensity for “more or less angelic pornography,” using his unique talent for arousing in his reader the peculiar thrill linked to sadomasochist fantasies.³¹⁵

³¹³ Schaffer, p.472.

³¹⁴ Mortimer, p.106.

³¹⁵ Langan, p.65.

Regarding the outward appearance, Raskolnikov is depicted as an attractive young man: he has “refined features,” moreover, “he was not destitute of personal attractions; he was above middle height, with a slender and well-proportioned figure, and he had dark auburn hair and fine dark eyes,” (the depiction in the Russian version is even more flattering: “[...] он был замечательно хорош собою, с прекрасными темными глазами, темно-рус, ростом выше среднего, тонок и строен...”)³¹⁶ His mother considers him even more handsome than his beautiful sister Dunya: “И какие у него глаза прекрасные, и какое всё лицо прекрасное! Он собой даже лучше Дунечки...”³¹⁷ Similarly to Raskolnikov, Humbert does not only consider himself a misunderstood genius, but also presents himself to the audience as an “exceptionally handsome male; slow-moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanor,” (“статный мужественный красавец”) who can obtain at the snap of his fingers “any adult female” he chooses.³¹⁸ However, instead of seducing adult females, Humbert pursues a nymphet, breaching a societal taboo and therefore engaging in erotic transgression. Donahue states in her thesis that eroticism has functioned as a form of transgression throughout history because it has the power to liberate us “from the discontinuous realm regulated by the need to obey taboos.”³¹⁹ A transgression propels man into a “sacred realm of freedom” that exists beyond the mortal sphere governed by taboo, which is precisely where Raskolnikov and Humbert wish to get, however without success. Dostoevsky and Nabokov display how an individual in pursuit of transgression is liable to transform “into a violent tyrant... unable to recognize the value of lives other than his own.”³²⁰ In fact, it cannot be denied that both Raskolnikov and Humbert treat others as tools, utilizing them to attain their objectives.

³¹⁶ Dostoevsky, p.6.

³¹⁷ Dostoevsky, p.173.

³¹⁸ Nabokov, p. 25.

³¹⁹ Donahue, p.16.

³²⁰ Donahue, p.21.

Many critics point out the dualism in Nabokov's narrative, but Mlechko reproves this approach, claiming that *Lolita* is not a black-and-white novel, but a novel of shades, a play of lights and shadows, as shimmering colors on butterflies' wings ("Но *Лолита* — не черно-белый роман, а роман полутонов, игры света и тени, мерцающих красок на крыльях набоковских бабочек.")³²¹ Similarly to Raskolnikov, Humbert struggles with inner duality, which is even reflected in his name, Humbert Humbert. He is both hero and anti-hero, which creates a compelling antagonism that stays unresolved throughout the novel: "Humbert the Terrible deliberated with Humbert the Small whether Humbert Humbert should kill her or her lover, or both, or neither,"³²² (whereas in the Russian version Humbert the Small is translated as Humbert the Meek - "Гумберт Грозный внутренне обсуждал с Гумбертом Кротким, кого именно убьёт Гумберт Гумберт.") The word "meek" implies a quiet and gentle person that does not want to fight or argue with other people, which is obviously an unsuitable depiction of Humbert that proves once again the unreliability of his narration. Additionally, this could be an allusion to Dostoevsky's *The Meek One*, a story in which a neurotic narrator develops an interest in a sixteen-year-old girl, who later becomes his wife. Like *Lolita*, *The Meek One* is a confession of a white widowed male. Similarly to Humbert, the Pawnbroker sees himself as a superior human being, and attempts to impress and tame the girl by offering her money. By calling himself Humbert the Meek, Humbert manipulates the reader's expectations, inverting the roles.

On the contrary, Shadursky calls the word created by Nabokov twofold, stating that this duality is typical of European Romantics, who designed another world full of harmony and 'aesthetic bliss' beyond the perishable reality:

"Для рассмотрения поэтики Набокова важно учесть представление о 'двомирии'... Двомирие основано на знании, что за тленным миром, действительной реальностью скрыта реальность духовная, мир, где воздается за творчество, стремление к гармонии, истине."³²³

³²¹ Mlechko, p.143.

³²² Nabokov, p.29.

³²³ Shadursky, p.11.

Alexander Dolinin remarks that this duality can be interpreted in at least two ways: first, existentially, as a double life, correlating with Nabokov's existence in two parallel realities in an exile; secondly, mystically, as a juxtaposition of an imaginary world created by the artist with the reality.

Another dichotomy, namely the duality of love and hatred in *Lolita*, is discussed by Boyd, who asks the readers why someone as vain as Humbert, "as sure of his own intellectual superiority to those around him, choose to invent someone who so easily frustrates and humiliates him."³²⁴ According to Boyd, Nabokov structures *Lolita* "around the contrasts and comparisons between the girl Humbert loves and the man he hates," trying to immortalize Lolita and to annihilate his rival.³²⁵ The more Humbert finds Quilty freer than himself, the more he hates him, which proves once again that freedom is one of Humbert's most ardent desires. In *Crime and Punishment*, dualism and doubles play a prominent role, too. Raskolnikov's name contains a crucial clue to his character: the word *raskol* (раскол) meaning "split." Various critics pointed out that dualism lies deep within Raskolnikov's character: he is torn between the desire to transgress the law and the desire to be virtuous. These two opposing sides are embodied by Svidrigajlov and Sonia. In his draft of *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky characterizes Sonia and Svidrigajlov in the following way: "Свидригайлов – отчаяние, самое циническое. Соня – надежда, самая неосуществимая. Он страстно привязался к ним обоим," (Svidrigajlov is despair, the most cynical. Sonia is hope, the most unrealisable. He [Raskolnikov] became passionately attached to both.)³²⁶ Moreover, Raskolnikov admits to Svidrigajlov: "I can't help feeling that in some way you are very like me."³²⁷ Bakhtin maintains that Dostoevsky tends to "dramatize, in space, even internal contradictions and internal stage in the development of a single person – forcing a character to converse with his own double, with the devil, with his alter ego, with his own caricature."³²⁸ In *Crime*

³²⁴ Boyd, p.83.

³²⁵ Boyd, p.86.

³²⁶ Dostoevsky, 1967, p.244.

³²⁷ Dostoevsky in Panichas.

³²⁸ Bakhtin, 1984, p.90.

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and Punishment, Svidrigajlov serves as Raskolnikov's dark double, similarly to Quilty in *Lolita*. Initially, Dostoevsky even contemplated that both Raskolnikov and Svidrigajlov would commit suicide at the end of the novel.

Another division in Raskolnikov that should be mentioned is the sudden switch from deliberate indifference to impulsive charity.

Igor Sukhih remarks that Raskolnikov feels a mutual affinity with Svidrigailov and therefore confronts him, whereas Raskolnikov and Sonia are drawn to each other like the opposite poles of a magnet. Sukhih states that Raskolnikov and Svidrigajlov epitomize contempt for people and human pride brought to the limit; whilst Sonia represents humility and compassion. This juxtaposition represents a common gender difference in self-estimated intelligence with males providing systematically higher estimates than females. In “Gender Differences in Self-Estimated Intelligence: Exploring the Male Hubris, Female Humility Problem,” the scientists admit that the issue is complex and nuanced. Still, the research has shown that females in the samples have reported lower general self-esteem, which negatively influenced their self-estimated intelligence. In *Crime and Punishment*, both Sonia and Dunia regard their feelings and needs as inferior to those of the male protagonists, placing the welfare of others before themselves. In “Chaos and Dostoevsky’s Women,” Nathan Rosen maintains that “love in Russian literature lacks the romantic ecstasy that we find in Western literature” – the hero loves the kind of woman, “who will bring out the noblest elements in his character, forcing him out of his private dilemma to feel sympathy for all the afflicted of the earth.”³²⁹ The highest example of womanhood in Russian literature is the Decembrists’ wives, who followed their husbands to Siberia, which is Sonia’s exact trajectory. Western critics tend to regard this attitude as masochistic, whereas others point out Raskolnikov’s infantile dependence on women in his life.

Raskolnikov and Humbert systematically engage in thinking and writing sessions to develop their theories, every now and then escaping into the world of their imagination. As Raskolnikov recounts, “I sat in my room like a spider. . . I ought to have studied, but I sold my books; and the dust lies an inch thick on the notebooks on

³²⁹ Rosen, p.262.

my table. I preferred lying still and thinking. And I kept thinking.”³³⁰ Raskolnikov says: “... whether I became a benefactor to others, or spent my life like a spider, catching men in my web and sucking the life out of men, I couldn’t have cared at that moment.” Similarly, Humbert imagines himself as a spider “sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard.”³³¹ However, the image of a powerful spider is very soon replaced by the powerless Humbert the Wounded Spider (“Подбитый паук Гумберт”) who moves around his prey “like some kind of paralytic, on soft distorted limbs.”³³² Venturing into the realm of fantasy, he imagines himself braver and bolder: “How marvelous were my fancied adventures as I sat on a hard park bench pretending to be immersed in a trembling book.”³³³ (“какие чудесные приключения я бывало воображал.”)³³⁴ According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s character comes close to mirroring Heidegger’s fundamental proposition: “We see not who he is, but how he is conscious of himself; our act of artistic visualization occurs not before the reality of the hero, but before a pure function of his awareness of that reality.”³³⁵ In *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky chooses the third person omniscient narrator, focusing primarily on Raskolnikov’s thoughts and feelings, so that the reader gains a deeper insight in the motivation behind his actions, creating a similar subjectivity as in Humbert’s confession. It is worth mentioning that Dostoevsky’s notebooks indicate that he considered writing either a memoir or confession of Raskolnikov in the form of a diary.³³⁶

A literary scholar, Humbert blueprints his artistic project through dialogue with numerous traditions of world literature, whereas all of the writers he mentions or cites are somehow linked to Romanticism — whether as its forebears, its classics, or its modernist progeny. “On the whole we can state that the romantic tradition, as the

³³⁰ Dostoevsky, p.359.

³³¹ Nabokov, p.47.

³³² Nabokov, p.54.

³³³ Nabokov, p.20.

³³⁴ Nabokov, RV, p.29.

³³⁵ Bakhtin 1984, p.49.

³³⁶ Rosenshield, p.399.

predecessor and foundation of the modernist sensibility, formulates Humbert's consciousness and project."³³⁷ Raskolnikov, in his turn, is called by many critics a dreamer and a romantic, being categorized as one of "higher personalities" capable of dominating other people, which, according to Evlampiev, Dostoevsky borrowed from German Romanticism.³³⁸ When we read Reich-Ranicke's portrayal of Nabokov's novels, we immediately feel that exactly the same depiction could have been applied to Dostoevsky's works: "Seine Romane sind Studien des Wahns und der Dämonie, seine Helden gleichen Amokläufern, das Monomanische ist ihr Element: Sie sind besessen – von der Liebe zu Frauen, [...] vom maßlosen Ehrgeiz oder von qualvollen Miderwertigkeitskomplexen."³³⁹ Reich-Ranicke claims that Nabokov's novels are a study of madness, whereas his heroes are possessed by passion, excessive ambition or painful inferiority complexes. All of the above can be applied both to Humbert and Raskolnikov. According to psychologist Albert Adler, who coined these terms, people with superiority complex frequently attempt to hide low self-esteem or a sense of inferiority.

Ironically, Nabokov has criticized the amount of mentally unstable characters in Dostoevsky's novels in his lectures on Dostoevsky:

"Психопатов среди главных героев романов множество: Ставрогин — случай нравственной неполноценности, Рогожин — жертва эротомании, Раскольников — случай временного помутнения рассудка, Иван Карамазов — еще один ненормальный. Все это случаи, свидетельствующие о распаде личности. И есть еще множество других примеров, включая нескольких совершенно безумных персонажей...Сомнительно, можно ли всерьез говорить о `реализме` или `человеческом опыте` писателя, создавшего целую галерею неврастеников и душевнобольных."³⁴⁰

In this passage, Nabokov remarks that there are numerous psychopaths among Dostoevsky's protagonists, citing Raskolnikov as a character who appears to be temporarily out of his mind, which signifies a disintegration of his personality. Nabokov extends his argument, asserting that one can hardly talk about "realism" or "human experience" of a writer who created a whole gallery of neurotic and mentally

³³⁷ Lipovetsky, p.15.

³³⁸ Evlampiev, p.82.

³³⁹ Reich-Ranicke, p.64.

³⁴⁰ Nabokov, Лекции, p.179.

ill characters. Furthermore, Nabokov claims that the views and responses of these lost crippled and mutilated souls cannot be considered normal human reactions, which often makes the author's task unresolved, irrespective of his original intention.

Still, both Raskolnikov and Humbert are introduced from the very beginning as mentally unstable characters who occasionally plunge into delirium: Humbert more than once suffers from "a dreadful breakdown,"³⁴¹ complaining about "melancholia and a sense of insufferable oppression,"³⁴² whereas Raskolnikov "for some time past had fallen into a state of nervous depression akin to hypochondria."³⁴³ In his article about crime, Raskolnikov states: "Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The really great men must, I think, have great sadness on Earth."³⁴⁴ Ironically, Sonia's suffering was never considered a sign of her large intelligence; and neither was Lolita's hardship interpreted as a mental health threat. Both female protagonists suffer in silence or when they do object, as it was in Dolly's case, this protest is filtered and muted by the male protagonist.

Alienation from society is one of the primary themes of both Nabokov's *Lolita* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Both Raskolnikov and Humbert live in Diogenes's jar, outside norms and customs. Raskolnikov "had withdrawn from society and shut himself up,"³⁴⁵ whereas Humbert continually tries to escape, first, overseas, then to arctic Canada, and finally on the road trip with Lolita. Raskolnikov's life is truly ascetic, he is poor and dreams of having more money to engage in the intellectual work; as for Humbert, his uncle dies and leaves him an annual income on the condition he moves to the US. Humbert does exactly what Raskolnikov had dreamed of: he invests all his time in writing a scientific work without worrying about the financial situation: "The first volume took me a couple of years during which I put in seldom less than fifteen hours of work daily."³⁴⁶ He

³⁴¹ Nabokov, p.33.

³⁴² Nabokov, p.34.

³⁴³ Dostoevsky, p.5.

³⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, p.230.

³⁴⁵ Dostoevsky, p.5.

³⁴⁶ Nabokov, p.32.

detests American consumer society, embodied by Charlotte and Lolita, exactly as Raskolnikov detests Svidrigajlov, Luzhin, and Alena Ivanovna, who are, in his opinion, abusing the power money grants them. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky skilfully depicts the tendency of individuals to strive for “release from systems that seek to quantify and define them.”³⁴⁷

At first, Raskolnikov considers his plan a mere fantasy, reassuring himself: “It is not serious at all. It’s simply a fantasy to amuse myself; a plaything!”³⁴⁸ “The dreadful fantasy is compulsive, Rodion is and has for a considerable time been in a virtually somnambulistic, dissociated state,” believing that the act he planned is “not a crime.”³⁴⁹ Similarly, Humbert the Harmless initially believes himself incapable of violence: both protagonists find themselves in a “threshold situation,” whereas overstepping results in a scandalous crime.³⁵⁰ Both novels could be classified as transgressive fiction, a term coined by literary critic Michael Silverblatt. Much transgressive fiction deals with a search for personal freedom. According to stereotypical representations of gender roles in literature, men are more likely to break the “legal” codes of conduct, such as committing a murder or a theft, whereas women are expected rather to break the “social” or “moral” codes of conduct, having affairs or engaging in prostitution. Both *Crime and Punishment* and *Lolita* comply with these stereotypes.

We anticipate the murder when Humbert is singing the song about Carmen.³⁵¹ In this paragraph, Nabokov uses the well-known stratagem called Chekhov’s gun, meaning the dramatic principle postulating that every element in a story must be necessary to the plot. In a letter to his fellow playwright Aleksandr Lazarev, Chekhov wrote: “One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn’t going to go off.” Freise explains the secret hidden behind Chekhov’s gun in “Four perspectives on world

³⁴⁷ Nooter, p.75.

³⁴⁸ Dostoevsky, p.6.

³⁴⁹ Squires, p. 481.

³⁵⁰ Semyonova, p.37.

³⁵¹ Nabokov, p.81.

literature - reader, producer, text, and system,” stating: “The semantically active detail does not need any shoot to come out of it. On the contrary, it swallows up all shoots, which by any chance it may release in a given situation.”³⁵² Humbert imagines himself a duelist, ready to restore his honor and gain satisfaction: “Then, with the stern and romantic care of a gentleman about to fight a duel, I... bathed and perfumed my delicate body, ... selected a silk shirt and clean drawers, pulled on transparent taupe socks, and congratulated myself for having with me in my trunk some very exquisite clothes...”³⁵³ Disregarding the laws reaches a twisted, satirical dimension after Humbert kills Quilty. He sets himself another challenge: “... since I had disregarded all laws of humanity, I might as well disregard the rules of traffic.”³⁵⁴ Disregarding the laws creates a grotesque atmosphere that correlates with the notion of carnivalisation, coined by Bakhtin, which means the reversal of conventional attitudes, a disruption of authority and introduction of alternatives. Carnival normalizes a free expression of eccentric and otherwise unacceptable behavior.

Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels often display various carnivalistic forms, embodying a dialogical truth in a plurality of consciousnesses. Raskolnikov exclaims: “Did I really kill the old woman? No, it was myself I killed! – it was myself I have irrevocably ruined!”³⁵⁵ Both killers leave dead bodies with disfigured skulls (“Оба убийцы оставляют трупы с (эта особенность указана в тексте) изуродованными черепами. В темя бил Раскольников по голове старухи, и Гумберт разнес четверть головы Куильти.”)³⁵⁶ After having committed the crimes, their sense of isolation grows, because of the “intense guilt and the half-delirium” into which the overwhelming guilt throws them, causing an intolerable suffering.³⁵⁷ “Poor Humbert”, as he calls himself, says: “I feared lest the void I lived in might drive me to plunge into the freedom of sudden insanity... Solitude was

³⁵² Freise, p.12.

³⁵³ Nabokov, p.268.

³⁵⁴ Nabokov, p.306.

³⁵⁵ Dostoevsky, p.332.

³⁵⁶ Shadusky, p.57.

³⁵⁷ Benson; Cheng, p.17.

corrupting me.”³⁵⁸ This never-ending stress and exhausting anxiety seem more terrible than the actual punishment they are trying to avoid.

The issue of repentance is evoked in the second part of the novel. Although Nabokov harshly criticizes “melodramatic muddle” in Dostoevsky’s works, in *Lolita*, there are plenty of melodramatic episodes.³⁵⁹ For instance, after Dolly runs away with Quilty, hoping for a better and more exciting life, Humbert nostalgically and mournfully recalls the moments spent with her:

“I would lull and rock my lone light Lolita in my marble arms, and moan in her warm hair, and caress her at random and mutely ask her blessing, [...] (with my soul actually hanging around her naked body and ready to repent.)”³⁶⁰

Humbert is trying in vain to find a “spiritual solace,” ostentatiously showing repentance for having tainted Lolita by “the foul lust [he] had inflicted upon her.”³⁶¹ He seems to stop adjusting his perception of reality to fit his delusory fantasy; instead, he starts revising and reassessing his fantasy, partly providing Lolita with some bits of her own reality.³⁶² Then comes the moment of revelation: “In the novels, moments of epiphany often represent a primordial experience of a particular necessary condition for the possibility of human experience—an ‘existential.’”³⁶³ Shadursky asserts that a revelation is a sign of character’s emerging spirituality which gives him the strength to commit a noble act: “Прозрение персонажа оказывается своеобразным знаком проявления его духовности, которая дает силы для совершения достойного поступка.”³⁶⁴ He considers revelation to be a manifestation of artistic Gnosticism. Analogously, Kant claimed that “conscience represents the divine tribunal within us,” and we can neither deceive it nor escape it.³⁶⁵ Humbert both employs and subverts the assumptions of confessional discourse, and in the process, reveals the full measure of the confessional paradox. The novel is introduced as a confession in the Foreword by John Ray (*Lolita, or the Confession*

³⁵⁸ Nabokov, p. 257.

³⁵⁹ Frazier, p.486.

³⁶⁰ Nabokov, p.285.

³⁶¹ Nabokov, p. 283.

³⁶² Beusman, p.18.

³⁶³ Siddiqi, p.1.

³⁶⁴ Shadursky, p.33.

³⁶⁵ Kant, p.134.

of a White Widowed Male’), making the reader anticipate a true disclosure and its sincere quality. A confession mobilizes the fundamental assumptions of unity, sincerity, and transparency. However, Nomi Tamir-Ghez states that Humbert maintains a double discourse throughout the novel, claiming that his discourse is “a mixture of self-accusation and self-justification.”³⁶⁶ Therefore, the reader can never fully trust the confession of such an unreliable narrator.

Similarly, it is unclear whether Raskolnikov wholeheartedly repents his sin, as he confesses, plagued by the burden of his unspeakable secret: “He fell to the ground where he stood... He knelt in the middle of the square, bowed to the ground, and kissed its filth with pleasure and joy.”³⁶⁷ According to Rockwell, “due to this remorse, Raskolnikov stops trying to overcome his superego, and, instead, tries to flee from it.”³⁶⁸ However, I would argue that Raskolnikov does not succeed to flee from his inflated ego, for in the last chapter he admits that he does not repent his crime, still trying to justify his insatiable desire to be a remarkable person beyond the law:

“He was always insatiable. Perhaps the influence of his desires made him believe that he was a man to whom more was revealed than to any other, and, therefore, more was permitted. [...] But he did not repent his deeds. [...] He owned to one fault only – his feebleness in confessing.”³⁶⁹

Raskolnikov claims that his conscience is easy, comparing himself to many benefactors of humanity, who committed crimes, too: “It is only necessary to look upon the deed from a broad view, without prejudice, and free from all influences of the day.”³⁷⁰ This statement resonates with Humbert’s utterance: “Taboos strangulated me. [...] At other times I would tell myself that it was all a question of attitude, that there was really nothing wrong in being moved to distraction by girl-children.”³⁷¹ Similarly to Raskolnikov, Humbert claims to feel a heavy burden after the crime is committed, sensing a need to confess his deed: “Far from feeling any relief, a burden even weightier than the one I had hoped to get rid of was with me, upon me, over

³⁶⁶ Tamir-Ghez, p.27.

³⁶⁷ Dostoevsky, p.305.

³⁶⁸ Rockwell, p.4.

³⁶⁹ Dostoevsky, p. 426.

³⁷⁰ Dostoevsky, p.427.

³⁷¹ Nabokov, pp.18-19.

me.”³⁷² However, their burden of patronizing and mistreating Dolly and Sonia, does not seem to be as massive and momentous. Raskolnikov admits: “He recollected how he had treated her, but these memories hardly troubled him.”³⁷³ As for Humbert, although he claims to suffer from the recollection of his treatment of Dolly, still, he acknowledges that it was his habitual method to ignore Lolita’s feelings while comforting his own “base self.”³⁷⁴ In the Russian version, Humbert continues to speak of himself in the third person, stating that he did not want to upset the Horrid Humbert (“дабы не расстраивать подлого Гумберта,”) which creates an impression of another mask being tried on, making the reader doubt his sincerity.³⁷⁵ In both cases, murder is perceived as a true crime, whereas an abusive behavior towards a woman is presented as an unfortunate, but a feasibly condonable and justifiable act, as long as the woman is unvindictive and forgiving.

As for the female protagonists of *Crime and Punishment*, Sonia is frequently called a Russian Magdalen, becoming a universal symbol of unjust suffering. Sonia unifies the dichotomy of a fallen woman versus a pure little girl, being simultaneously a sinner and a saint. She believes that we are not born for happiness but have to endure a lot of suffering on our path to new life. Sonia embodies what Wolffs labels “the sentimental stereotype,” which expresses itself “as an inclination towards justice and fair behavior, and deep response to human suffering.”³⁷⁶ These literary characters obtain the status of victim, gaining public recognition and approval. They are usually pictured as little, docile and masochistic, being described “in terms of submission and suffering.”³⁷⁷ Sonia’s full name, Sofia, signifies wisdom. However, everyone calls her Sonia, which means a sleepy, passive person in Russian. She gradually acquires her force and wisdom as she finds her voice.

³⁷² Nabokov, p.304.

³⁷³ Dostoevsky, p.431.

³⁷⁴ Nabokov, p.287.

³⁷⁵ Nabokov RV, p.369.

³⁷⁶ Wolff, p.210.

³⁷⁷ Wolff, p.212.

Sonia remains silent till the fourth part of the novel, where she has a conversation with Raskolnikov. When she first appears, she timidly and noiselessly makes her way through the crowd:

“From under her hat had appeared a poor little wan and frightened countenance, with open mouth and eyes immovable from terror. Sonia was small and slightly built, with fair hair and complexion, and possessed very attractive blue eyes.”³⁷⁸

Sonia is depicted as a gentle creature with a soft, little voice. While speaking, she often replies feebly,³⁷⁹ asks questions “in a trembling tone of voice,”³⁸⁰ retorts “with choking voice,”³⁸¹ trembles with fear, stammers,³⁸² answering “naively and in a timid voice.”³⁸³ Instead of talking clearly, she mutters, murmurs, “lowering her eyes confusedly.”³⁸⁴ She is compared to a little bird,³⁸⁵ when agitated, she is exclaiming, weeping, sobbing and crying “with heart-broken accents.”³⁸⁶ While talking to Raskolnikov, she listens “with avidity,” but hardly says anything: “She once more wished to speak, but remained silent.”³⁸⁷ Her replies are often “indistinct and sad,”³⁸⁸ and she looks at Rodion “with a martyr-like gaze.”³⁸⁹ There are long pauses in their conversations, when Sonia suddenly stops speaking: “For a long time the girl remained silent, as if incapable of reply.”³⁹⁰ While talking to Svidrigajlov, Sonia blushes and stammers, weighted down by fear: “She was very anxious to say something, to put some kind of question, but she was frightened, and did not know how to commence.”³⁹¹ However, when Raskolnikov asks her to read a Russian translation of the Gospels, Sonia slowly discovers her voice:

“Sonia opened the book and looked for the passage. Her hands trembled. The words stuck in her throat. Twice did she try to read without being able to utter the first syllable. [...] But suddenly, at the

³⁷⁸ Dostoevsky, p.135.

³⁷⁹ Dostoevsky, p.241.

³⁸⁰ Dostoevsky, p.242.

³⁸¹ Dostoevsky, p.246.

³⁸² Dostoevsky, p.392.

³⁸³ Dostoevsky, p.328.

³⁸⁴ Dostoevsky, p.243.

³⁸⁵ Dostoevsky, p.244.

³⁸⁶ Dostoevsky, p.246.

³⁸⁷ Dostoevsky, p.327.

³⁸⁸ Dostoevsky, p.247.

³⁸⁹ Dostoevsky, p.248.

³⁹⁰ Dostoevsky, p.249.

³⁹¹ Dostoevsky, p.393.

third word, her voice grew wheezy, and gave way like an overstretched cord. Breath was deficient in her oppressed bosom. [...] By a violent effort over herself, Sonia conquered the spasm which parched her throat, and continued to read. [...] She was getting to the miraculous story, and a feeling of triumph was taking possession of her. Her voice, strengthened by joy, had a metallic ring.”³⁹²

The raising of Lazarus symbolizes spiritual awakening, a reunion of body and soul. Sonia is terribly ashamed of her body, which influences her demeanor and voice. By reading an inspiring story, she reconnects with her body, feeling steadfast and jubilant.

Elizabeth Blake points out the predominance of men’s voices in *Crime and Punishment*, noting that “women characters have few opportunities to tell their own stories” and are portrayed through the perception of their male counterparts.³⁹³ In her article “Sonia, Silent No More,” Blake notices the unsympathetic portrayal of Sonechka by the narrator. At the end of the novel, Sonia’s voice takes over the narration through her letters portraying Raskolnikov’s life in Siberia. However, she never writes about herself, her thoughts, or her feelings. When citing the Bible, she is reproducing someone else’s thoughts, which she appropriates and considers her own. Unlike other male characters, Sonia demonstrates “a strong anchorage in ethic principles and spiritual notions ... in the sea full of rational dilemmas and doubts that torment usually just men in Dostoevsky’s works.”³⁹⁴ Filova asserts that in this way, Dostoevsky emphasizes the power of women, which lies in their loyalty and ability to love. Sonia’s relationship with Raskolnikov would have been labeled as toxic nowadays. Although she sacrifices everything for him, submitting to all his demands, he is deliberately rude to her, seeming to undervalue her dedication.

Similarly to Humbert’s epiphany, at the end of the novel there is a sudden and wondrous feeling of pure love that overcomes Raskolnikov: “Love and affection rose upon them; the heart of one held within it an eternal light and love for the heart of the other.”³⁹⁵ This statement is consonant with Humbert’s addressing Dolly as the light of his life.

³⁹² Dostoevsky, p.252.

³⁹³ Blake, p.254.

³⁹⁴ Filova, p. 99.

³⁹⁵ Dostoevsky, p.432.

However, Filova asserts that the light of Sonia's character also casts a shadow, for her selfless behavior "is so oriented towards others that she completely 'empties' her own self."³⁹⁶ She concludes that Sonia is so perfect, "godlike" and supernatural that she ceases to be human. Still, Sonia continues to feel inferior in her relationship to Rodion, being afraid to speak and express her thoughts freely:

"She glanced at him affably, and timidly extended her hand, as of old. She always proffered her hand in a timid fashion, as if doubtful whether it would be taken. [...] Not a word was spoken, and her eyes sought the ground. [...] At first she became dreadfully frightened, and her face was pale as death."³⁹⁷

Sonia and Rodion still have to spend seven years in Siberia; and the reader does not get to know if they get over the seven-year itch of the partnership.

Sonia's and Lolita's destinies bear a strong resemblance to those of fallen women in literature. To be more precise, there is a conventional narrative pattern typical of the novels about ruined women, which is similar to the plot of *Lolita*: "the woman falls, by seduction, rape or sensual desire," lives in isolation and finally dies. The death serves as a punishment for her "nonconformity and sexual misconduct."³⁹⁸ Humbert mentions Emma Bovary, a tragic heroine and a fallen woman that commits suicide: "Never will Emma rally, revived by the sympathetic salts in Flaubert's father's timely tear."³⁹⁹ In the Russian translation there is one more line, added by Nabokov: "Никогда не уедет с Онегиным в Италию княгиня N."⁴⁰⁰ He refers to Tatiana Larina, who managed to stay loyal to her old husband whom she had never loved, refusing to meet her old flame Evgeny Onegin. These two examples show the classic dichotomy of an evil and a good woman (*femme fatale* versus *femme ange*). Lois Tyson recounts that according to the Victorian feminine ideal of the nineteenth century, there were solely two possible identities a woman could have: she could embody either virtue or evil, and the prescribed role "defined her in terms of male desire and sexuality."⁴⁰¹ The fallen woman, "long existent in patriarchal discourse

³⁹⁶ Filova, p.104.

³⁹⁷ Dostoevsky, pp.430-431.

³⁹⁸ Chatraporn, p.27.

³⁹⁹ Nabokov, p.265.

⁴⁰⁰ Nabokov, p.341.

⁴⁰¹ Tyson, p.88 in Chatraporn, p.26.

and intensified by Victorian sexual ethics,” has a tragic destiny: “she succumbs to seduction or sensual desires, suffers social condemnation and ostracism, and eventually dies, either repentantly or shamelessly.”⁴⁰² Lapidus maintains that women in Raskolnikov’s worldview are divided into those who are ‘good’: that is, attractive, and feminine—and those who are ‘bad,’ meaning asexual, masculine, and thus repulsive.⁴⁰³ In *Crime and Punishment*, the good women are few: Raskolnikov’s sister and mother, joined by Sonia, who accomplishes a transformation throughout the novel. In “Dolores Disparue: Reading Misogyny in Lolita,” Sarah Herbold points out the transformation Dolly undergoes in the Coalmont section. She is no longer presented as a devious nymphet but antagonistically as a Virgin Mother. Herbold claims that Lolita has even been sanctified: her baby, ostensibly a boy, is due at Christmas, and she stands “crucified” in the doorway as she admits Humbert to her humble home.⁴⁰⁴ Dolores Schiller is no longer rebellious. Instead, she becomes meek and docile. Dostoevsky once noted that both rebellion and humility represent heroism. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov chooses rebellion symbolized by an ax, whereas Sonechka opts for humility symbolized by a cross. Her humility is pure and genuine, like art for the sake of art. By prompting Raskolnikov to kiss the ground, she introduces him to this humility, showing the path to purification. Overall, both Nabokov and Dostoevsky seem to imply that love may legitimate cruelty and callousness, purifying and exculpating the sinner.

Sonia’s lack of complexity is often criticized for making her a less credible character than Raskolnikov. Some critics assert that she personifies stereotypical female saints that soothe male violence, offering consolation and comfort, yet her only function is to aid her male counterpart to develop and rehabilitate. However, Oliva Espin provides a different view on female saints in “Female Saints: Submissive or Rebellious? Feminists in Disguise?” She claims that all women saints transgressed the established norms of female virtue, simultaneously complying with stereotypes and twisting them to achieve what they believed was important:

⁴⁰² Chatraporn, p.1.

⁴⁰³ Lapidus,p.28.

⁴⁰⁴ Nabokov, p.270.

“Most of the narratives about saints, presented to little girls as role models, portray them as compliant, obedient, self-sacrificing, faithful to the dictates of authority, neglecting or denying the fact that their behavior frequently challenged the norms and expectations placed on them as women.”⁴⁰⁵

Similarly, Sonia repeatedly shows her strength, doing what she believes to be important: first, by supporting her family, and then by being on Raskolnikov’s side in Siberia. Both Sonia and Dolly evoke mixed feelings in the male protagonists. As mentioned above, Humbert finds Dolly both repulsive for being vulgar and simultaneously attractive for embodying his sexual fantasy. As for Sonia, Lapidus asserts that she also elicits controversial feelings in Raskolnikov: on the one hand, he admires her selflessness and reckless devotion; on the other hand, he feels as a “castrated eunuch, for every other man in the world but he would have had sex with her.”⁴⁰⁶ He feels powerless to prevent it, repeatedly visiting Sonia in her room, gazing at her bed and imagining what it is used for while discussing Bible with her.

On the whole, Raskolnikov and Humbert overlap in some important ways in terms of their behavior and Weltanschauung. In both texts, the reader watches the male heroes navigate through their frustration and anxiety in the foreground. O’Connor claims that Nabokov reaches out for Dostoevskiiian discourse, aiming to introduce into *Lolita*, “with extraordinary brilliance and subtlety, the very Dostoevskiiian moral judgement that he elsewhere so loudly decries.”⁴⁰⁷ I would maintain that by parodying a moralizing approach to his novel, Nabokov stimulates the reader to independently choose an emotional response that appears appropriate and equitable. This artful tactics incites a polyphonic clash of critical responses to *Lolita* mentioned in the introduction.

In contrast, female heroines cope with their distress in the background, scarcely visible and heard. As Schiesary puts it in *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature*, Humbert occupies a privileged male melancholic subject position, permanently drawing the

⁴⁰⁵ Espin, p.136.

⁴⁰⁶ Lapidus, p.29.

⁴⁰⁷ Frazier, p.509.

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reader's attention to his own sorrows while invalidating the trauma he induces the female characters. He states that as opposed to a "normal man," he is "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy."⁴⁰⁸ The same can be said of Raskolnikov, who claims his superiority, recklessly terminating Alena Ivanovna's and Elizabeth's lives, and leniently accepting Sonia's sacrifice of her own life for his sake.

⁴⁰⁸ Nabokov, p.17.

5. Seduction and Manipulation in *Lolita*

Humbert was repeatedly called the most seductive villain in fiction. He baits and allures his readers using hypnotizing rhetoric. Already in the fictional foreword, the reader learns that Humbert's name is a mask "through which two hypnotic eyes seem to glow."⁴⁰⁹ Philipp Schweighauser provides a thorough analysis of Humbert's manipulative discourse in "Discursive Killings: Intertextuality, Aestheticization, and Death in Nabokov's *Lolita*," claiming that it "traps and engulfs Lolita in a semantic web of death" by treating her as a reincarnation of Annabel, whose only life purpose is to fulfill his disrupted fantasy.⁴¹⁰ I would assert that Humbert is hiding behind the mask of a Humanist Man of Moderation, depicted by Bruce Smith in *Shakespeare and Masculinity* and mentioned in the chapter "Gender and Desire." He is described as a nobleman governed by learning and wisdom, whereas "virtue" and "learning" are made synonyms. Moreover, this type is able to manipulate others, using his outstanding intellectual capacities and analytical skills: "By sheer force of reason Sir Thomas More is able to reduce the London mob to peace and obedience."⁴¹¹ However, who is hiding behind the appearance of "an old-fashioned Continental father"⁴¹² who "tried hard to be good"⁴¹³?

In his international bestseller *The Art of Seduction* (2001), Robert Greene describes nine types of seducers and eighteen types of victims, using historical and literary examples and explaining the most popular seduction techniques. Humbert fits in multiple categories depicted by Greene, which goes in line with the multiple personalities he exhibits throughout the novel. To start with, he is The Dandy – a fluid, ambiguous, mysterious, and elusive character with a "startling physical image" Humbert was so proud of.⁴¹⁴ Dandies defy societal values and live out a commonly repressed desire for freedom: "Dandies excite us because they cannot be categorized,

⁴⁰⁹ Nabokov, p.3.

⁴¹⁰ Schweighauser, p.255.

⁴¹¹ Smith, p.50

⁴¹² Nabokov,p.193.

⁴¹³ Nabokov, p.19.

⁴¹⁴ Greene, p.41.

and hint at a freedom we want for ourselves.”⁴¹⁵ The Dandy has traditionally been defined by clothing and Humbert le Bel definitely succeeds in creating a unique visual style: he describes himself as a “distant, elegant, slender, forty-year-old valetudinarian in velvet coat.”⁴¹⁶ Just one page later, Humbert once again lingers on his appearance and its effect on the viewers: “The men looked at her fragile, *frileux*, diminutive, old-world, youngish but sickly, father in velvet coat and beige vest, maybe a viscount.”⁴¹⁷ In south Arizona Humbert wears a silk scarf, while watching a tennis match, which seems extravagant and out-of-place: “I would leave them to their game and look on, comparing their bodies in motion, a silk scarf round my throat.”⁴¹⁸ This remark confirms that Humbert is extremely self-conscious and vain, regarding himself not only as a spruced up spectator of a private show designed especially for him, but also as a main participant of the show who deserves admiration and attention. The above description correlates with the images of Oscar Wilde’s “green velvet suit” and Théophile Gautier’s red vest given as examples of The Dandy’s outfit by Greene.⁴¹⁹ On the whole, time displacement is typical for Humbert, for he imitates a 19th-century Romantic hero. However, he finds himself in a wrong epoch, which makes him look inadequate and ridiculous.

Dolly’s husband Dick Schiller is depicted by Humbert as a radically opposite character: “a plumper fellow with only one arm,” unshaven, with black and broken fingernails, immediately put by Humbert in the category of “simple folks” (or even “proletarian” in the Russian version – “Преувеличенная вежливость пролетария.”)⁴²⁰ This juxtaposition highlights Humbert’s sophistication and refinement.

Furthermore, Greene warns the reader that power struggles might be an issue in a relationship with The Dandy, which was undeniably the case in Humbert’s

⁴¹⁵ Greene, p.41.

⁴¹⁶ Nabokov, p.272.

⁴¹⁷ Nabokov, p.273.

⁴¹⁸ Nabokov, p.162.

⁴¹⁹ Greene, p.49.

⁴²⁰ Nabokov, RV, p.351.

relationship with Lolita. Humbert demonstrates his power, propounding a long list of limitations of Lolita's freedom that would apply as long as his "regime" lasted: "First of all the old ogre drew up a list under 'absolutely forbidden' and another under 'reluctantly allowed'."⁴²¹ The image of a monumental and petrifying man-eating monster that Humbert created for himself reflects his predatory and possessive nature disguised under the elegant and attractive encasement. Lolita was not allowed to go to a movie or a party without her supervisor, nor could she even indulge in a telephone conversation out of his earshot. In addition, smoking was also "*streng verboten* under Humbert the Terrible."⁴²² The choice of the German language stands out and contrasts with the rest of the text, where we could find numerous French expressions embedded into the English text *pour ajouter le flair*. The use of German seems to be intentional, serving to draw a parallel between Hitler's and Humbert's regime.

Portraying The Dandy, Greene asserts that this type is gender fluid. The Dandy enjoys playing with masculinity and femininity, skillfully appealing to the narcissism of each sex: "to a woman they are psychologically female, to a man they are male."⁴²³ Furthermore, he mentions an actual historical character who fits this type, ironically, a woman, Lou von Salomé who insisted on being called Lyolya (Лёля), emphasizing her Russian roots. Her first "victim" was Henrik Gillot, who was the darling of St. Petersburg intelligentsia in 1870s. He broke many hearts till finally, at the age of forty-two, he met a seventeen-year-old Lou, who changed his life. They were having a spiritual relationship that was instantly ruined when Gillot proposed to her two years later – Lou was horrified and rejected him. Similar to Humbert's portrayal of a dangerous nymphet, Lou is depicted by Greene as a "devilish young woman" who "radiated a forbidden sexuality".⁴²⁴ She cast a spell upon many men, some of whom were highly prominent, such as Friedrich Nietzsche or Rainer Maria

⁴²¹ Nabokov, p.186.

⁴²² Nabokov, p.275.

⁴²³ Greene, p.41.

⁴²⁴ Greene, p.43.

Rilke.⁴²⁵ The diabolical description of Lou having a mystical power at her command, reminds us of Lo's image created by Humbert.

Secondly, Humbert the Humble falls into the category of The Natural, who create sympathy by being vulnerable and helpless, displaying "natural" weaknesses. As an example of this seductive type, Greene introduces Charlie Chaplin whose naïveté attracted the post-war spectators who "yearned for a lost childhood that they imagined as a golden paradise."⁴²⁶ In fact, Chaplin was notorious for his obsession with nymphets.⁴²⁷ As we know, he was married to Lita Grey, who started working with him when she was twelve and became pregnant by the thirty-five-year old Chaplin at the age of fifteen. In "Nabokov's *Lolita*" Delaney draws a parallel between Lita's family name, Grey, and what Nabokov called "the capital town of the book" – namely, Gray Star, a settlement "in the remotest northwest."⁴²⁸ Lita Grey was a female star of Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925), a story about the remotest northwest. In "My age of innocence girl – Humbert, Chaplin, Lita and Lo," Barbara Wyllie draws parallels between the real and the fictional stories, claiming that "Chaplin's present and past life resonates across Humbert's text."⁴²⁹ As Humbert mentions in Chapter 11 "the delightful little toothbrush mustache" he had not quite decided to grow, the reader notices the allusion to the most famous wearer of a toothbrush mustache, Charlie Chaplin. In addition, Brian Boyd points out that Nabokov was an admirer of Chaplin.

Furthermore, Edgar or Jean-Jacque Humbert's personality (Гумберт Начитанный) correlates with the seductive type called The Charismatic, who tries to heighten their charisma with a fiery oratory and an air of mystery. Greene advises the reader who wishes to embody this personality to show an "uncontrollable devotion to pleasure" that makes one seem weak but exciting to be around, mixed with a "disdain for

⁴²⁵ Greene, pp.44-47.

⁴²⁶ Greene, p.59.

⁴²⁷ Delaney, p.99.

⁴²⁸ Delaney, p.99.

⁴²⁹ Wyllie, p.36.

convention” that makes one seem rebellious.⁴³⁰ According to Greene, The Charismatics seduce by creating contradictions within their personalities, being simultaneously cruel and kind, powerful and vulnerable, which is the exact dichotomy embodied by Humbert.

Finally, Humbert bears a striking resemblance to The Rake type, who has a powerful, magnificent voice with a “hypnotic” effect – “with a flowing rhythm and inflection that was almost musical,” spellbinding the listeners, and speaks a poetic language, using “alliterative phrases, charming locutions and poetic images.”⁴³¹ Similarly to Humbert, The Rake takes pleasure in describing the effect a desired woman has on him, composing poems that seem to have been especially for her. The Rake portrays his desire as immensely powerful, giving a woman no time to think about the consequences. Greene states that “resistance is only the spur to his desire, enflaming him all the more.”⁴³² Analogously, Humbert is not turned off by Dolly’s resistance mixed with disgust, ignoring her tears and both verbal and physical confrontation. She scratches his back with her “little claws,”⁴³³ calls him “a lousy crook and worse,”⁴³⁴ and treats him “to one of those furious harangues of hers where entreaty and insult, self-assertion and double talk, vicious vulgarity and childish despair, were interwoven in an exasperating semblance of logic which prompted a semblance of explanation.”⁴³⁵ Still, Humbert refuses to face the fact that Dolly’s feelings are justified by his abusive behavior and constitute logical consequences of his actions.

According to Greene, The Ardent Rake is aglow with desire, pursuing a woman, whereas “the victim senses this and is enflamed, even despite herself.”⁴³⁶ He claims that an intense desire has a distracting power on women, so the seducer must show his lack of control, pretending to be a slave of her charms, which seems to be

⁴³⁰ Greene, p.27.

⁴³¹ Greene, p.22.

⁴³² Greene, p.25.

⁴³³ Nabokov, p.166.

⁴³⁴ Nabokov, p.186.

⁴³⁵ Nabokov, p.171.

⁴³⁶ Greene, p.21.

Humbert's strategy that, however, has a little effect on Dolly. She is definitely not enflamed, either due to the fact that she is still too young to enter a sexual relationship, or because Humbert is rather busy seducing the reader than his captive stepdaughter, whom he treats alternately as a naughty child or as a sex slave.

Furthermore, Greene recommends the seducer to add a sense of danger or even a hint of cruelty to the relationship, for "danger and taboo appeal to a repressed side in women, who are supposed to represent a civilizing, moralizing force in culture," simultaneously "yearning to be free of the constraints of virtue and decency."⁴³⁷ This statement refers to the stereotypical role women currently try to abandon in our society, struggling with their position within the dichotomy between a sinner and a saint, mentioned earlier.

In the following passage, I will shortly sum up the steps of the seductive process as presented by Greene: 1) choose the right victim, who will prove susceptible to your charms; 2) create a false sense of security – approach indirectly; 3) send mixed signals – both innocent and cunning; 4) appear to be an object of desire – create triangles; 4) create a need – stir anxiety and discontent; 5) keep them in suspense; 6) use the demonic power of words to sow confusion; 7) poeticize your presence – create an idealized halo; 8) disarm through strategic weakness and vulnerability; 8) isolate the victim; 9) place yourself in the Oedipal triangle as the parental figure, positioning your victim as a needy child; 10) stir up the transgressive and taboo.

All in all, this seems to be a plot summary of Nabokov's *Lolita*. By isolating Dolly, Humbert becomes her only attachment figure, exerting power and overall control over her. According to Greene, an isolated person is weak: "By slowly isolating your victims, you make them more vulnerable to your influence."⁴³⁸ As an example, firstly, he cites Mahatma Gandhi, whose devoted followers were encouraged to cut off their ties with the past, including family and friends. Secondly, he names John F.

⁴³⁷ Greene, p.26.

⁴³⁸ Greene, p.309.

Kennedy, who invited Americans to join a new life, on a “New Frontier,” as opposed to Eisenhower’s politics. Greene differentiates between physical and psychical isolation, proposing to give the victim the sense of “being marginalized, in limbo,” a feeling of “leaving one world behind and entering another,” in order to lure the seduced into your lair.⁴³⁹ In fact, Dolly has to undergo an abrupt transition between two worlds, leaving everything behind before entering an unknown and unstable environment provided by Humbert.

In “Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*: The Representation and the Reality. Re-Examining *Lolita* in the Light of Research into Child Sexual Abuse,” Lawrence Ratna describes the stages of grooming used in the process of seduction, combining the modern psychological findings with the strategies applied by Humbert to Lolita. The first stage is “creating a pathway of access to the victim,” which Humbert did by courting her mother so that he can move from “lodger to lover.” The next step is to take “covert control of the family dynamics,” slowly approaching the prey and gradually “increasing the level of physical intrusion, as a spider does.”⁴⁴⁰ As mentioned earlier, Humbert compares himself to a spider sitting in a luminous web spread all over the house and giving little jerks to particular strands. In addition, Ratna states that the “sofa scene” is a variation of a tactic called “horseplay” commonly used by abusers to blur the boundaries of touching. Another common grooming strategy is the use of drugs in order to intoxicate or sedate the victim. Humbert muses over administering “a powerful sleeping potion so as to fondle the latter through the night with perfect impunity.”⁴⁴¹ At the Enchanted Hunter hotel, he gives Lolita a purple pill, but his “pill-spiel” does not have the desired effect. In the morning, Humbert applies another tactic: he feigns sexual innocence, challenging Dolly to educate him, which is, according to Ratna, another common trick used by the predators. Furthermore, the perpetrator must brainwash the victim to not disclose their secret or seek help. Humbert confides to the reader:

⁴³⁹ Greene, p.309.

⁴⁴⁰ Ratna, p.26.

⁴⁴¹ Nabokov, p.70.

“From the very beginning of our concourse, I was clever enough to realize that I must secure her complete co-operation in keeping our relations secret, that it should become a second nature with her, no matter what grudge she might bear me, no matter what other pleasures she might seek.”⁴⁴²

The abusers usually manipulate the victim’s trust by pretending to have normal adult-child relationship patterns. Humbert presents himself as a mindful caretaker: “I want to protect you, dear, from all the horrors that happen to little girls,” using a magazine to exemplify his point:

“Look, darling, what it says. I quote: the normal girl—normal, mark you—the normal girl is usually extremely anxious to please her father. She feels in him the forerunner of the desired elusive male... The wise mother (and your poor mother would have been wise, had she lived) will encourage a companionship between father and daughter.”⁴⁴³

In this way, Humbert tries to persuade Lolita that a close father-daughter bond is normal and desirable, and, as the enchanter, proceeds to “meld the wave of fatherhood with the wave of sexual love.”⁴⁴⁴ Finally, Humbert deploys the most powerful manipulative strategy, namely, psychological grooming, exploiting Lolita’s loneliness and vulnerability. He frames her as a seductress, “accused of having impaired the morals of an adult in a respectable inn,”⁴⁴⁵ using “dire warnings of the dangers of disclosure” to intimidate and silence Dolly.⁴⁴⁶

Ultimately, a complacent and crowing Humbert confides to the reader: “By rubbing all this in, I succeeded in terrorizing Lo, who despite certain brash alertness of manner and spurts of wit was not as intelligent a child as her I.Q. might suggest. I managed to establish that background of shared secrecy and shared guilt.”⁴⁴⁷ Herman and Hirschman suggest that in a patriarchal society, the father-daughter incest is more frequently violated, whereas incest offenders are often described as “family tyrants,” who try “to secure their dominant position by socially isolating the members of the family from the world outside.”⁴⁴⁸ All in all, Humbert manipulates Dolly, using a range of tactics, such as economic abuse (stealing her pocket money,

⁴⁴² Nabokov, p.147.

⁴⁴³ Nabokov, p.148.

⁴⁴⁴ Nabokov, p.51.

⁴⁴⁵ Nabokov, p.148.

⁴⁴⁶ Ratna, p.26.

⁴⁴⁷ Nabokov, p.149.

⁴⁴⁸ Herman; Hirschman, p.741.

so that she would not be able to escape,) positive reinforcement (such as gifts and entertainment,) negative reinforcement (forbidding favorite activities,) psychological punishment (such as silent treatment, emotional blackmail, and intimidation,) and traumatic tactics (such as explosive anger). For instance, Humbert is used to be passive aggressive in his previous relationships, stating: “My habit of being silent when displeased, or, more exactly, the cold and scaly quality of my displeased silence, used to frighten Valeria out of her wits.”⁴⁴⁹

Nabokov repeatedly highlighted a similarity between advertising strategies, political propaganda, and erotic seduction — all of the above employ hidden forms of hypnotism or suggestion, trigger the lower instincts, and abuse the human inclination for “solidarity.”⁴⁵⁰ Le Durantaye attempts to seize “the subtle entrapment” exercised by Humbert by his “entrancing story.”⁴⁵¹ He claims that it was on purpose that Nabokov made Humbert “engaging, amusing, appealing and alluring: he made him seductive.”⁴⁵² Le Durantaye marvels at Nabokov who employed all his artifice to make the repugnant alluring. However, it is by no means an innovative literary technique. An attractive, charming villain is a familiar figure found in numerous masterpieces of the world literature: Robert Lovelace (*Clarissa*), Don Juan, Tartuffe, Dorian Gray, Alec d’Urberville, George Wickham (*Pride and Prejudice*), Alexei Vronsky (*Anna Karenina*), to name just a few most prominent protagonists.

Besides that, there are some direct allusions to the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*, adapted by Jean Cocteau: “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.”⁴⁵³ In the Russian version Nabokov prefers the wordplay “взаимоотношение между чудом и чудовищем, между мой рвущимся зверем и красотой этого зыбкого тела этом девственном ситцевом платье.”⁴⁵⁴ “Чудо”

⁴⁴⁹ Nabokov, p.89.

⁴⁵⁰ Grishakova, p.274.

⁴⁵¹ Durantaye, pp.8-9.

⁴⁵² Durantaye, p.12.

⁴⁵³ Nabokov, p.59.

⁴⁵⁴ Nabokov, RV, p.79.

(wonder) and “чудовище” (beast) share the same root, which makes the sentence gain the touch of a fairy tale with a spooky twist. There is a fragmentation in this scene – just his member and her body – which emphasizes both the self-objectification of the narrator and the objectification of the nymphet. Then his “huge hairy hand” appears, a “happy hand” reaching “the hot hollow of her groin.”⁴⁵⁵ In this passage, Nabokov makes an allusion to the protagonist of a famous gothic romance – Quasimodo. Victor Hugo vividly depicts what it means to be a monster overflowing with passion and desire for a beautiful young girl. Using these allusions, Nabokov creates an atmosphere of a Romantic genre, the tragedy of passions, inspired by Euripides, who focused on the emotions of the characters, which overcome reason. The introduction of McFatum in his discourse alludes to a common element in Greek tragedies and myths, “fatum,” a fatal destiny.

Moreover, Humbert was compared to another prominent villain. Mark Lipovetsky draws a parallel between Humbert and Dracula, for both of them have a colossal erotic power at their command. He compares Lolita to a vampire’s victim because she is frozen at the age when she was “bitten”:

“Подобно Дракуле, Гумберт обладает колоссальной эротической силой. Напоминая жертву вампира, Лолита «застывает» в том возрасте, в котором она была «укушена» Гумбертом, — не превращается во взрослую женщину и, по существу, умирает подростком-нимфеткой.”⁴⁵⁶

I would disagree with Lipovetsky’s statement that Lolita does not become an adult woman, dying as a nymphet. On the contrary, she grows up, matures, and even “fades,” as Humbert puts it, which makes this comparison somewhat ineffective.

Speaking of stereotypical villains, in “Still Intrigued with *Lolita*: Nabokov’s Visionary Work on Child Sexual Abuse,” Lucia Williams maintains that Nabokov himself dispels the myth that a sexual offender is a necessarily a thoroughly “disgusting character who may be easily identified by society.”⁴⁵⁷ Instead of a clichéd villain, the reader faces a bright, charming, vulnerable and handsome man.

⁴⁵⁵ Nabokov, p.61.

⁴⁵⁶ Lipovetsky, p.58.

⁴⁵⁷ Williams, p.51.

Williams bemoans the fact that the appearance of *normality* of sexual abusers is still misjudged and misread in our society, particularly by the legal system “that – unequipped to deal with child victims and lacking sufficient knowledge of sexual abuse – questions the validity of child’s testimony simply on the basis that presumably decent and successful adults could never do such despicable things.”⁴⁵⁸ Humbert does his best to appear decent and successful, hiding his emotional disorder and troubled mind from the public.

Bykov asserts that Nabokov unconsciously repeats the plots of Mikhail Sholokhov’s *And Quiet Flows the Don*, Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, and Leo Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, which contain the idea of early incest, an escape with a new lover, and birth of a dead child.⁴⁵⁹

“Набоков в *Лолите* бессознательно — скажи ему кто, он пришёл бы в ужас, — повторяет сюжет *Тихого Дона* и *Доктора Живаго*, повторяющих в свою очередь сюжет *Воскресения* Толстого. Все эти фабулы, в свою очередь восходящие к *Фаусту* и являющиеся вариацией на его сюжет, содержат идею раннего инцеста... Другой обязательный элемент — бегство с новым любовником и гибель прежнего. Наконец, неизбежная составляющая — рождение мёртвого ребёнка... повторяющего смерть ребёнка Григория и Аксиньи, Нехлюдова и Масловой, Фауста и Гретхен?”

However, Bykov does not acknowledge the fact that *Lolita* was written before *Doctor Zhivago*. Moreover, a similar plot viewed in broad terms can be found in many other world classics. Le Durantaye considers Humbert’s nympholepsy to be a comparatively new sin, remarking that his villainous set of tactics, on the contrary, is by no means an unprecedented one: “The Mephistophelean wedding of fine rhetoric and foul designs is one with which we are well familiar. If Humbert’s sin is a new one, of the sort, his evil is as old as Adam and Eve.”⁴⁶⁰ I would argue that his sin is not a new one either, demonstrating in the following chapters how the topic of sexual abuse of minors has become less and less concealed and shaped by shame and silence in the 21st century, ceasing to be a taboo subject.

⁴⁵⁸ Williams, p.51.

⁴⁵⁹ Bykov, p.93.

⁴⁶⁰ Durantaye, p.313.

Can Dolly be considered a seductress? According to Luke Savers, many critics “consistently adopted a negative view of the character Lolita,” attempting to defend the book from the ardent accusations of obscenity.⁴⁶¹ Eric Goldman explains that the critics sharing Humbert’s misogynistic interpretation of Lolita simply adopt Humbert’s biased perception of the girl instead of exploring and disputing it.⁴⁶² Fiedler accuses Dolly of depravity and dishonesty in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, stating: “it is the naïve child, the female, the American who corrupts the sophisticated adult, the male, the European.”⁴⁶³ Moreover, Fiedler asserts that *Lolita*’s subject is “the seduction of a middle-aged man by a 12-year-old [...] nymphomaniac, demonic rapist of the soul,” whereas poor Humbert “is fascinated, raped and left to die in jail.”⁴⁶⁴ In “The Problem of Desire” Robertson Davies describes the theme of *Lolita* as “not the corruption of an innocent child by a cunning adult but the exploitation of a weak adult by a corrupt child.”⁴⁶⁵ His conclusion is based on Humbert’s utterance: “I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me.”⁴⁶⁶ In fact, it is extremely common for sex offenders to claim that they were seduced the victims. Humbert initially presents himself as a helpless victim of destiny and desire. When he decides to marry Charlotte, he announces that he feels powerless facing a temptation: “In a word, before such an Amazing Offer, before such a vastness and variety of vistas, I was as helpless as Adam at the preview of early oriental history, miraged in his apple orchard.”⁴⁶⁷ The image of the forbidden fruit emerges in various fragments of the narration. In closing, Ratna asserts that the “child-as-seducer narrative not only pervades the cultural discourse of the novel but also dominates that of the two major film adaptations of the book,” those by Stanley Kubrick and by Adrian Lyne.⁴⁶⁸ Moreover, Humbert describes himself as “meek and fishy,” compares himself not to

⁴⁶¹ Savers, p.5.

⁴⁶² Williams, p. 53.

⁴⁶³ Fiedler, p.335.

⁴⁶⁴ Fiedler, p.213.

⁴⁶⁵ Boyd, p.230.

⁴⁶⁶ Nabokov, p.132.

⁴⁶⁷ Nabokov, p.71.

⁴⁶⁸ Ratna, p.27.

monster, but to a mouse curled in its hole, simultaneously characterizing Dolly as “dangerous.”⁴⁶⁹

Williams attempts to dispel the myth of the seductress child presented in *Lolita* movies and popular culture that describes her as “no saint.” She cites Dmitri Nabokov, who laments: “How misunderstood was poor Lolita! What a pornocopia of pubescent and post-pubescent prostitutes has traveled through the media under her name!”⁴⁷⁰ Some critics, such as Lionel Trilling,⁴⁷¹ seek to defend the novel from being labeled as pornographic, describing it as full of tenderness and passion. In *The Last Lover*, Trilling repeatedly claims that “*Lolita* is about love... *Lolita* is not about sex, but about love.”⁴⁷¹ However, Williams emphasizes that it is unacceptable to use the term *love* while discussing *Lolita* because of the inequality of power in the relationship of Dolly and Humbert, who takes advantage of a still developing child solely to gratify or satisfy his needs.⁴⁷² Williams supports her argument by referring to the contemporary scientific research carried out by psychologist Robert Sternberg, who maintains that love is based on three different scales: intimacy, passion, and commitment. The triangular theory of love holds that these three components are essential for a balanced and long-lasting relationship, whereas a relationship based on a single element is less likely to be fulfilling and survive. In Humbert’s relationship with Dolly, there is plenty of passion on his behalf, but no intimacy or mutual commitment, which he realizes at the end of the novel.

Instead of love, in *Lolita* we observe limerence, a state of intense desire and unfulfilled longing that includes obsessive thoughts and fantasies about the object of desire. This term was coined by psychologist Dorothy Tennov in *Love and Limerence: The Experience of Being in Love* (1979). The sexual attraction is the main component of limerence, which is characterized by ruminative thinking, anxiety, and fixation on the desired partner. All of the above can be applied to

⁴⁶⁹ Nabokov, p.172.

⁴⁷⁰ *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, p.131 in Williams, p.53.

⁴⁷¹ Trilling, p.334 in Williams, p.52.

⁴⁷² Williams, pp.52-53.

Humbert's relationship with Dolly. Moreover, as an example of limerence, Tennov describes Dante's feelings towards Beatrice, whom Humbert mentions twice while expressing his sentiments towards Lo in the following poem: "Oh Lolita, you are my girl, as Vee was Poe's and Bea Dante's, and what little girl would not like to whirl in a circular skirt and scanties?"⁴⁷³ Limerence is characterized by interchangeable feelings of intense joy and extreme despair and could be compared to an addiction. Contrary to love, limerence is often nonreciprocal and does not involve concern for the other person's welfare and feelings. Ironically, the object of desire is labeled by Tennov "LO" (limerent object.)

Another common myth concerning sexual abuse is that it is an impulsive act rather than a carefully planned one. Williams asserts that Humbert, as many pedophiles, "first assesses Lolita's family dynamics," before marrying Charlotte to gain easy access to the girl.⁴⁷⁴ Williams considers the short and long-term impact of Humbert's sexual abuse to be quite realistic, referring to a thirty-year longitudinal study conducted by David Fergusson: as many victimized children, Dolly shows signs of depression: "She cries herself to sleep every night, her school performance deteriorates," she becomes inattentive, angry and rebellious.⁴⁷⁵ Additionally, Pratt asserts that Dolly is obsessed by sexual thoughts "for which she finds no outlet, and will tease and martyrize" other girls and younger instructors.⁴⁷⁶ Moreover, Dolly's involvement with Quilty supports the common view that the survivors of sexual abuse tend to be revictimized. Numerous studies suggest that childhood abuse creates a higher threshold of tolerance for violence among victims, affecting their emotional regulation and decreasing the awareness of danger. Dolly does not see Quilty as another dangerous predator, characterizing him as a brilliant person and a great guy in many respects: "He saw – smiling – through everything and everybody, because he was not like me and her but a genius. A great guy. Full of fun."⁴⁷⁷ Dolly idealizes

⁴⁷³ Nabokov, p.107.

⁴⁷⁴ Williams, p.55.

⁴⁷⁵ Williams, p.56.

⁴⁷⁶ Nabokov, p.196.

⁴⁷⁷ Nabokov, p.275.

Quilty, treasuring heartwarming memories of him, although he, similarly to Humbert, views her as an object, banishing her as she refuses to participate in his orgies.

Dolly's image as presented by Humbert correlates with a seductive feminine type depicted by Greene, namely, The Siren, that symbolizes freedom, representing "the ultimate male fantasy figure because she offers a total release from the limitations of everyday life."⁴⁷⁸ She is a dangerous mirage that lures men, embodying their fantasies and making them lose control over themselves. Her prototype is the Greek goddess Aphrodite, whose Roman equivalent is Venus, a frequently mentioned symbol in Nabokov's *Lolita*. According to Greene, the Siren often looks innocent, as if she does not intend to arouse desire, which makes her even more alluring because her innocence is what excites men. Her deepest need is to be loved and desired, which makes her seem vulnerable, resembling "a little girl craving protection."⁴⁷⁹ Humbert remarks that Dolly was craving for attention and affection, comparing her to a little dog: "She would be, figuratively speaking, wagging her tiny tail, her whole behind in fact as little bitches do."⁴⁸⁰ Besides degrading Dolly to a status of a little domestic animal, Humbert suggests that her behavior is instinctive and therefore innocent. Greene asserts that such an attitude is highly seductive, because it "gives the male the critical illusion that he is a protector, the father figure," which represents the exact role Humbert desired to play in his relationship with Dolly.⁴⁸¹

Speaking of The Siren, Greene concludes that in today's world this powerful male fantasy appeals stronger than ever to the male psyche, for now a man is forced to live "in a world that circumscribes his aggressive instincts by making everything safe and secure, a world that offers less chance for adventure and risk than ever before," whereas in the past a man could find a different outlet for his basic drives,

⁴⁷⁸ Greene, p.5.

⁴⁷⁹ Greene, p.11.

⁴⁸⁰ Nabokov, p.164.

⁴⁸¹ Greene, p.11.

participating in wars or political intrigues.⁴⁸² Greene declares that without any of these outlets that used to offer a variety, male drives “turn inward and gnaw at him, becoming all the more volatile for being repressed” and transforming “a normally strong and responsible male into a childish slave.”⁴⁸³ Undeniably, Humbert finds pleasure and profit in presenting himself as a powerless slave of his passion. Although Greene admits that the notion of mortal danger might seem outdated, he still insists on the crucial role of danger in seduction because it is supposed to add emotional spice, appealing to modern men who are mostly “rational and repressed.”⁴⁸⁴ Nevertheless, I would argue that nowadays there are more than enough outlets for both male and female negative instincts and impulses. Freud defines sublimation as a defense mechanism by which negative urges and drives are channeled into socially acceptable behaviors. Today people have the possibility to engage in various activities such as exercising, spiritual practices, playing computer games, creating art, going shopping, and practicing other ways of consumption. As mentioned in the previous chapters, I believe that excessive consumption is Dolly’s unconscious strategy of dealing with abuse and oppression.

Green draws a parallel between a modern man, who tries to avoid temptation, and an ancient hero, such as Odysseus, who put wax in the ears of his sailors so that they would not leap into the water, following the sirens’ song. I would like to remark that Adorno reads *The Odyssey* as an allegory that reflects an opposition between manual and intellectual labor, comparing sailors to factory workers and Odysseus, above on the mast, to a bourgeois concertgoer, “taking cautious pleasure in art as an idle luxury.”⁴⁸⁵ Moreover, in “Adorno’s Siren Song,” Comay points out the existence of a fine line between the song itself and its own announcement or replication: “Odysseus’s Sirens, promising to sing of “everything,” sing of nothing other than the fact that they are to sing: a song about itself, says Todorov, a song about all

⁴⁸²Greene, p.11.

⁴⁸³Greene, p.12.

⁴⁸⁴Greene, p.12.

⁴⁸⁵Comay, p.22.

songs.”⁴⁸⁶ As we know, Odysseus was tied to the mast, being able to hear the song but unable to move. Thus his body is “reduced to a giant ear,” whereas self-domination becomes self-mutilation, in an attempt “to free oneself from external bondage to the Other.”⁴⁸⁷ Greene maintains that a modern man must “work and follow a straight path in life,” avoiding all possible distractions.⁴⁸⁸ Before kidnapping Dolly, Humbert bears semblance to Odysseus, presenting himself as an aesthete who wishes to enjoy the nymphets’ beauty without endangering himself. After all, it seems that all male protagonists of Nabokov’s *Lolita* – Humbert Humbert, Clare Quilty, Dick Schiller – resemble sailors, who have wax in their ears, not listening to or hearing Dolly, thus amplifying the psychological distance between them. Recent studies have shown that hearing loss of a partner can cause a sense of isolation, frustration, anger, and resentment in a relationship. Moreover, being unheard changes one’s self-esteem, influencing interaction with others. Throughout the novel, the reader witnesses derealization and denigration of others by Humbert: “As the melancholic comes to perceive himself as an exclusive subject, the hyper-exclusivity of his world requires the negation of everything different from himself.”⁴⁸⁹ According to Schiesari, this male self-centeredness stems from a lack of significance given to women’s grief in a patriarchal culture, in which melancholia is considered to be a “specific representational form for male creativity, one whose practice converted the feeling of disempowerment into a privileged artifact.”⁴⁹⁰

Humbert is constantly trying to mastermind Dolly’s mood, using “blandishments, threats and promises.”⁴⁹¹ At first, he threatens her with an exile in a distant farmhouse, where she would learn French and Latin, and then with life as a ward of the Department of Public Welfare. Humbert succeeds in “terrorizing Lo;” however, despite all the bribes he is “much less successful in keeping her in a good humor.”⁴⁹²

⁴⁸⁶ Comay, p.36.

⁴⁸⁷ Comay, pp.21-22.

⁴⁸⁸ Greene, p.13.

⁴⁸⁹ Schiesari, p.8.

⁴⁹⁰ Schiesari, p.8.

⁴⁹¹ Nabokov, p.147.

⁴⁹² Nabokov, p.139.

Dolly, in her turn, does not intend to offer her body for free, negotiating, bargaining and trading her favors for money and entertainment. The reader could assume that the main motive behind her blackmailing Humbert is a desperate effort to defend herself, gaining at least some power in the relationship. Since the story is told from Humbert's perspective, we do not know how much of it is embellished, understated, or hyperbolized, for he frequently toys with the reader, confessing: "I am exaggerating a little."⁴⁹³

The relationship of Humbert and Dolly is reminiscent of the master-slave dialectic, a concept developed by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his work *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The slave is dependent on his master, whereas he realizes and resents this dependency. His strongest desire is to break free from these chains and gain autonomy, aspiring a dynamic existence. The master depends on his slave, too, for it is his ownership only that makes him a master. His aim is to retain possession of the slave, keeping his existence static: "How smugly would I marvel that she was mine, mine, mine, and revise the recent matrimonial swoon to the moan of the mourning doves, and devise the late afternoon one..."⁴⁹⁴ A dove is a symbol of love, peace, and hope. In the English version, the doves moan and mourn, which creates an atmosphere of gloom and grief with a slightly sexual subtext. In the Russian version, wild doves moan ("под стоны диких голубей,") which makes the reader think of their freedom as opposed to Dolly's captivity.⁴⁹⁵ Just the thought of losing Dolly makes Humbert insane. He is ready to do almost anything to keep Dolly as his valuable commodity, overflowing with pride while watching his "spoiled slave-child."⁴⁹⁶ Humbert regrets that in modern times we are not surrounded "by little slave flowers that can be casually plucked between business and bath as they used to be in the days of the Romans."⁴⁹⁷ He does not address slave-children as human beings, deliberately dehumanizing them by applying flowery language concealing a sly

⁴⁹³ Nabokov, p.145.

⁴⁹⁴ Nabokov, p.161.

⁴⁹⁵ Nabokov RV, p.206.

⁴⁹⁶ Nabokov, p.188.

⁴⁹⁷ Nabokov, p.124.

innuendo: plucking someone's flower is a slang term meaning losing one's virginity. A plucked flower symbolizes fragility and a swift passage from life into death, representing the cycle of creation.

In his confession, Humbert evokes Hegel, sarcastically comparing Valeria to Schlegel and Charlotte to Hegel, to emphasize Rita's intellectual inferiority. In addition, he mentions Virgil and Queen Nefertiti while talking about his sexual fantasies, implying that in antique civilizations, one could enjoy more personal freedom, which correlates with Hegel's standpoint on this matter. In her essay "On Human Freedom and Inhuman Art: Nabokov," Pifer maintains that Humbert attempts to subject a living person "to the despotic rule of artistic creation, behaving towards Lolita "as though she were the mere instrument of his will."⁴⁹⁸ This statement is also consistent with Hegel's master-slave dialectic outlined above.

To conclude, Greene admits that gender roles are gradually changing, following the societal changes. However, he claims that something remains constant, which is conformity: "the vast majority of people conform to whatever is normal for the time," playing the role allotted to them because people, being social creatures, always imitate one another.⁴⁹⁹ Greene remarks that the belief that sexual freedom has progressed in recent years is erroneous, naming multiple epochs and cultures that were much more hedonist and libertine than ours: for instance, imperial Rome, late-seventeenth-century England or the "floating world" of eighteenth century Japan. I would definitely add French libertinage, a term coined by John Calvin, to this list. Ultimately, Greene states that most of us are secretly oppressed by the lack of freedom, making us drawn to those who seem free and fluid.

⁴⁹⁸ Pifer HF, pp.58-59.

⁴⁹⁹ Greene, p.48.

6. Voice as a Manifestation of Freedom

A voice is an active expression of an individual, it is an instrument that signals participation and produces meaning whereas being silenced means being oppressed. According to Paul-Michel Foucault, discourse and power are inseparable, whereas power is achieved through discourse. Wood points out that Nabokov in his works often raised questions concerning the role of irony and silence.⁵⁰⁰ Various critics have discerned the absence of Lolita's voice in the novel. Her voice is strangled by Humbert's narration. Durham links the voicelessness with an undeveloped understanding of sexuality, claiming that girls need to have a sexual voice – “a way to make their needs known, to feel that they can assert themselves in sexual situations, and to express their comfort levels.”⁵⁰¹ Postmodern feminists claim that women's voices have always been alienated from the mainstream discourse in the patriarchal society. As a result, women often remain in a state of aphasia, being subordinate to men. As Feijie Zhen asserts in “Analysis of Lolita's Life Tragedy from the Perspective of Postmodern Feminism,” Lolita gradually loses her discourse power, whereas Humbert becomes a ‘silencer’ of her life, exercising a totalitarian control over her.

In Bakhtin's terms, *Lolita* could be classified as a monophonic or a “homophonic” narrative. In his literary research, Bakhtin mainly focuses on characters' autonomy and voice, emphasizing the importance of dialogue. He applies the term “polyphonic novel” to the works of Dostoevsky, admiring “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.”⁵⁰² That is, opposite to Nabokov, Bakhtin asserts that Dostoevskian characters are self-reliant figures that do grow and evolve in accordance with the development of the plot. In his work “Bakhtin and Nabokov: The Dialogue That Never Was,” Francisco Picon suggests that Humbert and Lolita have an “ethically fraught, asymmetric power relationship” that correlates with their “equally asymmetric, monological

⁵⁰⁰ Wood, pp.6-7.

⁵⁰¹ Durham, p.163.

⁵⁰² Bakhtin, p.6.

narrator–character relationship.”⁵⁰³ Moreover, Picon asserts that Nabokov’s monologism is intentional, meaningful and emblematic. It represents a moral transgression against the other, being a hermeneutic crime that “distorts the epistemological underpinnings of a world made up of multiple consciousnesses.”⁵⁰⁴ Finally, at the level of interpersonal ethics, monologism is the metaphor for verbal oppression that can lead to the literal silence of others.

Pekka Tammi calls Nabokov’s narratives “anti-polyphonic”: “We may talk of a pronouncedly anti-polyphonic feature in the author’s writing: an overriding tendency to make explicit the presence of a creative consciousness behind every fictive construction.”⁵⁰⁵ However, Nina Semyonova finds that there is one particular episode in *Lolita* that can be envisaged in the framework of a polyphonic novel. One morning Humbert hears a “reverberating monologue” under the hotel’s window: “It was not really a monologue, since the speaker stopped every few seconds to listen (presumably) to another fellow, but that other voice did not reach me, and so no real meaning could be derived from the part heard.”⁵⁰⁶ This is exactly what is happening throughout the novel: Lolita’s voice reaches neither Humbert nor the readers, so there is a “hidden dialogue” or “hidden polemic” in Bakhtin’s terms.⁵⁰⁷ A “hidden polemic” is a particular species of double-voicing that may include “all self-deprecating overblown speech that repudiates itself in advance, speech with a thousand reservations, concessions, loopholes, and the like.”⁵⁰⁸ It is “wholly shaped by an anticipation of how it will be received.”⁵⁰⁹ Consequently, what we read is not a monologue, but a dialogue with omitted utterances of the interlocutor. The second person is invisibly present; there is a deep trace of the unsaid words.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰³ Picon, p.5.

⁵⁰⁴ Picon, pp.209-210.

⁵⁰⁵ Tammi, pp.97-101.

⁵⁰⁶ Nabokov, p.132.

⁵⁰⁷ Bagby, p.46.

⁵⁰⁸ Bakhtin, p.196

⁵⁰⁹ Farmer, p.37.

⁵¹⁰ Bakhtin, p.96.

On the whole, women in *Lolita*, except Annabel Leigh, seem to utter a totally meaningless babble. Humbert, who is filtering their speech for his readers, is only delighted with the “melodious silvery precision (a bird, a very bird!)” of the French prostitute Monique. On just two pages, he provides a detailed account of her utterances in French, which all are outright banal and superficial. Nevertheless, Humbert the Thinker seems to be enchanted by the mere sound, entirely disregarding the meaning of her words: “Stopping before a window display she said with great gusto: ‘*Je vais m’acheter des bas!*’ and never may I forget the way her Parisian childish lips exploded on ‘*bas*’...”⁵¹¹ This is another proof of Humbert’s linguistic and aesthetic obsession, whereas *Lolita* can be regarded as an aesthetic riddle.

As for Valeria, “the idiot” (“дура моя”) or “practically brainless baba” (“совершенно безмозглая баба”), as Humbert calls his first wife, the reader neither hears her voice through the brief description of their relationship, which hardly takes five pages, nor learns the reasons for such a harsh judgment.⁵¹² The only reason why Humbert marries her is to purge himself of his “degrading and dangerous desires.”⁵¹³ In this relationship Humbert emerges as a dominant character and a violent chauvinist in need of a submissive woman. As soon as he finds out that Valeria does not intend to put up with his behavior, Humbert experiences a suffocating “mounting fury,” expressing the desire “to beat her up in the streets” in order to regain the power by emphasizing his physical superiority. In fact, he actually strikes her on the knee with his fist, despite his alleged “superhuman self-control.”⁵¹⁴ Furthermore, Humbert describes Valeria’s announcement about another man in her life as “her wild talk,” presenting his “comedy wife” as derailed and unsound. Solely at the very end of their relationship, there is just one sentence uttered by Valeria after the scene of their separation:

“[...] Valeria, as she waddles by my side, began to shake her poodle head vigorously without saying a word. I let her go on for a while and then asked if she thought she had something inside. She

⁵¹¹ Nabokov, p.23.

⁵¹² Nabokov, p.26.

⁵¹³ Nabokov, p.24.

⁵¹⁴ Nabokov, p.27.

answered (I translate from her French which was, I imagine, a translation in its turn of some Slavic platitude): ‘There is another man in my life.’”⁵¹⁵

In the Russian version, Valeria is assigned a different dog’s breed: she has a Maltese’s head instead of a poodle’s (“Валерия начинает энергично и безмолвно трясти своей болоночной головой.”)⁵¹⁶ Obviously, this is an image of a dog that cannot make himself understood by its master. It is puzzling why the reader does not get an opportunity to hear this sentence in French, which probably was “Il y a un autre homme dans ma vie” – an inconspicuous construction, recently used by Celine Dion in a public interview. Most probably, Humbert did not want her to sound charming, simultaneously diminishing her cognitive capacities in the reader’s eyes.

The same misogynistic attitude is applied towards Charlotte, his second wife, whose French is ridiculed by Humbert for no particular reason. Being an American, she does not only speak French but also occasionally communicates in French with her daughter, which is a sign of good education. However, Humbert ridicules her pronunciation and venomously remarks: “[...] this is her mother who thinks she knows French.”⁵¹⁷ In the course of their conversations, Charlotte seems just to retell mediocre novels and movies: “[...] fat Haze suddenly spoiled everything by... starting a make-believe conversation about a fake book by some popular fraud.”⁵¹⁸ Everything seems fake here. On a different evening, four days later, “The old girl had finished reading in great detail the plot of the movie she and L. had seen sometime in the winter.”⁵¹⁹ In the Russian version, she is called “an old fool” (“старая дурында”).⁵²⁰ On a different occasion he calls her “an old echidna” (“старая ехидна”), which has a connotation of a spiteful creature. However, in the English version Nabokov decided to call her “the old cat.”⁵²¹

⁵¹⁵ Nabokov, p.27.

⁵¹⁶ Nabokov, p.38.

⁵¹⁷ Nabokov, p.44.

⁵¹⁸ Nabokov, p.43.

⁵¹⁹ Nabokov, p.45.

⁵²⁰ Nabokov, RV, p.61.

⁵²¹ Nabokov, p.47.

Moreover, Humbert's last relationship with "sweetest, simplest, gentlest, dumbest Rita imaginable," with whom he has also spent two years, the same amount of time as with Lolita and, similarly, part of the time on the road, is full of condescension and arrogance.⁵²² To start with, Humbert states that he "picks her up"⁵²³ (in the Russian version the chosen word is "подобрал" instead of a more common denotation "снял,")⁵²⁴ which presents Rita as a fallen or lost object he accidentally finds and appropriates. Moreover, Humbert picks her up "in depraved May," which is a direct allusion to T. S. Eliot's "Gerontion": "In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,/ To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk/ Among whispers."⁵²⁵ Similarly to Nabokov's *Lolita*, this is a dramatic monologue of an older man looking back at his past. The words "flowering judas" evoke the issue of faith and betrayal, forecasting a tragic outcome.

Next, Humbert weighs Rita's intellectual abilities against those of her predecessors, declaring: "In comparison to her, Valechka was a Schlegel, and Charlotte a Hegel," which paradoxically makes Rita "the most soothing, the most comprehending companion" that Humbert has ever had.⁵²⁶ Apparently, Rita's detachment from reality due to her problematic relationship with alcohol makes her "such a good sport" that "she would have given herself to any pathetic creature or fallacy, an old broken tree or a bereaved porcupine."⁵²⁷ In this way, Humbert puts himself in line with an object and an animal, humorously suggesting not only that Rita does not perceive or follow any social norms, but also that she is disoriented and unable to make logical decisions. Alex Sklyarenko points out that Rita is a short form of Margarita, meaning "pearl," which brings to mind the saying "[*nolite mittere margaritas ante porcos*]" ([don't throw] pearls before swine). A bereaved porcupine mentioned above may hint at porcos in the Latin proverb.⁵²⁸ Humbert describes Rita as "a very slight, dark-haired, pale-skinned adult, weighing a hundred and five

⁵²² Nabokov, p.259.

⁵²³ Nabokov, p.258.

⁵²⁴ Nabokov, RV, p.331.

⁵²⁵ www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47254/gerontion

⁵²⁶ Nabokov, p.259.

⁵²⁷ Nabokov, p.258.

⁵²⁸ thenabokovian.org/node/52291

pounds, with charmingly asymmetrical eyes, an angular, rapidly sketched profile, and a most appealing *ensellure* to her supple back.”⁵²⁹ This purely physical description of Rita’s appearance including her weight gives an impression of a cataloged article, whereas the term “*ensellure*” evokes an image of a horse.

Another example of Humbert’s objectification of Rita can be seen in the last scene of Chapter 26, in which he brings her to The Enchanted Hunters, following “a curious urge” to relive his stay with Lolita in this hotel. He leaves Rita in a bar to find her drunk a few hours later, recalling: “In the silent painted park where I walked her and aired her a little, she sobbed and said I would soon, soon leave her as everybody had.”⁵³⁰ This description makes Rita appear as a dog or a dusty carpet that needs to be groomed and primed. Her emotional reaction indicates an intense fear of abandonment due to her past traumatic experience. In fact, the reader neither gets to know what Rita likes about Humbert nor does he learn anything about her inner world.

At least, Humbert finally seems to realize that there are some deep emotions and thoughts behind the brash facade: “It struck me [...] that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate – dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me [...]”⁵³¹ Lena Toker argues that inattentive readers underestimate the complexity of Lolita’s character in the same way as Humbert brushes off the manifestations of her inner life “as irrelevant and depraved childish nonsense.”⁵³² Durantaye, in his turn, claims in “Lolita in *Lolita*, or the Garden, the Gate and the Critics” that Humbert is trying to protect Lolita by “solipsizing” her, hoping “to render her not only ‘unaware’ of his pleasure, but ‘alien’ to it.”⁵³³ In *Style is Matter. The Moral Art of*

⁵²⁹ Nabokov, p.258.

⁵³⁰ Nabokov, p.263.

⁵³¹ Nabokov, p.286.

⁵³² Toker, p.204.

⁵³³ Durantaye, *Lolita in Lolita*, p.191.

Vladimir Nabokov, published one year later in 2007, Durantaye elaborates: “She is everywhere referred to, everywhere described, everywhere poetically loved, but as to her thoughts, and feelings, Humbert offers us scarcely a glimpse.”⁵³⁴ Pifer states that Humbert “despotically transforms the twelve-year-old America kid into an aesthetic mirage.”⁵³⁵ Humbert Humbert reminds of a Professor Henry Higgins in Shaw’s famous play *Pygmalion*, who tries to teach young Eliza some manners, whereas she, exactly like Lolita, needs a bath and keeps swearing.

We never hear Humbert leading a meaningful discussion with Lolita, although he draws parallels between her and his first love Annabel Leigh, to whom he had sensed not only a physical but also a deep spiritual bond: they were both interested “in the plurality of inhabited worlds, competitive tennis, infinity, solipsism and so on.”⁵³⁶ Even after she dies of typhus, Humbert is holding on to this spiritual connection, declaring: “Long after her death I felt her thoughts floating through mine,” a statement that transfers the reader in a mystical, paranormal dimension, representing the cult of memory, which is not uncommon in poetry.⁵³⁷ With Lolita, on the contrary, any deep conversation seems utterly impossible:

“We would become strangely embarrassed whenever I tried to discuss something she and an older friend, she and a parent, she and a real healthy sweetheart, I and Annabel, Lolita and a sublime, purified, analyzed, deified Harold Haze, might have discussed – an abstract idea, a painting, stippled Hopkins or short Baudelaire, God or Shakespeare, anything of a genuine kind. Good will! She would mail her vulnerability in trite brashness and boredom, whereas I, using for my desperately detached comments an artificial tone of voice that set my own last teeth on edge, provoked my audience to such outbursts of rudeness as made any further conversation impossible...”⁵³⁸

Basically, she repeatedly rejects him on the emotional level, exactly as she does on the physical level. However, Humbert decides to cease his attempts to break through her mental guard, annoyed and offended, although he never stops sexually assaulting her, ignoring her resistance.

⁵³⁴ Durantaye, p.323.

⁵³⁵ Pifer HF, p.59.

⁵³⁶ Nabokov, p.12.

⁵³⁷ Nabokov, p.14.

⁵³⁸ Nabokov, p.284.

Still, Humbert repeatedly claims that “in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel.”⁵³⁹ By giving her predecessor the name “Annabel Leigh,” which is itself derived from that of a fictional character Annabel Lee created by Edgar Allan Poe, Humbert indicates that his very creation of “Lolita” is to a certain degree a product of his imagination and not an autonomous being. After their first “innocent” intercourse on the sofa, Humbert claims: “What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, [...] having no will, no consciousness - indeed, no life of her own.”⁵⁴⁰ At the end of the novel he explains his stubborn denial of Lolita’s identity by complaining about his supersensitive system that makes him suffer so much: “which reminds one of the tenth or twentieth soldier in the raping queue who throws the girl’s black shawl over her white face so as not to see those impossible eyes, while taking his military pleasure in the sad, sacked village.”⁵⁴¹ In “Captivating Illusions: Sexual Abuse and the Ordering of Love,” Christina Traina examines strategies used by Humbert to foreclose any responsibility for abuse. One of these strategies is erasure, when the abuser declares his target to be nonexistent. Traina states: “Nabokov brilliantly makes admit Humbert his own erasure and replacement of Dolores Haze in different degrees and kinds throughout the novel. Not only does Humbert [...] tell the entire story, but he erases his ‘fatherly’ relationship to her when it is convenient.”⁵⁴² By declaring Dolly a nymphet, Humbert erases her humanity.

Humbert, in his turn, bemoans that Lolita does not see him as a person either: “[...] in order to enjoy my phantasms in peace I firmly decided to ignore what I could not help perceiving, the fact that I was to her not a boyfriend, not a glamour man, not a pal, not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn.”⁵⁴³ In the Russian version Nabokov decided to cut the allegory, writing directly: “not a human at all, but two eyes and a thick phallus” (“[...] даже вообще не человек, а всего только пара глаз да толстый фаллос длинною в фут.”)⁵⁴⁴ Although

⁵³⁹ Connolly, p.25.

⁵⁴⁰ Nabokov, p.62.

⁵⁴¹ Nabokov, p.262.

⁵⁴² Traina, p.188.

⁵⁴³ Nabokov, p.283.

⁵⁴⁴ Nabokov, RV, p.364.

Humbert seems to complain of his hardship, he simultaneously boasts of his extraordinary manhood, trying to impress the reader.

In “Gender and Power in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” Tristan Gans asserts that Humbert attempts to dominate female characters by addressing them by using possessive pronouns. Furthermore, he mentions that Humbert has a “psychological need to win, to possess, and to control,” constantly trying to prove his superiority.⁵⁴⁵ According to Nafisi, *Lolita* belongs to a category of victims “who have no defense and are ever given a chance to articulate their own story. As such, she becomes a double victim: not only her life but also her life story is taken from her.”⁵⁴⁶ Patnoe points out another duality concerning *Lolita*’s figure, namely “the dual existence of one textual *Lolita* and another, very different, coopted, mythical *Lolita*,” the muted and violated adolescent versus seductive and lethal female.⁵⁴⁷ She asserts that the manipulative “double-voicing” causes a “double-drama,” when rape is presented to the reader as sly seduction.

After Humbert moves in to the Hazes and starts writing the diary, he remarks that he is “moved by the little one’s slangy speech, by her harsh high voice.”⁵⁴⁸ He does not want to listen to her, acquiring “a habit and method to ignore *Lolita*’s states of mind.”⁵⁴⁹ Julian Connolly points out a paradox here, while Humbert needs her physical presence to satisfy his desires, he is revolted and sickened by her mental presence, viewing “the individual who inhabits that body as a nuisance or distraction that he would like to ignore.”⁵⁵⁰ When she is crying after another forced intercourse, Humbert is laughing, drowning out her sobs. In the course of their affair, Humbert does not perceive *Lolita* as a person, “staying deaf to her signals,”⁵⁵¹ besides; all of his sexual activities are entirely self-involved. Even in the very beginning of his

⁵⁴⁵ Gans, p.3.

⁵⁴⁶ Nafisi, p. 41.

⁵⁴⁷ Patnoe, pp.83-84.

⁵⁴⁸ Nabokov, pp.41-42.

⁵⁴⁹ Nabokov, p.289.

⁵⁵⁰ Connolly, p.38.

⁵⁵¹ Toker, p.205.

obsession with Lolita, he is feigning interest in her activities to come closer to her: “I faked interest by bringing my head so close that her hair touched my temple and her arm brushed my cheek as she wiped her lips with her wrist.”⁵⁵² After the first night in the “Enchanted Hunters,” there is a sudden upheaval in Lolita’s behavior: “Loquacious Lo was silent,”⁵⁵³ (in the Russian version “словоохотливая Лолита молчала.”)⁵⁵⁴ In both versions, there is a repetition of the sound “lo” in the adjective and in the noun, which creates an imitation of a babbler allegedly produced by the talkative girl. Additionally, in Old English, the word “Lo” is used to call one’s attention to something, meaning “look,” which makes this statement seem significant for the plot of the story, drawing the reader’s attention to it. Gradually, Dolly is getting “dull and silent,” and Humbert is tortured by her silence that makes her “so tantalizingly, so miserably unattainable.”⁵⁵⁵ Thus, Dolly deliberately encircles herself with silence, fencing herself off any further intrusion.

Throughout the novel, we just get a biased summary of her utterances. The reader is left to guess what exactly she says, swearing “in language that I never dreamed little girls could know, let alone use.”⁵⁵⁶ On a different occasion, Humbert complains: “Lo treated me to one of those furious harangues of her where entreaty and insult, self-assertion and double talk, vicious vulgarity and childish despair, were interwoven in an exasperating semblance of logic which prompted a semblance of explanation from me.”⁵⁵⁷ The reader gets a semblance of a conversation, with singled-out utterances torn out of context: “swell chance...I’d be a sap I took your opinion seriously... Stinker...You can’t boss me...I despise you... and so forth).”⁵⁵⁸ There are too many gaps to fill in.

⁵⁵² Nabokov, p.58.

⁵⁵³ Nabokov, p.140.

⁵⁵⁴ Nabokov, R, p.181.

⁵⁵⁵ Nabokov, p.239.

⁵⁵⁶ Nabokov, p.170.

⁵⁵⁷ Nabokov, p.171.

⁵⁵⁸ Nabokov, p.171.

Nabokov elaborates the theme of silencing when Lolita participates in a production of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Shakespeare's drama tells the story of a fiery, spirited, and sharp-tongued woman, Katherina, becoming obedient and silent in a relationship with her manipulative husband, Petruchio, who pretended to be kind and gentle before marrying and abducting her. Her silence can be attributed to "a crude form of male dominance" or to her understanding of the "advantages of outwardly conforming to society's expectations" that proclaim that a woman should avoid conflicts in a relationship, being subservient to the male.⁵⁵⁹ In the scene, where they almost got caught after having sexual intercourse at a "secluded romantic spot," Humbert imagines himself as a tamer of a young animal, forcing Dolly to submit to his will:

"With the quiet murmured order one gives a sweat-stained distracted cringing trained animal even in the worst of plights (what mad hope or hate makes the young beast's flanks pulsate, what black stars pierce the heart of the tamer!), I made Lo get up [...]."⁵⁶⁰

Humbert experiences mixed feelings, whereas the anxiety and fear of being caught create increased arousal. In the Russian version, the stars explode in the tamer's heart ("чёрные звёзды разрываются в сердце,") which creates an image of fireworks of feelings.⁵⁶¹ By controlling and dominating Dolly, Humbert modifies his self-image, transforming from a coward neurotic to a cool and brave hero. He remarks retrospectively: "Now [...] I know that I am a courageous man, but in those days I was not aware of it, and I remember being surprised by my own coolness."⁵⁶² He uses an active coping strategy (flight-or-fight), successfully escaping from a possible threat represented by witnesses. In contrast, Dolly instinctively chooses a passive coping strategy (immobilization or freezing), sensing that the threat represented by Humbert is inescapable. For her, this spot hardly seems romantic, for she is weeping – "a salutary storm of sobs after one of the fits of moodiness that had become so frequent with her in the course of that otherwise admirable year" – whereas Humbert is happily laughing in the blue of his bliss, thoroughly detached from her feelings,

⁵⁵⁹ Greenblatt in Fischer, p.87.

⁵⁶⁰ Nabokov, p.169.

⁵⁶¹ Nabokov, RV, p.217.

⁵⁶² Nabokov, p.169.

even though he guesses that Dolly might hate him, hoping to get away from her painful routine.⁵⁶³

However, Dolly's coping mechanism gradually changes, and she starts responding with anger and irritability, both of which are hyperarousal symptoms of PTSD. When Dolly is playing tennis in California, Humbert tells us that she reacts with a "sullen fury" to "every word of persistent advice" coming from him and emits "a tremendous ough of disgust" when he intervenes in the game.⁵⁶⁴ Finally, before they leave Beardsley, Humbert notices a radical transformation of Dolly's appearance, regarding it as "an exploded myth" of childhood purity and mythological innocence: "A coarse flush had now replaced that innocent fluorescence."⁵⁶⁵ However, her transformation is not only outward but inward as well. Dolly deliberately destroys her angelic image, mirroring Humbert's verbal violence. He recalls:

"From that moment, I stopped restraining my voice, and we continued yelling at each other, and she said unprintable things. She said she loathed me. She made monstrous faces at me, inflating her cheeks and producing diabolical plopping sound. [...] She said she was sure I had murdered her mother."⁵⁶⁶

In the Russian version, Nabokov replaces a broad term "murdered" by a very specific word "stabbed" ("она выразила уверенность, что я зарезал её мать."⁵⁶⁷) This must have been an intentional alteration, for some 80 pages later, as Dolly asks Humbert where her "murdered mummy"⁵⁶⁸ was buried; in the Russian version we read again "мою зарезанную мать,"⁵⁶⁹ (which means "my butchered mother.") Ironically, although Humbert did contemplate drowning or poisoning Charlotte, he had never actually thought of butchering her, which reminds the reader of Raskolnikov's crime.

Furthermore, I would argue that an abrupt change in Dolly's character is visible when she starts openly voicing her perspective on her relationship with Humbert,

⁵⁶³ Nabokov, p.169.

⁵⁶⁴ Nabokov, p.162.

⁵⁶⁵ Nabokov, p.204.

⁵⁶⁶ Nabokov, p.205.

⁵⁶⁷ Nabokov RV, p.263.

⁵⁶⁸ Nabokov, p.286.

⁵⁶⁹ Nabokov RV, p.368.

naming the crime he committed, which conflicts with the artificially romanticized framework constructed by Humbert to envelop their relationship:

“Can you remember,” she said, “what was the name of that hotel, you know [nose puckered], come on, you know—with those white columns and the marble swan in the lobby? Oh, you know [noisy exhalation of breath]—the hotel where you raped me. Okay, skip it. I mean, was it [almost in a whisper] *The Enchanted Hunters*? Oh it was? [musingly] Was it?”⁵⁷⁰

The tables turn when Lolita proposes Humbert to go on a further cross-country road trip, where this time it would be her who determines where to go.

The absence of Lolita’s voice is additionally emphasized by Nabokov in the last chapter of the novel. As Humbert is waiting to be arrested on a mountain road, he is suddenly enchanted by children’s voices: “a melodious unity of sounds” coming as a “vapory vibration” from a remote mining town in a valley: they were “majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic” when he painfully realizes that “the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from them concord.”⁵⁷¹ David Larmour calls this fragment “one of the most illuminating moments in the book, calling for a decisive focal adjustment through retrospective reorientation.”⁵⁷² This passage can be interpreted as Humbert’s ultimate realization of his previous negation of Lolita’s identity, disregarding her basic human needs, including a normal childhood. Eric Lemay states that this concord climaxes the confession and serves as an epiphany: “For although Humbert recounts events which occur after he hears these children, he plucks their chord last, allowing it to echo beyond the book’s end, like the final ‘Amen’ of a hymn that aches within a cathedral’s tarred arches.”⁵⁷³ Ellen Pifer asserts: “It is Humbert’s riotous imagination that, paradoxically, leads to his betrayal of the highest values of imagination: the spontaneity, vitality, and originality emblemized by the child. In striving to obtain his ideal world or paradise, he selfishly deprives Lolita of her rightful childhood—and betrays the principles of romantic

⁵⁷⁰ Nabokov, p.189.

⁵⁷¹ Nabokov, pp. 307-308.

⁵⁷² Larmour, p. 105.

⁵⁷³ Lemay.

faith and freedom.”⁵⁷⁴ Still, I would argue that even at this final point Dolly is neither truly heard nor recognized by Humbert. “Being heard,” as established by Sheldon Bach, is being recognized, when the speaker “is confirmed in his sense that his feelings are real and that it is possible for another separate human being to share them.”⁵⁷⁵ The only thing Humbert recognizes is Dolly’s absence. This final scene is interlinked to the scene in the first part of the novel: before her first night with Humbert, Lolita recites her Camp Q brochure: “We loved the sings around the fire in the big stone fireplace or under the darned stars, where every girl merged her own spirit of happiness with the voice of the group.”⁵⁷⁶ Lena Toker suggests that the loss of her own voice through merging with others stands for her loss of identity and a metaphorical death.

Humbert is fixated on the visual image of Lolita, brushing aside everything else concerning her feelings and thoughts.⁵⁷⁷ He claims: “the thousand eyes wide open in my eyed blood,” while he is looking at his nymphet Lo.⁵⁷⁸ This is an allusion to Argos, a many-eyed giant in Greek mythology, who guards the nymph Io. At one point, while watching Lolita from afar, Humbert appries the reader: “With her right hand holding her left arm behind her untanned back, the lesser nymphet, a diaphanous darling, would be all eyes, as the pavonine sun was all eyes” and describes the moment as an “oculate paradise.”⁵⁷⁹ On a different occasion Humbert exclaims: “my own desire for her blinds me,” admitting that “the look of lust is always gloomy.”⁵⁸⁰ He calls his lurking eye “the ever alert periscope of my shameful vice...”⁵⁸¹ That is, paradoxically, Humbert’s capacity to see is both enhanced and debased by his intense desire to possess his nymphet. Thus he is fixated on details, viewing Dolly as an assortment of disintegrated body parts and fragmented character traits, but cannot perceive her as a whole person.

⁵⁷⁴ Pifer, 1997, p.317.

⁵⁷⁵ Bach, p.160 in Juhasz, p.177.

⁵⁷⁶ Nabokov, p.116.

⁵⁷⁷ Freeh-Maciorowski, p.125.

⁵⁷⁸ Nabokov, p.42.

⁵⁷⁹ Nabokov, p.163.

⁵⁸⁰ Nabokov, pp.44, 125.

⁵⁸¹ Nabokov, p.264.

Trubetskova maintains that the image of the eye in Nabokov's works symbolizes a unique world perception, whereas there is a strong correlation between a rich inner world and visual acuity:

“Образ глаза в эстетике Набокова – таинственный символ уникального восприятия мира, он осмысляется как метафора авторского всеведения, как модель Вселенной, как приобщение ‘потусторонности’. На наш взгляд, такая разработка образа обуславливала в произведениях писателя прямую зависимость богатства духовного мира героев от остроты их физического зрения...”⁵⁸²

Humbert can indeed boast of profound cultural and literary knowledge, including apprehension of psychology. However, I would argue that in spite of his complex and differentiated vision of reality, Humbert's vision of Dolly is often selective, biased and foggy, as if they both have “plunged in the same enchanted mist.”⁵⁸³ A few chapters later, this metaphor is elaborated, as Humbert is watching drugged Dolly in the hotel room, sensing the “otherworldliness” mentioned above (“потусторонность”):

“A breeze from wonderland had begun to affect my thoughts, and now they seemed couched in italics, as if the surface reflecting them were wrinkled by the phantasm of that breeze. Time and again my consciousness folded the wrong way, my shuffling body entered the sphere of sleep, shuffled out again, and once or twice I caught myself drifting into a melancholy snore. Mists of tenderness enfolded mountains of longing.”⁵⁸⁴

I would suggest that the mists depicted by Humbert are the mists of lust enfolding mountains of reason.

Moreover, Dolly's identity is overshadowed and obscured by Humbert's intense desire and his power of imagination. Being renamed from Dolores to Lolita, she is extracted from her habitual life, being placed in the realm of Humbert's fantasies, isolated from the rest of society. In addition, the numerous names given to her officially or by important attachment figures - Dolores, Lo, little Haze, Lola, Lottelita, Lolitchen, Lotte, little Carmen, Lolita, Dolly, Mrs. Richard F. Schiller - may cause a discontinuity in the sense of self and thus result in a disruption of

⁵⁸² Trubetskova, p.63.

⁵⁸³ Nabokov, p.120.

⁵⁸⁴ Nabokov, p.131.

identity. According to Schweighauser, Lolita's body is transformed into a fragmented body of allusions and incoherent intertextual references. Sweeney suggests the readers—"in order to acknowledge the character's subjectivity, resist the narrator's bias, and honor the text's insistent artifice and indeterminacy—is to refer to her without naming her at all."⁵⁸⁵ After all, we do not really get to know her. Humbert describes her "twofold nature," a mixture of childishness and vulgarity, adding that even this feature is not something that belongs solely to her, but to "every nymphet."⁵⁸⁶ Brand maintains that Humbert's renaming everyone and everything in his confession symbolizes the replacement of reality by the images invented by his ample imagination. Humbert separates names from their referents, creating his own aesthetic universe. Moreover, he classifies them, separating them into species: "Here too, Humbert deprives the external world of its independence by reducing things to temporary manifestations of types over which he has complete conceptual control."⁵⁸⁷

It may appear strange that when Humbert and Lolita meet at her new home, she seems neither angry nor resentful. Quite the contrary, she seems oblivious of the years he abused her. David Larmour suggests that at the end of the book – namely, in the Hunter Road scene – Lolita breaks free "from those solipsized, warped sections of the memoir which aimed to suppress her as the nymphet waif."⁵⁸⁸ At once, Humbert sees her "blurred beauty"⁵⁸⁹ in a lot of detail, "hopelessly worn at seventeen," but still goes "mad with tenderness at the mere sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice [...]"⁵⁹⁰ In fact, this statement instead gives an impression that Humbert is not actually listening to what Lolita could be saying, but rather enjoying the mere sound of her voice as if it were birds chirping. Michael Wood cites the following passage that exemplifies her un-lived, ruined childhood in "a travelling prison": "In her washed-out grey eyes, strangely

⁵⁸⁵ Sweeney, p.29.

⁵⁸⁶ Nabokov, p.44.

⁵⁸⁷ Brand, pp.17-18.

⁵⁸⁸ Larmour, p.107.

⁵⁸⁹ Nabokov, p.270.

⁵⁹⁰ Nabokov, p.278.

spectacled, our poor romance was for a moment reflected, pondered upon, and dismissed like a dull party, like a rainy picnic to which only the dullest bores had come, like a humdrum exercise, like a bit of dry mud caking her childhood.”⁵⁹¹ Dolly seems to suppress her memories in the hope to start anew, erasing the past. “Did it really happen?” is a burning question for the victim of soul murder, claims Leonard Shengold in his book *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation*.⁵⁹² He explains that so-called “soul murder” occurs in a case of parent loss, rape, incest, emotional neglect or abuse, stating: “What happens to the child subjected to soul murder is so terrible, so overwhelming, and usually so recurrent that the child must not feel it and cannot register it, and resorts to a massive isolation of feeling, which is maintained by brainwashing (a mixture of confusion, denial, and identifying with the aggressor.”⁵⁹³

Humbert is sure that it would be absolutely impossible for his Lolita to forget their common past, declaring: “nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her.”⁵⁹⁴ However, Dolly chooses to pretend that nothing happened, greeting her “Dad” with “all the emphasis of wonder and welcome,” talking with “a vehement cheerful note” and gesturing with a “humorous courtesy.”⁵⁹⁵ However, she does not dare to tell her husband about the past, feeling that might make her feel dirty and ashamed. Dolly announces: “The past was the past,” adding that “there was not much else to tell.”⁵⁹⁶

In his book *Silence and Silencing of the Traumatized*, Aleksandar Dimitrijevic admits that silence is a prominent phenomenon in cases of trauma, stating: “If a child is repeatedly traumatized by a person to whom he/she is attached,” he/she would try “to preserve the image of the parent untarnished,” avoiding talking about the experience at all costs. He adds that “consequences seem to be most disturbing when

⁵⁹¹ Nabokov, p.272 in Wood, pp.136-137.

⁵⁹² Shengold, p.32.

⁵⁹³ Shengold, pp.24-25.

⁵⁹⁴ Nabokov, p.283.

⁵⁹⁵ Nabokov, pp.269-270.

⁵⁹⁶ Nabokov, p.272.

trauma is inflicted in closest relationships, those from which children expect safety and encouragement for exploration.”⁵⁹⁷

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi relates Lolita's experience to that of many other women in the Islamic Republic: “Well, it’s like this: if you’re forced into having sex with someone you dislike, you make your mind blank—you pretend to be somewhere else, you tend to forget your body... That’s what we do over here. We are constantly pretending to be somewhere else—we either plan it or dream it.”⁵⁹⁸ Anne Dwyer suspects that Nafisi misunderstands *Lolita* as a novel, but still praises her reading of the text as “a sign of liberation, rather than as one of oppression,” which allows the readers to explore a different social context.

Silence used to be “quite an obscure topic” in the beginning of the twentieth century. Theodor Reik noted an interesting fact that can be applied to literary analysis: “What is spoken is not the important thing. It appears to us more important to recognize what speech conceals and what silence reveals.”⁵⁹⁹ In those rare cases when we do hear her voice, she does not sound as a bratty and superficial teenager. Her words are “deeper and more sophisticated than would be appropriate for a twelve- or fourteen-year old American teenager.”⁶⁰⁰ In a private conversation with her friend, overheard by Humbert, she says: “You know, what’s so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own.”⁶⁰¹ This quotation shows that she prefers an abusive companionship to loneliness. Lena Toker claims that “Dolly’s death is the emblem of the irreversible isolation that she always feared.”⁶⁰² But it’s not only Dolly that dies at the end of the novel. Christine Grogan points out that there is “an overkill” of female characters in Nabokov’s novel: Humbert’s mother, his first love Annabel, his

⁵⁹⁷ Dimitrijevic, pp.198-199.

⁵⁹⁸ Nafisi, p.329.

⁵⁹⁹ Reik, p.127 in Dimitrijevic, p.xxii.

⁶⁰⁰ Hetenyi, p.43.

⁶⁰¹ Nabokov, p.285.

⁶⁰² Toker, p.225.

first wife Valeria, his second wife Charlotte Haze, and even Jean Farlow who had a crush on him – all are dead by the end of the narrative.⁶⁰³

In the scene of their last meeting, Lolita has new glasses, “new ears,” and she could suddenly talk “in a relaxed flow” – that is, all her senses are heightened, she can absorb visual and auditory impulses, responding to them adequately. She is suddenly heard and perceived by Humbert as an autonomous human being. In the Russian translation, Nabokov adds a phrase, which is absent in the original: “Она, как я сказал, всё ещё говорила. Я наконец включился в её свободно полившуюся речь.”⁶⁰⁴ That is, Dolly’s speech is flowing as a powerful liberated stream that has destroyed the dam erected by her oppressor. Manolescu finds that her discourse “is the expression of freedom and vocal maturity.”⁶⁰⁵ Her voice has changed, too: “Dick, this is my Dad!” cried Dolly in a resounding violent voice that struck me as totally strange, and new, and cheerful, and old, and sad [...]”⁶⁰⁶ All at once, there is a whole spectrum of emotions, which Humbert has not discerned before.

Humbert used to call Dolly “the little fool,” “my sweet fool” (“моя медовая дурочка,”)⁶⁰⁷ “моя бездарная девочка” (absent in the original, meaning “my talentless girl,”)⁶⁰⁸ a “simple girl” (“простодушная девочка,”) or a “simple child” (“простоватая моя девочка.”)⁶⁰⁹ However, at the end of the novel he refers to her as “a wise girl,” starting to see her with new eyes.⁶¹⁰

However, what makes her develop from a “mere dummy to Humbert’s male ventriloquism” to a young woman “with independent fictional life” is the one word

⁶⁰³ Grogan, p.64.

⁶⁰⁴ Nabokov, p.350.

⁶⁰⁵ Manolescu, p.92..

⁶⁰⁶ Nabokov, p.273.

⁶⁰⁷ Nabokov, p.155, p.160.

⁶⁰⁸ Nabokov, p.207.

⁶⁰⁹ Nabokov, p.180, p.149.

⁶¹⁰ Nabokov, p.271.

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she can finally say at the end of their last encounter, seeing her oppressor surrender at last.⁶¹¹

“**No**,” she said smiling, “**no**.”⁶¹²

Dolly’s “no” is monosyllabic and powerful, for she is not trying to justify her answer. It is radically different from the yielding and helpless “oh, *no*” she mutters “with a sigh to heaven” every time Humbert’s lust swells again.⁶¹³ Her final “no” is also different from “a long ‘no-o’ in a deep almost growling undertone when the blow of fate had actually fallen.”⁶¹⁴ That is, Humbert ascribes the responsibility for his lust to a higher power, transferring the blame and refusing to perceive Dolly’s repeated objections. Her ultimate “no” is finally heard and accepted as a valid answer.

Saying no is an emotionally intelligent skill that many people, especially women, do not possess. In their article “Teaching Sexual Abuse Prevention Skills to Children,” Hanratty and Miltenberg state that there are three essential safety skills children need to learn at a very young age - saying “no,” getting away, and telling a trusted adult (recognize, avoid, escape, and report). Wurtele (2008) similarly categorized safety skills into three essential steps: recognize, resist, and report. Teaching sexual abuse prevention skills or abduction prevention skills, it is imperative to teach saying “no,” when facing “a lure (a request to engage in unsafe behavior) that comes from an older person.” Unfortunately, Dolly did not have any trusted adults in her surrounding, partly because she had to move across the country without a possibility to build any meaningful bonds; and partly because she could not develop a sense of trust and security after the pain of being tricked and betrayed by Humbert. Ultimately, Dolly has reclaimed her voice and learned to set boundaries, prioritizing her feelings and needs. Nonetheless, Humbert is not able to recognize her autonomy,

⁶¹¹ Larmour, p.107.

⁶¹² Nabokov, p.280.

⁶¹³ Nabokov, p.285.

⁶¹⁴ Nabokov, p.188.

still insisting that Lolita belongs to him, referring to her as “my Lolita, . . . still Carmencita, still mine.”⁶¹⁵

Similarly, in Alice Walker’s famous novel *The Color Purple* (1982), the protagonist Celie finds her voice after liberating herself from misery and male oppression. She was sexually abused and exploited by her stepfather but finally succeeds in breaking free and reassert her own individuality. Analogously to *Lolita*, the novel continues “to elicit a wide range of praise and censure” from literary critics and ordinary readers, although it has been awarded both the American Book Award for Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize.⁶¹⁶ In “Celie’s Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*” Charles Proudfit maintains that Celie’s “fictive narrative voice, that ‘speaks’ to us though mute” and that is never heard by the men who abused her, “transcends the limitations of her isolation”⁶¹⁷ Undoubtedly, the African-American literature offers multiple examples of overcoming the male oppression through finding one’s voice, but I decided to leave this significant part out, for some influential literary critics claim that there is a significant difference between the stories of women of color and those of Euro-American women. Walker, Morrison, Hurston, to name just a few, deliver a historical account of both black and white men violating particularly black women, whereas the latter attain a spiritual transformation while finding their own identity. In the novels of African-American women writers, a deliberate celebration of black female autonomy plays a vital role, which would go beyond the scope of this research.

Shengold asserts that only a more or less continuing feeling of personal identity “can bring an impression of unity to the mess of one’s past.”⁶¹⁸ Patnoe concludes that we need to be aware of heteroglossia in *Lolita* and understand the double injury (the one induced by the offender and the other one caused by the social injustice) “to bring our own

⁶¹⁵ Nabokov, p.280

⁶¹⁶ Proudfit, pp.12-13.

⁶¹⁷ Proudfit, p.16.

⁶¹⁸ Shengold, p.284.

backgrounded voices to the fore.”⁶¹⁹ In the final sentence of the novel, Humbert concludes: “And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita,” alluding to “the refuge of art” as a form of immortalization.⁶²⁰ However, by exhibiting and perpetuating his story of exploitation in his “confession,” Humbert spreads and eternizes that exploitation.

⁶¹⁹ Patnoe, pp.98-99.

⁶²⁰ Nabokov, p.309.

7. Freedom and Desire in Modern Reinterpretations of *Lolita*

Nabokov's *Lolita* has been reconstructed, reinterpreted, and adapted to the realities of today by so many authors and film directors that some critics compare her to a folkloric heroine that acts as a social and cultural barometer for a global audience, revealing generational traumata and indicating sexual mores and values. In every decade, *Lolita* reflected something different: sexual innocence was replaced by erotic transgression, and feminist eroticism gave way to an accusatory tone of the #MeToo generation. One of the most scandalous and unsuccessful adaptations of Nabokov's *Lolita* is a drama by Edward Albee, written and performed in 1981. It was regarded by numerous critics as unconvincing, lacking both the book's sense of humor and of tragedy, and became a famous Broadway flop. James Lardner harshly criticizes Albee's *Lolita* in *The Washington Post*, sarcastically remarking:

"As it further turns out, the institution of sex is one of the minor victims of this production's battery of offenses to life and art – a fast hit-and-run on the road to the real bloodbath. The casualty list should probably begin with the memory of Vladimir Nabokov and the related memory of *Lolita*."⁶²¹

Similarly, other critics also noted Albee's troubling treatment of sex and sexuality in his adaptation. In *Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Edward Albee's Plays*, Clump and O'Brian remark that Albee's plays rather function as dark comedies, "in which manners and mores are more important than sexual desire."⁶²² They cite Linda Benn de Libero, who states that in the '60s, sex was either freedom or enslavement, whereas modern society offers "greater freedom for deviation from gender binary and from gender roles."⁶²³ According to Emily Prager, the most significant *Lolita*'s reinterpretations told from the feminine point of view appeared in the late '90s, as attempts "to emancipate her story from Humbert's omniscient narrative."⁶²⁴ The latter half of the 1990s has often been rebranded as the era of "girl power," there was an expansion of LGBT activism and sex-positive rhetoric.

Durham scrutinizes the millennial popularity of the nymphet, looking at the entire

⁶²¹ *The Washington Post*, 20.03.1981, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1981/03/20

⁶²² Clum; O'Brian, p.2.

⁶²³ Clum; O'Brian, p. 111.

⁶²⁴ Prager, p. 2.

entertainment industry dedicated to the eroticization of youth. She blames the continual cultural confusion about girls' sexuality in the US on the media, claiming: "As a culture we seek to deny and suppress it, while exploiting it in the crassest ways. But in fact, like Nabokov's *Lolita*, [...] children are not really capable of handling sexual activity, emotionally or psychologically or even physically." In her article "Romantic Children, Brazen Girls? An Exploration of the Girl-Childish Representation in and around Nabokov's *Lolita* and Three Derivative Novels," Sandra Visser argues that the existence of the derivative novels "point to the emergence of a new form of feminist resistance to the oppressive representations" of girls in the modern Western world governed by an 'innocent-or-corrupt' dichotomy.⁶²⁵

In *Lolita in the Afterlife: On Beauty, Risk, and Reckoning with the Most Indelible and Shocking Novel of the Twentieth Century* (2021), thirty authors offer a contemporary perspective on Nabokov's *Lolita*, examining it from a range of angles. The featured essays are multifaceted and intense. Several female essay writers recollect their first reading of *Lolita* while in their early teens, apologetically reflecting on their former identification with Dolly, and comparing their innocent perception with their mature attitude. Some critics claim that it is the first book that reassesses the legacy of this contradictory and provoking novel that continues generating strong feelings and strong opinions. Curiously, the editor of this book, Jenny Minton Quigley, is the daughter of Walter J. Minton, who published *Lolita* at G. P. Putnam's Sons in 1958.

The derivational novels analyzed in this research can be viewed as female confessions. In "Confessional Writing beyond National Boundaries" Heather Blaha states that there are two kinds of the feminist narrative of self-discovery: the first depicts "a process of moving outward into the public realm of society;" whereas the second one describes self-discovery "as an awakening to an inner self."⁶²⁶ The

⁶²⁵ Visser, p.3.

⁶²⁶ Blaha, p.40.

following reinterpretations of Nabokov's *Lolita* combine these two kinds of narratives, although the focus resides on the female protagonist's inner development and growth. I would like to underline the significance of the transparent link between these later works and Nabokov's *Lolita* by referring to *Writing as Re-vision* by Adrienne Rich, who asserts:

"We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival."⁶²⁷

The modern reinterpretations of *Lolita* originate in a desire to understand the past, in order to break up with it, moving forward. Hélène Cixous advocates enhancing a female voice and perspective in literature, asserting: "Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" to create a new language of her own, outside of the male-dominated language of society that entraps her mind and body.⁶²⁸ By verbalizing her experience, she can subvert male authority and achieve her own autonomy.

⁶²⁷ Blaha, p.40.

⁶²⁸ Cixous, p.242.

7.1. *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras

Marguerite Duras was called “a towering figure of the late twentieth-century French feminist literature who was justly glorified as the grand dame of *écriture féminine*” by Ehsai Azari Stanizai in “Duras and the Poetics of Writing Feminine Desire in *The Lover*.” The autobiographical novel tells the story of a 15-year-old nameless French girl that becomes a lover of a 27-year-old wealthy Chinese man. Almost all characters of *The Lover* remain unnamed, which suggests anonymity on the one hand, and symbolic universality on the other hand. The action takes place in French Indochina in 1929. Similar to *Lolita*, *The Lover* (1984) was labeled illicit and scandalous but still had great success all over the world, had won Prix Goncourt and Ritz Hemingway Award; and has been translated into 43 languages. Stanizai asserts that this novel has built “a solid foundation for the much sought-after truth of feminine desire in all its complexities and minutiae.” There is no explicit indication of Nabokov’s influence on Duras’s work, although *The Lover* has been dubbed as anti-*Lolita* by some critics. Still, there are some fascinating parallels and contrasts between these two novels that I would like to highlight.

“Is it a confession?” asks Laure Adler in her biographical work *Marguerite Duras: A Life*, “or is it the outline of a novel?” The story is recorded as a diary, it is fragmented and patchy. The word “confession” correlates with Nabokov’s *Confessions of a White Widowed Male*, for Duras’s novel could have been called *The Confessions of a White Divorced Female*. In both novels, intimate and hidden details of one’s private life are revealed, functioning as a mirror for self-reflection. A confession is written in the first person and displays emotionally charged situations, following the formula “sin-suffer-repent,” which is almost entirely true both for *Lolita* and *The Lover*. One can assume that a traumatic tale of child-prostitution is transformed in a love story in an attempt to embellish the past, representing an act of wish-fulfillment. Adler believes that this transformation represents a self-therapeutic act of revenge on reality: “Expanded and romanticized, the story rang so true, was so moving and apparently authentic, that the episode with the lover became

a part of her life that was never challenged.” She claims that Duras as an artist decided to give herself a love story she felt she deserved, but never experienced. I would like to explore the common denominators between the Lolita myth and the Lover myth.

Duras’s story is told retrospectively, as a remote memory of an old woman in her 60s with a “ravaged” face, “a face laid waste,” who is looking back at a significant episode of her coming-of-age, trying to re-evaluate its emotional consequences on her adult life. Undeniably, this story had a great impact on all her life ever since: “All her life, in one form or another, Marguerite never stopped telling the story of the lover,” writes Adler. This wrecked, devastated face is opposed to the girl’s former radiant and innocent young face: “At the age of fifteen I had the face of pleasure, and yet I had no knowledge of pleasure.” This statement correlates with Durham’s thesis that many young girls coming of age project a certain image without fully comprehending the effect it has on men, still being unaware of male and female sexual drives. The story serves as an explanation of a sudden and dramatic change of the girl’s appearance, revealing “hidden stretches” of her youth, “of certain facts, feelings, events” that she “buried.” The word “buried” evokes a sensation of sorrow and grief, whereas the word “hidden” implies the feelings of shame and secrecy. We are introduced to the story through a gaze of other – an unknown man approaches the grown-up girl in a public place and remarks:

“I’ve known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you’re more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged.”

This remark gives the reader an impression that the girl was observed and judged by many people, whom she seems not to remember. This man’s open inspection and assessment of her appearance are intrusive and chauvinist, which reflects the society the girl grew up in. The alleged compliment implies a simplistic dual scale: a woman can be seen either as beautiful or ugly, whereas her inner worth is not taken into account. Thus the reader feels a censuring and pedantic gaze that still signals a hidden desire.

Although there is a unity of identity in the novel, the perspective deviates from the narrative norm, occasionally switching from the first to the third person, which challenges the unity, creating a sensation of a split personality. The girl's self-image is discontinuous and unstable. She seems to depend on the gaze of others, experiencing difficulty to find and feel her true self. On the one hand, this duality may signify the gap between the present and the past. On the other hand, the use of the pronoun "elle" ("she") may indicate a trauma-related dissociation that offers a mental escape from a distressing situation.

The girl's coming of age is metaphorically represented by her journey across the river Mekong on a ferry. Crossing the river, she is situated between childhood and adulthood. According to Richard Gray, this crossing symbolizes "not only her imminent initiation into adulthood in the physical sense, but also the instant during which she becomes aware of the changes occurring in her life." He states further that the natural picturesqueness and power of the Mekong implies that the girl recognizes the beauty and danger of the approaching sexual and psychological transformation. The ferocious "terrible current" of the river forewarns the reader of the tumultuous relationship between the girl and the Chinese man: "The current is so strong it could carry everything away - rocks, a cathedral, a city. There's a storm blowing inside the water. A wind raging." On one hand, the girl feels too old for childish activities, thinking:

"We're too old now, we don't go bathing in the river any more, we don't go hunting black panther in the marshes in estuary any more, or into the forest, or into the villages in the pepper plantations. Everything has grown up all around us. There are no more children, either on buffaloes or anywhere else. We too have become strange..."

On the other hand, she senses that there is a lot of abstruse and unvoiced information shared by adults, still unavailable for her understanding: "I already know a thing or two. I know it's not clothes that make women beautiful or otherwise, nor beauty care, nor expensive creams, nor the distinction or costliness of their finery. I know the problem lies elsewhere. I don't know where." Later on, the girl realizes that a woman does not have to attract desire, using external means; she maintains: "Either

it [desire] was in the woman who aroused it or it didn't exist." That is, she claims that a woman that does not experience desire cannot arouse it, which is clearly not the case in Nabokov's *Lolita*. But does Duras's protagonist actually experiences sexual desire at the age of fifteen, or is it her way of denying being a mere object of male desire? The girl becomes early aware of the male gaze following her, narrating: "For the past three years, white men, too, have been looking at me in the streets, and my mother's men friends have been kindly asking me to have tea with them while their wives are out playing tennis." In her essay "The Ambivalence of Colonial Desire in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*," Karen Ruddy asserts that by assuming an active position, the girl refuses to be a victim of this objectifying gaze, therefore constituting herself as "a desiring subject." Diane Johnson professes that the girl represents "a treasured object" whereas the Oriental lover is exotic and forbidden, "the more attractive for being forbidden." It makes their affair emblematic of sin and rebellion. However, if we have a look at the description of her first sexual encounter with the rich Chinese man, we would not find a sought-after desire. The girl refers to herself in the third person, recounting: "She doesn't feel anything in particular, no hate, no repugnance either, so probably it's already desire." Nevertheless, the absence of hate does not signify love, whereas the absence of repugnance does not necessarily mean desire.

In Nabokov's *Lolita*, water also symbolizes a transition into adulthood. In camp Q, Dolly crosses the lake with another girl, Barbara Burke, in her special canoe to get to Willow Island. For a modern reader, Willow Island is associated with a disaster, because of the deadliest construction accident in U.S. history that happened there in 1978. However, the novel was published 23 years before the accident, so that Nabokov might have had in mind the traditional connotation of the word "willow" – namely, a symbol of a new life. In a detailed description of nature, at first glance, there is a contrast between the innocent wilderness and the sexual activities of the children performed there:

"...every morning, oh my reader, the three children would take a short cut through the beautiful innocent forest brimming with all the emblems of youth, dew, birdsongs, and at one point, among the

luxuriant undergrowth, Lo would be left as sentinel, while Barbara and the boy copulated behind a bush.”

Nevertheless, due to the pastoral description of rural happiness, the copulation process seems careless and innocent. Very soon, Dolly starts taking an active role in these activities, though not owing to a sexual desire but since “curiosity and camaraderie prevailed.” Lake Climax offers them “a fascinating collection of contraceptives,” making the copulation process seem even more natural (whereas in the Russian version Nabokov uses a more ambivalent expression “прозрачные чехольчики” meaning “little transparent casings.”) Dolly’s partner is described as “silent, coarse and surly but indefatigable Charlie, who had as much sex appeal as a raw carrot,” which makes the sexual activity seem soulless and mechanical. Furthermore, Humbert’s erotic fantasies at *The Enchanted Hunters* also include a lake:

“There would have been a lake. [...] There would have been all kinds of camp activities on the part of the intermediate group, Canoeing, Coranting, Combing Curls in the lakeside sun. [...] 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.”

Such a poetic description of a climax could seem arcadian and aesthetically appealing if one overlooks the dominant red color that correlates with Dolly’s painful bleeding after her first night with Humbert in this hotel. In addition, there is another episode in the novel involving the images of water and blood, namely the scene during the night before Humbert collects Dolly from Camp Q. It is raining hard, and Humbert is staring at the rain, “at the inundated sidewalk, at a hydrant: a hideous thing, really, painted a thick silver and red, extending the red stumps of its arms to be varnished by the rain which like stylized blood dripped upon its argent chains.” Rain indicates a disaster coming ahead, whereas a hydrant that can be viewed as a phallic symbol is called a “nightmare cripple.” Two colors – red and silver – may symbolize Dolly’s suffering and the coins she receives for the fulfilling of “her basic obligations” plus “a whole collection of assorted caresses.” The water flowing down the hydrant looks like blood, which forecasts the painful experience of the first sexual encounter in *The Enchanted Hunters*.

Humbert's narcissism is pointed out by many critics, for instance, by Couturier in his article "Narcissism and Demand in *Lolita*," in which he presents a Lacanian reading of the novel, claiming that Humbert is incapable of loving anybody but himself. His aesthetic pleasure is utterly self-contained and created by his flight of imagination. He is in love with his body image and believes that any woman is bound to fall in love with him. Coming back to *The Lover*, Stanizai points out the protagonist's own "narcissistic love with her own body image." At first glance, this might seem true. The girl is wearing a bright sleeveless dress with a very low neck, made of real silk and almost transparent, a pair of gold lamé high heels "decorated with little diamanté flowers, but what makes her look extraordinary is her wearing of her brother's leather belt and a man's hat, which grants her "the crucial ambiguity of the image." Ruddy maintains that the girl intentionally transgresses appropriate gender roles. In addition, she presumes that by wearing inappropriate clothes that make the girl look like a "child prostitute," she "controls the gaze of the male other," assuming the usually male role of the subject of desire. However, I would rather support Durham's standpoint, who analyzes the power relationship between the female body and the male attention it attracts, stating that the girls are made to believe that attracting the male gaze is a demonstration of female power that "elevates them in the sexual hierarchy."

Moreover, Durham harshly criticizes the modern tendency that encourages girls to reveal their physical assets as "a form of self-expression that rejects old-fashioned prudery." Finally, I would disagree with Stanizai's statement that the girl is in love with her body image. The protagonist rather seems to be extremely self-conscious and insecure, talking about bargains and final reductions bought for her by her mother, confessing that she feels "so strangely, so weirdly dressed." She wears her mother's powder and the silk dress was her mother's once, too: "One day she decided the color was too bright for her and she gave it to me." Moreover, she feels inferior comparing her "thin awkward shape, the inadequacy of childhood," her "undersized" body and "childish breasts" to the sublime body of her friend H el ene Lagonelle with extraordinary round breasts: "She's much more beautiful than I am,

the girl in the clown's hat and lame shoes..." The girl's erotic relationship with H el ene bears some resemblance to Dolly's romance with her tent-mate Elizabeth Talbot, who "instructed her in various manipulations." However, we don't know much about their emotional bond, because the narration is filtered by Humbert, who is much more interested in piquant details.

Duras's protagonist has a troubled relationship with her mother, who has bouts of violence and madness. The girl recounts:

"My mother has attacks during which she falls on me, locks me up in my room, punches me, slaps me, undresses me, comes up to me and smells my body, my underwear, says she can smell the Chinese's scent, goes even further, looks for suspect stains on my underwear, and shouts, for the whole town to hear, that her daughter's a prostitute, she's going to throw her out, she wishes she'd die, no one will have anything to do with her, she's disgraced, worse than a bitch."

This extremely long sentence reflects the ongoing interminable and terrifying interrogation that makes the girl feel like a caught criminal in a third-world prison. Moreover, the mother makes sure that the defamation is heard by the neighbors, making the girl believe that the whole town knows her shameful secret. Similar to *Lolita*, there are typologically similar traits and stylistic devices often used in the portrayal of a fallen woman. Both Dolly and Duras's protagonist deviate from the norm of respectable femininity, being penalized for being aberrant from social and moral conventions. As in Nabokov's *Lolita*, the girl's father is absent, and a confidential conversation with the mother is impossible till she passes away. However, long before the mother dies, the girl misses her support and a loving gaze that could have helped her to develop a self-reflective identity. The loving gaze of the lover fills the girl's attention and power buckets, giving her a transient sense of security and self-worth, which she confuses with desire.

The death of the girl's mother in *The Lover* is interpreted by Kristeva as a crucial juncture in the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship. Kristeva asserts that after mother's death, the daughter is bound to occupy her mother's position and her madness in the novel: "she continues her through the negative hallucination of an always faithfully loving identification." The family's poverty makes its members more proximate to the locals, but the girl's mother continually attempts to secure its

racial supremacy, trying to realign the family with the white community in Indochina by strictly following the conventions of European colonial households. Similarly, Lolita's mother does everything to attain and keep a higher position in society, trying in vain to become friends with respectable inhabitants of Ramsdale:

“Charlotte in the course of twenty month or so had managed to become if not a prominent, at least an acceptable citizen. [...] She knew slightly the jovial dentist who lived in a kind of ramshackle wooden chateau behind our lawn. She had met at a church tea the `snooty` wife of the local junk dealer who owned the `colonial` white horror at the corner of the avenue. Now and then she `visited with` old Miss Opposite; but the more patrician matrons among those she called upon, or met at lawn functions, or had telephone chats with [...] seldom seemed to call on my neglected Charlotte.”

Both the rundown chateau and the ugly colonial house reflect the mediocre and ridiculous imitation of European bourgeois life. Moreover, we can draw another parallel between Duras's protagonist and Dolly, who occupies her mother's place next to Humbert after the fatal car accident. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow maintains that “women often continue to experience a desire for intense affective nurturance” as a result of an unresolved separation from their mothers, which makes it difficult for the daughters to establish their autonomy and independence. On the other hand, men tend to separate more completely from their mothers by suppressing their own emotionality, which makes them unable to fulfill all of the women's emotional needs. Moreover, society encourages men to be aggressive and self-sufficient, which makes literary romantic heroes who tenderly care for their beloved, combining exceptionally masculine and nurturing traits, highly desirable by female readers. The Chinese lover treats Duras's protagonist significantly kinder than her mother, being overemotional: “He moans, weeps. In dreadful love. And, weeping, he makes love.”

Stanizai claims that a great deal of Duras's art is related by her depiction of the perplexity of feminine desire to Lacan's theories that “ground feminine desire in the original trauma of a permanent loss and lack.” In accordance with Lacanian theory, Duras's protagonist views herself as an object of desire, consciously performing a conventional female gender role. Lacan states that feminine desire is intrinsically ambiguous and opaque due to its polymorphous structure, which is why it has often been reflected in literature in terms of hysteria, bisexuality, perversity, or frigidity.

Analogously to Dolly, Duras's protagonist cannot experience a long-lasting pleasure: she experiences emotional outburst, whereas the pleasure-seeking drive in her is punctuated with intermittent bouts of either indifference or agony. In her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Julia Kristeva claims that the suffering is her sex, the high point of her eroticism: "Such suffering expresses an impossible pleasure; it is the heartrending sign of frigidity. Holding back a passion that could not flow, suffering is nevertheless and more profoundly so the prison where mourning is locked in." Stanizai concludes that a *jouissance* in *The Lover* necessitates "a slide into suffering, pain, horror, and death which all represent a masochistic position that constitutes femininity concerning lack and desire." There is an additional ambivalence that arises in consequence of the girl's simultaneous attraction to her lover and her own disavowal of her desire, because this relationship was generally seen as perverse – not due to the age difference, but based on the racial boundary between them. Thereby disdain inevitably accompanies desire, as is the case in *Lolita*, with Humbert being appalled at Dolly's behavior and all at once delighted by her body.

The unleashing of the girl's dormant sexuality is examined by Julia Waters in *Duras and Indochina: Postcolonial Perspectives*. She asserts that *Cholon* represents a liberating site of "feminist-inflected exploration of the nature of freely-expressed female desire." She remarks that the sexual relationship between the girl and her older lover at first glance seems to conform to traditional, Freudian, gendered constructions of female passivity and male activity. Although the girl is passively indifferent to her lover, she is fascinated and proud of his intense desire for her. The reader should keep in mind, though, that a large part of Duras's confession seems to be fictionalized, especially her depiction of female desire. In "Wartime Writings, or the Imaginary Lover of Marguerite Duras," Bethany Ladimer sheds light on some significant aspects of the novel which seem carefully fabricated rather than real, based on Duras's notebook (the "Cahier rose marbré.") Her lover Léo is not Chinese, but a native Vietnamese, meaning having even lower social position. Duras describes him as much uglier than an average Vietnamese, badly scarred by smallpox. As she

allows Léo to kiss her in his car, she is not moved by his or her desire but feels immediately repulsed, disgusted, in a way that “truly cannot be described.”

Comparably to *Lolita*, Duras’s protagonist experiences a fundamental emptiness and boredom, sensing that her desires cannot be satisfied as the gaps of her inner self cannot be filled. This fundamental emptiness, according to Kristeva, denotes the splitting of the being between a feminine subject and her lover. Stanizai points out that in Duras’s fiction, desire always finds itself in the text in the relentless fragmentation of language, which signifies the subversion of the subject and the split of being. Another common ground shared between *Lolita* and *The Lover* is the aestheticizing of a violent and painful experience. Ruddy asserts that “one of the pleasures of loving the Chinese man is to write him down, and thus to make his aestheticized and eroticized body the object of the reader’s gaze as well.”

Coming back to the term “desiring machine” mentioned earlier, Ruddy proposes to theorize colonialism as the social production of desire, following Gilles Deleuze’s theory of capitalism as “desiring machine”: it can be understood as “a signifying system without author that encodes, traps, and inscribes the flows of desire on the surface of foreign lands, deterritorializing old institutions for controlling desire and reterritorializing new structures of repression.” This theory correlates with a widespread interpretation of Nabokov’s *Lolita* that views Humbert as an oppressive European colonizer of an innocent American girl. For instance, Jason Lee calls Humbert “the old, debauched European corrupting the young American, raping the virgin land, conquering and colonizing.” In other words, *Lolita* embodies a “garden” to be invaded by Humbert’s “machine,” if we apply the terms introduced by Leo Marx in his book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964). Paolo Simonetti explores this analogy, arguing that the American Declaration of Independence can be considered as a child’s rebellion against an oppressive parent. In her notebooks, instead of “desiring machine,” Duras compares her revelation during her first sexual experience as a “lucidity machine,” stating:

“It was as if a machine to manufacture lucidity had suddenly started up inside me ... I was setting out in life with the misshapen creature that was Léo and there was no escape for me ... I no longer recognized [my mouth], I was suffering its violation, its pollution, just as I was suffering what I thought was life: my life.”

Curiously, she compares this illumination mixed with disgust to an epiphany offered by Rimbaud or Dostoevsky in their works. Obviously, this description is the opposite of the portrayal of feminine desire featured in *The Lover*.

The lover's attachment is obsessive; however the girl's narration shows no romantic pretense. In her article “First Love and Lasting Sorrow,” Diane Johnson calls Duras's language “both lurid and flat,” admiring “blanks and silences of her minimalist sentences.” She describes Duras's female protagonist as “a dreamlike slave of love, sexual almost against her will, driven by desire, but also passive.” Some critics claim that this is an erotic novel, stating that the main reason of the girl's maintaining the relationship is her family's financial necessity. However, I would assert that all the tears and suffering make this novel rather seem sentimental and melancholic in the first place. All in all, the pain outweighs the pleasure. As for the financial motivation, the girl's lover accuses her of seeing him just because he is rich. The girl responds: “I say that's how I desire him, with his money, that when I first saw him he was already in his car, in his money, so I can't say what I'd have done if he'd been different.” Their affair offers her a refuge from an abusive atmosphere at home, providing relief from loneliness and social isolation. Being rootless, the girls find a similarly rootless person, with whom she can spend some time beyond the oppressive societal norms and standards. Johnson highlights Duras's solemn tone, which has no trace of irony or sarcasm typical of Nabokov, and claims that the change of tone or perspective would give us another *Lolita*.

The girl's lover regularly takes her family out to dinner at fancy restaurants, paying the expensive bills, but it's always an embarrassing and excruciating transaction. The girl's family never addresses him, resenting the fact that they have to depend on a Chinese man for food, but still not being proud enough to refuse:

“These evenings are all the same. My brothers gorge themselves without saying a word to him. They don't look at him either. [...] He, the first couple of times, plunges in and tries to tell the story of his adventures in Paris, but in vain. It's as if he hadn't spoken, as if nobody had heard. His attempt

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founders in silence. My brothers go on gorging. They gorge as I've never seen anyone else gorge, anywhere."

This experience is so painful for the girl that she starts dissociating, keeping an absent-minded expression of someone who stares into space.

Liberation is one of the central themes in *The Lover*. The girl values, uses, and sometimes abuses her freedom, missing lessons and staying away at night from her boarding school. Her mother also perceives her freedom as an inner quality that cannot be changed, saying in a conversation with the head of the boarding school: "She's a child who's always been free, otherwise she'd run away, even I, her own mother, can't do anything about it, if I want to keep her I have to let her be free." The girl's wish to become a writer when she grows up symbolizes her desire to be free, active and independent, for writing is often claimed to shape one's reality, make sense of the world, finding one's perspective and affirming the relevance of one's existence. However, Duras's mature protagonist seems to be disenchanted and disheartened by writing, professing:

"I started to write in surroundings that drove me to reticence. Writing, for those people, was still something moral. Nowadays it often seems writing is nothing at all. Sometimes I realize that if writing isn't, all things, all contraries confounded, a quest for vanity and void, it's nothing. That if it's not, each time, all things confounded into one through some inexpressible essence, then writing is nothing but advertisement."

Duras's philosophical standpoint reflects existentialism that flourished in Europe in the middle of the twentieth century. The major writers and philosophers, such as Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Martin Heidegger state that humans exist in a meaningless universe in which they had no purpose at all. Their works describe absurd situations in which their protagonists are thrown by an unknown force, which results in mental pain and suffering. Contrary to the writers of the twenty-first century presented in the following chapters, who believe in a massive global change due to their writing, Duras stays pessimistic and humble.

Although there is an undeniable power imbalance between the lovers, the girl is not a manipulated hostage, as was the case in *Lolita*. Yet Ruddy believes that the girl's

escape does not offer her true liberation, stating: “Her quest for liberation ultimately fails because it is dependent upon the continued oppression of others, rather than their liberation.” Already at the beginning of the novel the reader perceives a woman haunted by her past and suffering from alcoholism:

“Drink accomplished what God did not. It also served to kill me; to kill. I acquired that drinker’s face before I drank. Drink only confirmed it. The space for it existed I me. [...] Just as the space existed for me for desire.”

Duras juxtaposes drink and desire, whereas desire acquires the destructive quality of the drink. Alcohol is presented as a fatal force, serving as a coping strategy for past trauma. A famous aphorism by an American comedian and writer W.C. Fields immediately comes to mind, calling reality an illusion that occurs due to the lack of alcohol. Drinking is a fruitless attempt to escape painful reality, a futile quest for freedom.

After all, Duras’s female protagonist desperately wants to believe that it was a special love story. She imagines her Chinese lover being unable to desire his wife:

“It must have been a long time before he was able to be with her, to give her the heir to their fortunes. The memory of the little white girl must have been there, lying there, the body, across the bed. For a long time she must have remained the queen of his desire, his personal link with emotion, with the immensity of tenderness, the dark and terrible depth of flesh.”

She is not in touch with the current reality of her former lover, creating an imagined version of what he might feel towards her. Moreover, Duras’s protagonist fantasizes that her latter lover is finally able to desire his wife only because he thinks of her, speculating:

“Then the day must have come when it was possible. The day when desire for the little white girl was so strong, so unbearable that he could find her whole image again as in a great and raging fever, and penetrate the other woman with his desire for her, the white child.”

Thus she assumes having forever retained a unique position in his life, describing a fantasy bond between them. This fantasy bond is similar to the magic connection with Annabel Leigh as depicted by Humbert. A fantasy bond often mimics a dysfunctional relationship experienced in childhood. According to *The Fantasy Bond: Effects of Psychological Defenses on Interpersonal Relations* by Robert Firestone, it is a primitive defense mechanism developed in early childhood as a way

of maintaining an illusion of safety when experiencing unbearable emotional pain in a dysfunctional relationship with primary caregivers. Fantasy helps reduce the feeling of distress, giving one an illusion of supernatural connectedness, or even immortality, which later could be helpful while coping with existential fears. Such passages make the reader question the reliability of Duras's protagonist so that one legitimately questions the gratifying and sentimental climax of the novel. Years later, the Chinese lover comes to Paris and phones the girl to confirm their special bond: "And then he told her. Told her that it was as before, that he still loved her, he could never stop loving her, that he'd love her until death."

7.2. *Lo's Diary* by Pia Pera

One of the most scandalous and controversial reinterpretations of Nabokov's *Lolita* is *Lo's Diary* by Pia Pera (1995), in which the original story is narrated from Dolly's perspective. The novel was originally written in Italian and then translated into Finnish, Dutch, and finally, English (1999), which led to a legal dispute with Vladimir Nabokov's son Dmitry, who was dismayed that Pera and her Italian publisher declined to seek his permission and refused to acknowledge that *Lo's Diary* is a derivative work. Dmitry Nabokov categorically announces in his preface to the novel that "time came to put a stop to it."⁶²⁹ Moreover, he openly declared through his lawyer, Peter Skolnik, that he considers Pera's novel a terrible book, vulgar and badly done. In *The Aesthetics and The Ethics of Copying*, Darren Hudson Hick calls this preface "rather mean-spirited."⁶³⁰

The story is narrated from the perspective of Dolores Schlegel, formerly Maze. That is, Schiller is transformed into Schlegel, and Haze into Maze. Pera seems to rename the characters and places without paying attention to Nabokov's symbolism. Ramsdale becomes Goatscreek, whereas Clare Quilty suffers most, becoming Gerry Sue Filthy. Unlike Nabokov's, Pera's *Lolita* does not die in childbirth. In her essay "Unfair Use: Parody, Plagiarism, and Other Suspicious Practices in and around *Lolita*," Julia Vaingurt explores how parody deconstructs and reevaluates both the aesthetic value of the original and the very concept of aesthetic value. Vaingurt considers the very fact of *Lo's* survival to be Pera's most significant blow against Humbert's project of resurrection through creative memory. The fact that *Lo's* own story is published during her lifetime suggests that Nabokov "needed to kill off the heroine first so that it can later accomplish her aesthetic resurrection."⁶³¹ In the very beginning of the novel, we meet an adult Dolores, happily married to Richard Schlegel, a deaf young man "with raven-black hair," accompanied by a five-year old boy "with thoughtful gray

⁶²⁹ Pera, p. ix.

⁶³⁰ Hick, p.155.

⁶³¹ Vaingurt, pp.13-14.

eyes and long chestnut curls.”⁶³² In addition, Dolores is pregnant with a second child. In the foreword, we are told that Dolores decides to confront Dr. John Ray, a publisher at the Olympia Press, where Vladimir Nabokov had initially published the first edition of *Lolita*, offering her own vision of the events in the form of a diary she kept at the time:

“She crossed her legs, which glistened with a golden down: ‘But don’t worry, what you published was a completely made-up story – not to take anything away from the author. Or maybe that was the way he saw it. [...] Apart from my death and some other nonsense... Maybe you’d take a look at my own impressions of that time. They’re definitely less literary.’”⁶³³

As the publisher asks her, why she considers the scribbles of a twelve-year-old publishable, Dolores replies that he, as a publisher, should decide what is relevant and worthwhile. This statement signals the reader that the story he is about to read will contain plausible and significant information only. On the other hand, her female confession is once again filtered through a male gaze.

Humbert Humbert is called Professor Humbert Guilbert, which hints at his French origin and strips him from the original duality. Dolores claims that as soon as she left him, her “dear old dad” abandoned himself to his fantasies, whereas John Ray admits that he suspected that the hunt for Quilty and his murder were a work of fantasy.⁶³⁴ Already in the foreword Dolores complains to Dr. Ray that the check Humbert gave her when she was in trouble, was worthless, which makes the reader question his repentance as he made amends for the painful past.

Humbert is free and alive, and desperately wants to read the diary when John Ray tells him about it the same evening in a Vietnamese restaurant. As the diary, containing numerous single scraps of paper, falls down, scattering all over the floor, Ray and Humbert experience difficulties, reconstructing the original order, for firstly, “Mrs. Schlegel had not bothered to number the pages,” and secondly, there were gaps, “because the irresponsible girl went from the most passionate hatred to the most dreamy-eyed love for no plausible reason, so that most of the time her outbursts seemed groundless.”⁶³⁵ In

⁶³² Pera, p.1.

⁶³³ Pera, p.1.

⁶³⁴ Pera,p.2.

⁶³⁵ Pera, p.6.

other words, the publisher is not able to understand the reasons behind Dolly's emotions, as it was the case with Humbert, who openly confesses that he "never had the slightest idea what was going on in his young friend's mind," showing no interest in a reconstruction of the past events.⁶³⁶ Another female editor, Mme Houdenot, reluctantly admits that the text might make a different impression on a female mind, thus implying that a female reader would rather be able to comprehend Dolly's emotions, identifying with her. It could be an ironic remark aimed at the critics who claimed that Nabokov's *Lolita* was primarily designed for a male reader. Moreover, this statement reinforces the common stereotype that men, being born rational, can neither be emotional nor comprehend women's emotions.

John Ray remarks that he had to cut and correct the original text, explaining: "for the reader's comfort, it seemed to me necessary to furnish the text with an introduction, rational punctuation, and some division, however arbitrary, into chapters."⁶³⁷ Thus he insinuates that the text is not only childish, but also poorly written regarding language and structure. The only reason he decides to publish it is the sense of guilt as he recalls the foreword composed for Humbert's memoirs:

"Surely there was a sense of irony and condescension in the tone I had used as the author of the foreword to the misdeeds of M. Guibert, and yet that moral parody had the effect of making me uneasy about rejecting the memoirs of Dolores Schlegel née Maze (not Haze)."⁶³⁸

Finally, John Ray tells the reader that Humbert Guibert has retired to a peaceful town on the Riviera, not far from the Hotel Mirana mentioned by Nabokov in the original text.⁶³⁹ He is happily married to Annabel, the mulatto daughter of his cook. These details in the foreword shape the reader's anticipation of the following story that seems to be not tragic and life-changing at all, in contrast to the original, but a light-hearted portrayal of a minor incident in the protagonists' lives.

⁶³⁶ Pera, p.6.

⁶³⁷ Pera, p.7-8.

⁶³⁸ Pera, p.7.

⁶³⁹ Nabokov, p.12.

The story starts with a news report about the Bikini atomic bomb testing. Dolores is worried about the bomb's effect on fish, for the explosion could kill thousands of them, making the ocean turn yellow. Unlike a nonemotional mood of the foreword, such a dramatic and unexpected beginning creates a feeling of a sudden global disaster. I believe that an allusion to this disastrous experiment that destroyed many lives for decades could symbolize the teenage readiness to experiment, testing diverse boundaries, which could have dramatic consequences for their future. Dolly compares atomic energy with the genie in *The Thousand and One Nights*:

"he's shut up in a bottle, but just open it a crack and no one can stop him. So you have to pay attention, because afterward it's too late to be sorry – you have to think carefully beforehand what you want to ask the genie when he comes out, because afterward no one can shut him back up in the bottle. It's the same with the energy in atoms: every time you split one it's an opportunity lost forever."⁶⁴⁰

A destructive force and a fatal impact of a misguided desire make the reader anticipate a catastrophe. Incidentally, the story of Scheherazade is mentioned by Azar Nafisi, who assigns her students to read it before teaching *Lolita* in Tehran, stating that this story similarly deals with finding one's voice in the face of oppression. She asserts that the virgins are mostly ignored by the critics, because they have no voice in the story. However, she considers their silence to be significant. Scheherazade, by contrast, "breaks the cycle of violence by choosing to embrace different terms of engagement. She fashions her violence not through physical force, as does the king, but through imagination and reflection."⁶⁴¹ In *Lo's Diary*, Dolly uses her imagination and reflection to tell the reader her own story. However, her diary has two addressees: first and foremost, she has to keep an official travel log for Humbert to keep trace of everything she is learning from him; secondly, her intimate addressee is "Dolores Maze of the future."⁶⁴² Dolly keeps on writing to her future self, hiding from Humbert in the bathroom or when he is asleep, admitting: "That was how I unburdened myself with my only friend, who is you."⁶⁴³ This remark shows that writing has a therapeutic, liberating effect on Dolly, for writing about emotions may ease stress and trauma. Expressive writing, in which one explores one's innermost

⁶⁴⁰ Pera, pp.14-15.

⁶⁴¹ Nafisi, p.19.

⁶⁴² Pera, p.213.

⁶⁴³ Pera, p.213.

thoughts and feelings without inhibition, could help break free from the endless mental cycling and aid healing.

As in Nabokov's *Lolita*, Dolly's father and brother are dead, and her relationship with her mother is highly problematic. Charlotte is affectless and patronizing, whereas antipathy is mutual. Dolly complains:

"Mom keeps rummaging through my drawers. [...] She looks at me like she's going to hit me, then acts like it's nothing. [...] Mom ran behind me and shouted how dare I, and if I don't stop behaving like that (like what?) she'll send me to reform school, like the Lucknow's daughter. Pig."⁶⁴⁴

Feeling lonely and misunderstood, Pera's Lo starts a new hobby, namely collecting spiders, after her dad dies and soon has fifty of them: "In desperation I began to collect spiders. Here's how you capture them: you put a glass over the spider, then stick a postcard under it. After a while, the spider dies, and you keep it in a box."⁶⁴⁵ Spiders are natural predators of butterflies. Both images are eminent in Nabokov's *Lolita*, as mentioned above. Humbert compares himself to a spider carefully weaving a web for potential prey, a beautiful butterfly. In Pera's novel, there is a reversal of traditional roles: Lo takes an active position, enjoying trapping and collecting dead spiders, which may symbolize attracting and dumping numerous men.

In her diary, Lo gives full particulars of her first sexual experience with her friend Maude in a camp:

"I'd lie in my hammock and she'd caress me all over, she'd smooth my hair and then kiss me, just touching me with her lips and darting her tongue in the corners of my mouth, and do a lot of other things that made me tingle all over."⁶⁴⁶

Unlike Nabokov's original version, the boy Charlie is absent from the narrative, which makes Humbert Lo's first lover and a rapist, after all: "I confess, dear diary, that I gave her the first kiss of my life, which is O.K. since Maude is convinced she's a boy and told me, in strict secrecy, that her real name is Charlie."⁶⁴⁷ Maude is madly

⁶⁴⁴ Pera, pp.10-11.

⁶⁴⁵ Pera, p.13.

⁶⁴⁶ Pera, p.16.

⁶⁴⁷ Pera, p.16.

in love with Lo; however, the latter regards this affair as something purely physical, done out of teenage curiosity.

Pera provides a deeper insight into Lo's passion and desires, which remained undisclosed in Nabokov's novel. Furthermore, Pera's Lo exceedingly uses all her senses in everyday life. Lo confesses that she is extremely visually oriented, disclosing that she has chosen her best friend Mary Jo, because she is beautiful: "I liked her right away, because she's pretty and I love people who are good-looking. I can't stand ugly people – I don't care if they're the sweetest people in the world, if they're ugly I just am repelled."⁶⁴⁸ On the one hand, this statement can be considered evidence of her being shallow. On the other hand, if one takes into account the latest scientific research, which has shown that our brain rewards us for looking at pretty faces, generating the experience of pleasure, similarly when eating a tasty food, then we could find it just candid and plain-spoken. Dolly's desire to be beautiful is so strong that she runs out of the cinema in tears after she watches a film featuring "a fantastic actress with an endlessly long neck." It reflects her wish to be noticed and admired. Dolly complains: "It seemed terrible, unbearable, to think that I might never walk down a staircase and be looked at this way."⁶⁴⁹ As her mother makes fun of her feelings, Dolly is infuriated, thinking: "I will be a gorgeous woman someday, and then she can laugh as much as she likes, but she will never ever be one. I will be even more beautiful than my mother."⁶⁵⁰ The reader senses Dolly's resentment and anger, which result in competitiveness and desire to prove her worth.

Dolly's sense of smell is unusually developed, too. She recounts:

"Mom went to bed and I developed this passion for sniffing her feet. I remember as clearly as if it were now how I inhale deeply through my nose: my eyes are closed, and when I open them I'm astonished that Mom is still lying there on the bed, because I'm sure I've sucked her up inside me, along with her smell."⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁸ Pera, p.17.

⁶⁴⁹ Pera, p.24.

⁶⁵⁰ Pera, p.24.

⁶⁵¹ Pera, p.21.

Scientific research maintains that olfaction plays an important social and emotional role in our lives. Pheromones are used as a means of nonverbal communication, serving as identifiers, helping mothers and children recognize each other. It is a lifelong tie that cannot be broken. In “Towards Recognition: Writing and the Daughter-Mother Relationship,” Suzanne Juhasz asserts that mother-daughter relationships are often characterized by “the complex wave of need, expectation, desire, anxiety, idealization, disappointment, loss, hurt and joy.”⁶⁵² When daughters write about their mothers, writing becomes a method of negotiating and processing this relationship that serves as a model for all following love relationships. The desire for mother as a love object is part of her subjectivity, for the daughter-mother relationship serves as the source for developing gender and sexual identity. For example, Dolly is repulsed by her mother when she is awake but craves her proximity when she is asleep and cannot hurt her.

Humbert is introduced into the discourse in Chapter 8 (page 71), much later than Dolly’s appearance in Nabokov’s novel. This could mean a lesser significance of Humbert in Dolly’s life than vice versa. Still, Dolly is positively impressed by his looks, recounting:

“He’s not bad for a professor, he’s tan, broad shoulders. Must spend a lot of time outside. In fact he looks really nice, definitely a step above Mary Jo’s uncle. Wow, I say to myself, to catch this as Daddy No. 2 wouldn’t be something to sneeze at – already I can see us taking a walk in Goatscreek, my friends dying of envy because I’ve got the handsomest dad.”⁶⁵³

Thus Dolly is more concerned about the impression her hypothetical stepfather would make on her peers, regarding him as a trump in a competitive game, rather than being interested in him romantically or sexually. She immediately realizes that Humbert is taking a special interest in her, as he examines the garden:

“But it’s me he’s looking at, not the garden or the lilies, or the porch, just me. [...] He’s trying to decide what to do, obviously, but his eyes keep running over me. I give him a big inviting smile, because you shouldn’t take all hope away from a man, though you don’t have to pour it down his throat, either. [...] My lips are just slightly parted, because according to the how-to-catch-a-man book a woman should always appear half-open to a man.”⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁵² Juhasz, p.157.

⁶⁵³ Pera, p.73.

⁶⁵⁴ Pera, p.73.

In this way, Dolly is testing how the theoretical knowledge she has obtained from her mother's book would impact Humbert without fully comprehending that he could misinterpret the signals she is sending. After all, she confesses to her mother that by "acting like an imbecile," she is just trying to help her, making Humbert stay with them. Very soon, Dolly realizes that her original plan goes in a wrong direction, writing in her diary: "Things aren't going too well: he looks at me more than at Mom."⁶⁵⁵ However, after her mom violently beats Dolly, calling her "a little whore," "a disgrace," and "a monster," she decides to take revenge, brooding:

"You'll pay, believe me, because I know the book by heart, you old hen. You're just as old and cuckoo as Grandmother and you couldn't take advantage of my help and advice. [...] And now, I'm so sorry, dear Daddy who art in heaven, but I'm going to get this Humbert for myself. Let's face it, there was a certain age difference between you and Mom, and here it's more or less the same. Since I know how to seduce Humbert and Mom couldn't do it in a million years, why should I leave him to her?"⁶⁵⁶

The more time Dolly knows Humbert, the more she likes him, wondering whether he is in love with her and considering her behavior a legitimate defense.

Imitating Nabokov's original, Pera incorporates multiple allusions to fairytales into the narration. As Lo's mother is still alive and they are struggling over Humbert's affection, the daughter remarks: "I must be careful not to eat apples, a poisoned one can easily turn up in this type of situation. And I have to stay on my guard, because who knows what Mom might be plotting to get rid of her vile daughter with her vile blood."⁶⁵⁷ This is an obvious allusion to *Snow White*, where the Evil Queen attempts to kill her stepdaughter, which suggests that Dolly feels like a stepdaughter, instead of a biological daughter, missing warmth, support, and care. The repetition of the word "vile" intensifies the verdict that the daughter must be punished for not being "a good girl." The fact that Lo's "vileness" is located in her blood makes a positive transformation unobtainable. *Snow White* is about vanity, jealousy, and competition. Using an apple is the Queen's third and final attempt to get rid of Snow White. She poisons half of an apple, knowing that Snow White would be wary of accepting anything from a stranger. Therefore as Snow White refuses to taste the apple, the

⁶⁵⁵ Pera, p.76.

⁶⁵⁶ Pera, pp.77-78.

⁶⁵⁷ Pera, p.81.

Queen takes a bite from the unpoisoned half and then offers the rest to Snow White. Both in *Lolita* and *Lo's Diary*, Humbert plays a role of a half-poisoned apple, pretending to be unpoisoned till they come close on the road trip. As Dolly is previously watching his interaction with her mother, she is made to see his attractive and harmless side, thus daring to taste what her mother has already tasted.

In both novels, Humbert gives Dolly *The Little Mermaid* in a deluxe edition for her thirteenth birthday during their first road trip. In "Mermaids, Multiculturalism, and Misogyny in Nabokov's *Lolita*," Carlie Fischer analyzes Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale about a desire for love and an immortal soul, drawing parallels between the female protagonists of these two stories. She claims: "Comparing and contrasting Ariel's and Lolita's romantic relationships offers insights into both Humbert's and Nabokov's views on a woman's role in a heterosexual partnership."⁶⁵⁸ According to Fischer, both Lolita and Ariel are presented as archetypal temptresses that take a romantic interest in inappropriate partners – Ariel in a human and Lolita in her stepfather. Both Ariel and Lolita "endure silence, mutilation, and suffering for the man's sake," thereby forming "nearly perfect parables of masochism."⁶⁵⁹ They surrender their voices, having no viable alternative: the sea witch's potion is the only means by which Ariel become human, whereas sexual intercourse with Humbert grants Lolita a place to sleep, food, clothes, and some pocket money. Pera's Lo bitterly remarks that she has already read the story of the little mermaid, whereas the only thing she liked is the moral of the story: "Never save a man."⁶⁶⁰ This ironic remark suggests her mistrust in men, viewing them as dangerous and destructive, and reluctance to sacrifice herself for the sake of love.

Furthermore, Lo adds: "He should have given me *Bluebeard*, it would be more appropriate."⁶⁶¹ This cautionary tale is about obedience, transgression, and a false sense of freedom, which in all respects correlates with Lolita's story. In "Bluebeard

⁶⁵⁸ Fischer, p.82.

⁶⁵⁹ Golden in Fischer, p.85.

⁶⁶⁰ Pera, p.186.

⁶⁶¹ Pera, p.186.

and Its Multiple Layers of Meaning,” Denise Osborne cites a Lacanian interpretation of this tale offered by Philip Lewis. He states that the key offered to the wife by Bluebeard represents his male superiority, for he possesses the knowledge he is afraid to share, excluding his wife from it and marking the difference between them.⁶⁶² Additionally, by ordering her not to open the door, he exercises his power and control over her. All in all, *Bluebeard* is a complex fairy tale with various interpretations: a feminist approach considers it a tale of domestic violence; according to the Jungian viewpoint, Bluebeard is a predator of the psyche; in the Freudian interpretation, it would be about repressed thoughts and desires.

The passage where Dolly is trying to get rid of a speck in her eye is presented completely differently from her point of view. In the original, Humbert gently presses “his mouth to her fluttering eyelid,” whereas Dolly laughs, swiftly brushing past him out of the room.⁶⁶³ Nabokov’s description of the episode is concise and intense. Pera, in contrast, uses a whole page to describe Dolly’s thoughts on the incident, which she describes as follows:

“Humbert caresses my sharp shoulder blades, like an angel’s in the making, and then, muttering something about what he saw a Swiss peasant do, cow-with-calf type, he sticks his tongue in my eye, licks me lightly on the mouth, barely grazing it... a kiss on the edge of the lips ... and on his face there’s a sweet little smile, like a timid dirty old man.”⁶⁶⁴

Pera’s Lo neither laughs nor hurries anywhere. Instead, she tries to encourage Humbert, recalling the advice from her mother’s guidebook on how to conquer a man. First of all, “the golden rule, the most golden, the only really important one, is to give the man the illusion of making himself useful.”⁶⁶⁵ The reason Lo finally runs away is another piece of advice from the aforementioned book, namely never to make the man feel ridiculous. Lo’s follows the advice, trying to make Humbert believe that he is formidable and intimidating: “Better to escape and let him feel triumphant rather than laugh in his face, especially when you have him in front of

⁶⁶² Osborne, p.57.

⁶⁶³ Nabokov, p.44.

⁶⁶⁴ Pera, p.82.

⁶⁶⁵ Pera, p.82.

you with his tongue hanging out.”⁶⁶⁶ Pera’s Lo finds Humbert silly, but at the beginning of their affair, she constantly tries to make him feel brilliant compared to her, which is another advice from the guidebook: “I always pretend not to know anything: he is so pleased when he can explain, and it costs me so little to listen to him. Why not let him speak, let him feel important; it’s better for me to keep my daddy in a good mood.”⁶⁶⁷ However, Lo does not value the knowledge coming from him, perceiving his teaching as an attempt to “stick some burrs of knowledge” on her.⁶⁶⁸ The verb “to stick” is the same as in the episode with the tongue, which has a sexual connotation, as Humbert continually forces Dolly to have sexual intercourse with him. The image of burrs implies something rough and prickly that sticks or clings, which reflects the way she views the physical contact with him. What Humbert does to Dolly is called “mansplaining” in modern terms, which signifies a condescending and overconfident manner to explain something, based on the assumption that a man is likely to be more competent than a woman.

Pera’s interpretation of the famous scene with an apple also deviates from the original. Lo intentionally puts on red lipstick, meticulously planning “the attack”:

“I put on the lipstick *almost* carefully, I say almost, and not *completely*, because the guy’s eyes should be holed by uncertainty: was it put on well or badly? [...] So his thoughts go around and around until he forgets why he was curious in the first place and is simply lost in the contemplation of the mouth, the blinding-white teeth, the red tongue, darting between the teeth, redder than the lipstick, until, without meaning to, he gets closer and closer, and suddenly he’s stunned by the blood-hot breath, and doesn’t have the strength to pull back...”⁶⁶⁹

Although Pera’s Lo presents herself as a rapacious temptress, contrary to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, there is one striking similarity between the two depictions: each narrator launches an operation, assuming the innocence and ignorance of his or her counterpart, viewing himself or herself as a sly strategist. Pera’s Lo proceeds to explain her tactic:

⁶⁶⁶ Pera, p.82.

⁶⁶⁷ Pera, p.149.

⁶⁶⁸ Pera, p.149.

⁶⁶⁹ Pera, p.101.

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“But lipstick by itself isn’t enough: the attack has to come from multiple directions, otherwise the defense can concentrate on a single point. So a red apple, red plus red, two red spheres in perpetual motion. The principle of hypnosis.”⁶⁷⁰

Both Pera’s *Lo* and Nabokov’s Humbert anticipate an indignant defense, deploying a series of what they consider resourceful tricks to distract an alleged victim. The reference to hypnosis suggests *Lo*’s conviction that she has the power to influence and manipulate Humbert, feeling irresistible. In Pera’s version, the dress is briefly mentioned and hardly described, whereas in Nabokov’s version, this is the first thing Humbert notices, depicting it in the slightest detail:

“She wore that day a pretty print dress that I had seen on her once before, ample in the skirt, tight in the bodice, short-sleeved, pink, checkered with darker pink, and , to complete the color scheme, she had painted her lips and was holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple.”⁶⁷¹

Similar to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, we encounter the theme of desire as a golden leitmotif of *Lo’s Diary*. Pera’s *Lo* soon realizes that satisfying his sexual desires is Humbert’s supreme priority: “He needs to get excited just to feel he’s alive at all. He must be really dead to need so desperately to feel alive.”⁶⁷² Everything evolves around Humbert’s desire:

“With Humbert by my side it’s like I’m a great actress. He doesn’t have the slightest idea of what I feel. He feels desire, he satisfies the desire, he rests from the desire, the desire returns. Between one desire and the next he drives, he eats, he takes me from one point in the desert to the next one.”⁶⁷³

After having spent almost a year on the road with Humbert, *Lo* thirsts for a change, confessing: “In the morning a desire for movement seizes me. I *seem* to be going somewhere. [...] We seem to be moving, but really it’s always the same thing.”⁶⁷⁴ In fact, most of the time, she stays immobile in the passenger seat.

Lo objects to Humbert’s calling her “a consenting minor,” questioning his threats that there would be “no extenuating circumstances” for her if they get caught.⁶⁷⁵ She

⁶⁷⁰ Pera, p.101.

⁶⁷¹ Nabokov, pp.57-58.

⁶⁷² Pera, p.136.

⁶⁷³ Pera, p.200.

⁶⁷⁴ Pera, p.177.

⁶⁷⁵ Pera, p.195.

claims that she does not consent to everything: “He can’t say that I consent to become a vegetable.”⁶⁷⁶ It takes all her willpower to resist and resent the abuse till she finds the way to escape. Dolly finds Humbert’s desire flat and inflexible:

“He’s a fossil, too, because he’s had the same petrified desire for years – he can never come up with a new idea. He is just nuts, and his craziness is this fossilized desire of his that has nothing at all to do with me. It’s something totally different from the living desires of all other living people, it’s a desire that has lost touch with every other desire in the world. A relic of desire.”⁶⁷⁷

Lo states that it does not matter to her, and it should not be of significance to anyone else whether he loves her or not. She senses that Humbert’s desire has nothing to do with her as a person, so she is just trying to be patient, “waiting for this time to pass, this time that theoretically I wouldn’t want to waste, but that in fact I’m throwing away as fast as I can because it’s time that was stolen from me.”⁶⁷⁸ She feels that Humbert is wasting valuable time of her life, which he would never be able to repay or redeem.

Regarding tennis, Pera’s Lo does not understand why Humbert gets so furious when she misses. For her, the game is not about winning: “The idea should be to have fun, not for one person to be triumphant and the other humiliated.”⁶⁷⁹ In the figurative sense, the same could be applied for their sexual intercourse. She wishes for an occasional role reversal. For instance, in the famous morning scene, mentioned earlier, in which Humbert brings Dolly coffee to bed, not allowing her to drink it before she fulfills her “duty,” Pera’s Lo speculates: “Maybe if I considered it my right and Humbert’s duty I’d start having fun? I hate repetitions on a theme.”⁶⁸⁰

Freedom is another central theme in Pera’s novel. In Nabokov’s original, Dolly angrily mutters when sent to bed: “It’s a free country!”⁶⁸¹ This is a common phrase in the USA, although it could be debatable how free the life in the States actually is. Pera’s Lo elaborates on the subject, adding: “You see, this is a free country but only

⁶⁷⁶ Pera, p.195.

⁶⁷⁷ Pera, p.198.

⁶⁷⁸ Pera, p.200.

⁶⁷⁹ Pera, p.156.

⁶⁸⁰ Pera, p.185.

⁶⁸¹ Nabokov, p.46.

if you don't have a family."⁶⁸² Thereupon, she alludes to the unalienable rights pronounced by the Constitution, namely, Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness, as she gets angry at Humbert for being a coward who is constantly afraid of his desires: "He doesn't have the nerve to say what he wants, he doesn't know that we all have the right to our own happiness: the Constitution says so."⁶⁸³ Lo sees her mother as an oppressive force that hinders her liberty and happiness, fantasizing about her death, as Humbert does in the original novel. She remarks: "Isn't it obvious that ultimately all of us are born into the prison of childhood, and freedom doesn't come till later, after we've sweated our way to it?"⁶⁸⁴ However, if one regards the adult protagonist of this novel, namely Humbert, who has long escaped the prison of childhood, one may doubt whether there is some fantastic freedom awaiting afterward, or whether there is a seamless transition into the prison of adulthood.

Later on, when Lo reads *Huck Finn* for school, she identifies with the protagonist, sensing that Huck hates the widow as much as she detests her mother, wishing adventures and freedom instead of rules and routine:

"When we discuss it in class I'm going to say that now that we've entered the atomic age we should consider a policy of exterminating mothers right after they've given birth. 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."⁶⁸⁵

Lo feels that her life is awful under her mother's poisonous tyranny, hoping that Humbert could liberate her. She believes that to arouse his interest, she has to follow the advice of the hidden guidebook: "Men have no maternal instinct, so the way to make yourself interesting is not to seem needy but like you have a lot to offer."⁶⁸⁶ Lo sees a relationship as an exchange, in which men offer women material things "and in return we soak them with all that happy emotion we have inside; it squirts from our eyes, as if in place of brain there were a cake with candles."⁶⁸⁷ Lo uses the pronoun "we" when talking about women, making it clear that she has learned the

⁶⁸² Pera, p.86.

⁶⁸³ Pera, p.134.

⁶⁸⁴ Pera, p.139.

⁶⁸⁵ Pera, p.92.

⁶⁸⁶ Pera, p.95.

⁶⁸⁷ Pera, p.96.

stereotypical allocation of tasks differentiated by sex, internalizing prescriptive beliefs about gender roles. According to the above metaphor, women are supposed to radiate happiness at all times instead of using their brains for any other purpose. She plays the role of a woman as communicated by her mother and the media, being influenced by the rules and rituals of the previous generations. A famous 1948 advice book by Gene and Eugene Bengé, *Win your Man and Keep Him*, informed single women that there is some hope as long as they strictly follow their advice and get rid of bad habits:

“Tardiness, breathless haste, discourteousness, impatience, sarcasm, irony, resentment, anger, hysterics, swearing, crying, whining, contradicting, interrupting, sulking, moodiness, envy, jealousy, feeling sorry for yourself, worrying, fear, procrastination, indecision, bragging, super-independence and disorderliness with possessions.”⁶⁸⁸

One could have laughed about this list, blaming this ridiculous view on the old and obsolete Post-War American society, had not been there hundreds of similar recently written self-help books that became international bestsellers. For instance, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992) by John Gray that sold more than 15 million copies, is based on the assumption that men and women are fundamentally different beings. In the introduction, Gray asserts that “women generally have a greater need to share feelings as a way of coping with stress. But this doesn’t mean a woman can just go on and on or expect a man to stop and listen to whatever she has to say whenever she feels like it.”⁶⁸⁹ It should be mentioned that a scientific study “Black and White or Shades of Gray: Are Gender Differences Categorical or Dimensional?” by Bobbi Carothers and Harry Reis (2014) involving over 13,000 individuals found out that there are no taxonomic differences between men and women on the vast majority of personality traits and preferences, including the Big Five personality traits as well as the level of desire. Still, books giving women a stereotypical and misogynistic advice on how to catch and keep a man do not cease to appear in the 21st century. Thus, Pera’s reference to the self-help book mentioned above and Lo’s readiness to follow the advice can be viewed as harsh social criticism of the media influence concerning gender stereotypes.

⁶⁸⁸ Bengé in Gutterman, p.22.

⁶⁸⁹ Gray, Introduction to the Paperback Edition.

After their first night in *The Enchanted Forest*, Pera's Lo feels "all bruised" observing the hotel murals "showing scenes of hunters and trembling rabbits."⁶⁹⁰ Slowly, she starts realizing that she is not the hunter, as she previously believed, but rather a rabbit. Instead of enjoying an anticipated "great longed-for freedom" and a "magical moment together," Lo feels disaffected and deflated.⁶⁹¹ She realizes: "The most awful part is that Moms' dead, but I'm not free."⁶⁹²

When Dolly finally succeeds to call her mother's best friend Nora, telling her about Humbert taking her on a road trip, Nora is delighted, exclaiming: "Take advantage of this opportunity – it's a nice free trip around the country."⁶⁹³ However, Dolly does not share this opinion, regarding the trip as a calamity rather than an opportunity. She calls her stepfather Humbert the Jailer, questioning: "I'd like to know how Nora thinks she can call this a free trip. What's so free about it?"⁶⁹⁴ Lo feels like a little slave who does not have the right to quit.

After visiting an aquarium, Dolly makes Humbert promise to buy her goggles for the next summer so that she can watch "fish enjoying their freedom."⁶⁹⁵ This statement emphasizes her longing for freedom and autonomy. After the aquarium, they take a ferry to the Statue of Liberty, and Dolly realizes that when you climb the stairs inside the statue, you feel like a prisoner, contemplating:

"It had to be a trick if it came from the French: when you reach the top, after the hundred and sixty-eight steps that take you up inside the crown, you're in a cage: you see New Jersey, the skyscrapers, the islands, the boats all perfectly clearly, bright and shining, but your hands are holding on to the bars... you're shut up there spying on liberty from behind bars. That is truly a French joke."⁶⁹⁶

This description correlates with an allegorical portrayal of an ape in the cage in the Jardin de Plants in Nabokov's "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*." Answering a conventional question: "What is the author's purpose?" Nabokov artfully refers to the sketch of the bars "of the poor creature's cage" sharing the "shiver of inspiration"

⁶⁹⁰ Pera, p.131.

⁶⁹¹ Pera, p.132.

⁶⁹² Pera, p.138.

⁶⁹³ Pera, p.159.

⁶⁹⁴ Pera, p.160.

⁶⁹⁵ Pera, p.168.

⁶⁹⁶ Pera, p.168.

with his readers.⁶⁹⁷ This drawing symbolizes a fixation on the loss of freedom: similarly to Pera's Lo, the ape is able to see various objects through the gaps between the bars of its cage. However, the limitation of one's freedom often makes one's mind unfree, too, inciting obsessive thoughts revolving around the obstacle. In Nabokov's *Lolita*, it is Humbert who personifies the ape in a cage, whereas in Pera's novel, it is Lo who feels encaged and confined in Humbert's obsession. Pera offers the reader an unequivocal clue, stating twice that the illusion of freedom is a French trick, which corresponds to the Parisian incident described by Nabokov in the Afterword.

Only at the very end of the novel, in Chapters 19-22 the reader gets a brief insight in Dolly's critical mental state. Previously, she felt angry, helpless, and ashamed to tell anyone "the revolting truth"⁶⁹⁸ and having fits of "violent crying."⁶⁹⁹ However, every time she managed to compose herself, being cheered up by monetary bribes or presents. Finally, on the way to Mississippi, Dolly starts losing heart, admitting: "I'm dying inside. I have no desire for anything. There's something so oppressive as the days get shorter, and we spend hours and hours in the car going upstream in the dark."⁷⁰⁰ She feels empty and listless, writing in her diary: "I feel a hole inside me, a suction, from all this zigzagging back and forth."⁷⁰¹ The daily physical abuse is draining her, whereas all the material things that used to fill her start losing their restorative power.

After the year spent on the road, isolated from the rest of the world, Dolly starts feeling suicidal, writing in her secret diary:

"Dear Dolores Maze of the future, if I manage to resist the urge to cut these wrists which are so yearning to be penetrated, you will have to excuse me for keeping you so in the dark about what the Dolores Maze of now is experiencing. [...] I've even lost desire to find a hiding place where I can write in peace, and confine myself to making mental notes for you."⁷⁰²

⁶⁹⁷ Nabokov, p.311.

⁶⁹⁸ Pera, p.165.

⁶⁹⁹ Pera, p.153.

⁷⁰⁰ Pera, p.181.

⁷⁰¹ Pera, p.197.

⁷⁰² Pera, p.208.

She continually feels pain in her wrists, but she tells herself that she must not give to the desire to cut herself, because she does not want to lose her right to survive Humbert, which is the only thing that keeps her afloat.

Still, getting the lead role in the play *The Enchanted Forest* temporarily cheers Dolly up, most probably because she is cast into the role of a powerful creature whose whispery voice hypnotizes the hunters to the core until they become the prey. This is the role reversal Dolly was longing for. Nevertheless, her charms do not work on the poet, who cannot even see her:

“He seems to be looking at me but in fact he’s looking at something within himself, a woman he imagines, who has nothing to do with me. He’s bewitched not by me, but by his muse; I will never see his muse because I’m not a poet, only an apprentice fairy. [...] I’m really annoyed that I haven’t enchanted this guy, so I get closer and closer, hoping to be noticed, and my dance steps keep getting more and more uncertain and awkward, since I’m feeling insecure.”⁷⁰³

This rudimental summary of the play bears a strong resemblance to the relationship between Dolly and Humbert: he is not able to really see her, to comprehend her personality and get to know her “inner garden,” because she is just an imitation, a projection of his actual muse, Annabel Leigh. In Nabokov’s *Lolita* the visual images of the two girls intersect and overlap, as Humbert narrates:

“I remember Annabel’s features far less distinctly today, than I did a few years ago, before I knew Lolita. There are two kinds of visual memory: one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: ‘honey-colored skin,’ ‘thin arms,’ ‘brown bobbed hair,’ ‘long lashes,’ ‘big bright mouth’); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita).”⁷⁰⁴

There is a distinct opposition between the two images: Lolita is in the foreground, overshadowing and obstructing Annabel, who is reduced to fragmented templates. Ironically, Humbert calls Lolita’s image objective, although it is evident that his perception is highly subjective. By describing her as a replica, he implies that she is an imitation of the original; by referring to her as a ghost, Humbert suggests that Dolly represents a lie about the past that haunts and penetrates the present.

⁷⁰³ Pera, p.243.

⁷⁰⁴ Nabokov, p.11.

The last chapters of *Lo's Diary* are especially cumbersome and hollow. Humbert loses his good looks and his teeth, inciting Lo's disgust and pity. She starts calling him "Mama Humbert," probably because he takes on the role of her violent and despotic mother. Finally, Lo manages to escape with Filthy Sue on July 4th, the Independence Day commemorating the spirit of freedom fighters, which symbolizes her alleged liberation. However, he leaves Lo on the ranch and goes away, whereas she decides to ignore other inhabitants, becoming silent: "if you're silent you have more time to observe."⁷⁰⁵ Eventually Lo leaves the ranch and goes to live with Nora, the mother's friend. She pretends that nothing happened, hoping to forget the past:

"Dolores Maze of the future who will read these pages, I think you will be grateful to me for having written here the chronicle of these years so you will be able to forget them with a lighter heart. And if you should happen to lose this diary, don't worry: sooner or later you lose or forget everything."⁷⁰⁶

This conclusion devalues and diminishes Lo's traumatic experience, treating it as a minor and ordinary incident. She implies that the function of a diary is not to remember but to forget after having released the painful feelings on paper.

Vaingurt considers the act of keeping the diary a rebellious gesture; viewing it as an attempt to gain "some form of agency, even co-authorship, over the events it narrates, thus shaking the authority of the stepfather's text and changing the reader's view."⁷⁰⁷ In addition, Vaingurt mentions that Dmitri Nabokov questions the transformative purpose of *Lo's Diary*, claiming that Pera's novel is not a work of art, but an act of piracy that exploits and sabotages his father's original work. Thus Vaingurt asks the following questions: "Can parody be a crime? Does parody, in reevaluating a work, reduce its aesthetic value? And what, ultimately, is aesthetic value, and how is it measured in modernist and postmodernist practices?"⁷⁰⁸ In response to Nabokov's accusations, Pera released a public statement, in which she claims that her literary experiment in *Lo's Diary* has been legitimized by the intertextuality of Nabokov's original text, its parodic playfulness and encouragement to join its literary games, declaring: "All I did was to accept Nabokov's challenge,

⁷⁰⁵ Pera, p.278.

⁷⁰⁶ Pera, p.291.

⁷⁰⁷ Vaingurt, p.2

⁷⁰⁸ Vaingurt, p.3.

his implied invitation to a literary tennis match that, it seems to me, has a long and well established tradition behind it.”⁷⁰⁹ Vaingurt believes that by creating a postmodern and anti-aesthetic parody of *Lolita*, Pera precisely attacks the book’s belief in the ethical value of aesthetics, undermining the modernist cliché of elitist aestheticism.

In “Parody and the Contemporary Imagination,” Thomas Frosch defines parody as “an imitation of a writer’s manner done so as to extract humor from the original.”⁷¹⁰ However, Pera does not even attempt to imitate Nabokov’s style, for it would have been an impossible mission. Nor does she extract humor from the original. Undoubtedly, Pera’s novel lacks the stylistic skills exhibited by Nabokov, who considered obscene language to be a manifestation of bad taste. There are scarcely any metaphors, nor pathos or tragedy. By featuring an angry teenage girl as the only narrator, Pera removes the layer of literariness and style inherent in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, exposing Dolly “in a naked light in all her vulgarity and the affair in all its sordidness.”⁷¹¹ Pera’s characters are flat and static, lacking the depth that would make her immortalization justifiable and meaningful. According to Vaingurt and many other critics, in Pera’s *Lo*, there is neither “garden,” nor “twilight,” nor “palace gate”; there are no “dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to” Humbert and to us.⁷¹² Her cynicism, tastelessness, and rudeness exist apriori, long before she encounters Humbert. These character traits could result from her upbringing in a toxic relationship with her mother, but by no means represent a traumatic reaction to Humbert’s abuse. Pera’s Humbert is grotesque and pathetic, compared to Nabokov’s charming and tragic figure. In fact, both protagonists are extremely unsympathetic. Vaingurt believes that by creating such a brash *Lo*, Pera disempowers Humbert, showing that he is unable “to deprave and destroy.”⁷¹³ If we agree with this interpretation, we should either assume that

⁷⁰⁹ Vaingurt, p.12.

⁷¹⁰ Frosch, p.372.

⁷¹¹ Vaingurt, p.14.

⁷¹² Vaingurt, p.15.

⁷¹³ Vaingurt, p.15.

there is no villain in this story, regarding it as a lackluster romance; or we should consider Lo an evil seductress, which is somewhat problematic considering her age. Herbold states that misogyny frequently “takes the form of anathematizing adult women and turning the sexual exploitation of pubescent girls into a joke – or a romance.”⁷¹⁴ Although Pera claims that her novel is a feminist version of *Lolita*, the portrayal of a shallow teenage girl does not contest misogynistic views. Vaingurt believes that Lo’s persistent attention to sexual matters, called by Bakhtin the life of the “lower body stratum,” represents Pera’s ideological assault upon aestheticism. As mentioned in previous chapters, Bakhtinian interpretation of the medieval carnival approves the focus on the body, which represents a return to a natural state as opposed to the socially-constructed notions of freedom and desire: “it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body.”⁷¹⁵ Still, I find such a portrayal of *Lolita* somehow disturbing and disappointing, and would categorize Pera’s novel as a bad-mannered farce with over-the-top gags that miss the mark.

⁷¹⁴ Herbold, p.1.

⁷¹⁵ Bakhtin, p.19.

7.3. *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell

The novel *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell depicts a manipulative relationship between a 42-year-old English teacher Jacob Strane and his 15-year-old student Vanessa Wye. In her acknowledgement, Russell thanks

*“the self-proclaimed nymphets, the Los I’ve met over the years who carry within them similar histories of abuse that looked like love, who see themselves in Dolores Haze. This book was written for no one but you.”*⁷¹⁶

Strane makes Vanessa believe that they both possess a dark romanticism, a dark side, which no one else could perceive until Vanessa came along. The story is told from Vanessa’s perspective, as an adult woman in her early thirties, and becomes a recital of an inward struggle with an unprocessed trauma. However, for a long time, she does not see herself as a victim, refusing to join the movement against Strane. It was easier for her to view their affair as a love story rather than to acknowledge that she was an easy victim. Like Humbert, Vanessa is a classic unreliable narrator, blinded by her feelings and misclassifying her relationship. Her solipsism is calamitous and self-destructive. Thus, the reader gets a partial and one-sided account of the story. Numerous critics compare *My Dark Vanessa* to *Lolita*, maintaining that Dolores Haze has found her own voice in this modern novel. Overall, this novel is about the overwhelming aftermath of teenage trauma.

At the beginning of the novel, Vanessa’s story is “a wordless line of question marks,” and it takes time till she slowly figures out the essence of this relationship that has imprinted twenty years of her life. She does not want to use the word ‘abuse’ when describing their illicit affair because it sounds “ugly and absolute” and “swallows up everything that happened.”⁷¹⁷ As in *Lolita*, the law stipulating the age of consent is questioned and condemned as Vanessa is contemplating: “Are we supposed to believe that birthday is magic? It’s as arbitrary a marker as any. Doesn’t

⁷¹⁶ Russell, p.1.

⁷¹⁷ Russell, p.51.

it make sense that some girls are ready sooner?”⁷¹⁸ Quite often, the reader senses that she is just mirroring Strane, regurgitating his words, unable to perceive the inequality of their relationship and foresee its aftereffects. Vanessa feels insecure and unworthy without constant validation, confessing: “It’s a darker feeling, a fear of there being something wrong with me that I won’t be able to fix.”⁷¹⁹ Strane continually confirms that Vanessa is different from other girls, singling her out and therefore making her feel even more isolated, till she adopts it as part of her identity without realizing what it actually means. As Vanessa tells Strane that she feels as if she is running of time, wasting her life, he reassures Vanessa that it is an absolutely normal feeling for people his age who find themselves at the beginning of a midlife crisis. In this way, Strane tries to bridge the age gap between them, simultaneously distancing Vanessa even more from her peers. Later on, he inverses the roles, sliding into the role of an unruly teenager by saying: “I can’t keep it together when I’m around you. I’m acting like a teenager.”⁷²⁰ This statement implies that Vanessa’s “magic power” is stronger than his sensibility, making him appear a helpless victim of her spell.

Similarly to Humbert, Strane is a handsome man: he is very tall and broad, “the six-foot-four mountain, solid and safe,”⁷²¹ with wavy black hair and a black beard.⁷²² In addition, he is a good speaker, who can make clichéd stuff seem profound.⁷²³ During the first class, Strane already surpasses the normative and institutional borders, using “four-letter words” which he calls “colourful language.”⁷²⁴ However, the students are so surprised by the sincere sarcasm that no one confronts him. During their brief encounters on campus, Vanessa feels intimidated by his size and authority: “At one point when I make a mistake, he reaches down and guides the mouse for me, his hand so big it covers mine completely” and standing next to her he is “blocking out

⁷¹⁸ Russell, p.51.

⁷¹⁹ Russell, p.31.

⁷²⁰ Russell, p.93.

⁷²¹ Russell, p.54.

⁷²² Russell, p.17.

⁷²³ Russell, p.18.

⁷²⁴ Russell, p.22.

the sun.”⁷²⁵ Strane begins grooming Vanessa, first enthusiastically praising her writing, which gives Vanessa a feeling of being valued and cared for. She recalls: “Above everything else, he loved my mind. He said I had genius-level emotional intelligence and that I wrote like a prodigy, that he could talk to me, confide in me.”⁷²⁶ This statement implies that Strane wants Vanessa to believe in his emotional and intellectual attachment to her, leaving the physical aspect out of the picture. Strane repeatedly sends her mixed messages, making compliments about Vanessa’s hair being a color of red marble leaves, simultaneously claiming: “The last thing I want is to overstep.”⁷²⁷ However, he continually oversteps all the boundaries, till Vanessa ceases to have a grasp on reality, whereas her boundaries become more and more diffuse.

During the first class, Strane pays special attention to the prettiest girl, Jenny, without noticing Vanessa: “His face lights up at the sight of her.”⁷²⁸ The first question he embarrasses Jenny by asking how old she was when she first fell in love “and a blush takes over her whole face.”⁷²⁹ Later on, Strane tells his students: “I want you to think about sex,” and calls them ‘puritans’ when nobody dares to speak.⁷³⁰ Vanessa doesn’t want to seem narrow-minded and ordinary, so she is eager to keep a secret as he stealthily hands her a copy of *Lolita*, presenting it as a “poetic prose.”⁷³¹ Vanessa is amazed by the power of Humbert’s endless feelings towards Lolita, pitying his loss of control and the alienation from the world that demonizes him. She projects these feelings on Strane, admiring how much he has already risked touching her leg. She feels sorry for him, believing to grasp his inner conflict: “How lonely it must be for him, wanting the wrong thing, the bad thing, while living in a world that would surely villainize him if it knew.”⁷³² Vanessa assumes he is terrified and decides to be brave: “At the very least, I need to meet him in the middle, show him

⁷²⁵ Russell, pp.29-33.

⁷²⁶ Russell, p.5.

⁷²⁷ Russell, p.38.

⁷²⁸ Russell, p.19.

⁷²⁹ Russell, p.20.

⁷³⁰ Russell, p.71.

⁷³¹ Russell, pp.72-73.

⁷³² Russell, p.77.

what I want and that I'm willing to let the world demonize me, too."⁷³³ Her favorite line in *Lolita* is on page 17, when Humbert describes the qualities of a nymphet: "she stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power."⁷³⁴ She feels powerful and proud of being worshipped by an influential and intelligent man, and this feeling is addictive and intoxicating. Vanessa perceives *Lolita* as a romance, imagining being adored and worshipped, which gives her a sense of purpose and pride.

Later on, there is another allusion to *Lolita*, as they are reading in class "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe, and Vanessa silently ponders that Poe's wife Virginia Clem was thirteen years old when they got married. After the lesson, Vanessa shows Strane her new poem, which she edited to make it "more like *Lolita*, more suggestive," and they share their first kiss. Before it happens, Vanessa realizes that there is still a chance to turn away, but she chooses this dangerous path and steps beyond the point of no return, which once again reminds the reader of Robert Frost's famous poem "The Road Not Taken." In *The Magician's Doubts. Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, Michael Wood points out that Humbert "mentions Poe when he can."⁷³⁵ To mention just a few allusions to Poe in *Lolita*, he stresses the fact that Poe was her teacher, that is, abused the authority entrusted to him: "Virginia was not quite fourteen when Harry Edgar possessed her. He gave her lessons in algebra. *Je m'imagine cela.*" On another occasion, in Nabokov's *Lolita*, Humbert exclaims: "Oh, Lolita, you are my girl, as Vee was Poe's and Bea Dante's," placing himself in line with genius artists.⁷³⁶ One more direct allusion to *Lolita* appears in the scene, where Vanessa and Strane watch together the old picturization of the novel made by Kubrick. When Strane takes Polaroid pictures of her naked, the image reminds of Botticelli's Venus – "painfully pale, eyes unfocused" with maple red hair arranged over her breasts and light draping her body.⁷³⁷

⁷³³ Russell, p.75.

⁷³⁴ Russell, p.76.

⁷³⁵ Wood, p.119.

⁷³⁶ Wood, p.119.

⁷³⁷ Russell, pp.152, 155.

When Strane puts his arm around her shoulders, Vanessa suddenly goes through the feeling she had when falling from the last tree she ever tried to climb when she was nine: “Him holding me feels just like that fall – how the earth came up to meet me rather than the other way around, the way the ground seemed to swallow me in the moments after landing.”⁷³⁸ The image of falling from a tree is reminiscent of the concept of the original sin – a woman tastes the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge and is exiled from Eden. The idea of a “fallen woman” is reinforced by Strane when he warns Vanessa that they are breaking a lot of rules and finally kneels before her, saying: “*I’m going to ruin you.*”⁷³⁹ She believes to sense his inner struggle with this forbidden desire, already anticipating the unhappy end, which initially feels exciting because being loved by a grown-up man makes her feel special and powerful: “He says it with obvious torment, a glimpse into how much he’s thought about it, wrestled with it. He wants to do the right thing, doesn’t want to hurt me, but he’s resigned himself to the likelihood that he will.”⁷⁴⁰ In this way, Strane is portrayed as a weak and helpless being, facing a compelling and destructive desire. He confesses sitting on Vanessa’s chair after she leaves the class: “I rest my head on the table like I’m trying to breathe you in.”⁷⁴¹ The wish to internalize the object of his desire, to isolate Vanessa in his dark inner world, sounds like an allusion to Little Red Riding Hood who was devoured by the wolf. The image of the wolf is reinforced by the animalistic depiction of Strane’s appearance and behavior when they kiss: “At the sight of me, his face lights up, breaks into a grin, a hungry mouth. He locks the classroom door and presses me against the filing cabinet, kisses me so hard he practically gnaws at me, our teeth knocking against each other.”⁷⁴²

During their first sexual encounter, Strane seems to undergo a transformation, typical of fairy tales: “His voice doesn’t even sound the same, haggard and rough.”⁷⁴³ In the

⁷³⁸ Russell, p.78.

⁷³⁹ Russell, p.80.

⁷⁴⁰ Russell, p.80.

⁷⁴¹ Russell, p.81.

⁷⁴² Russell, p.93.

⁷⁴³ Russell, p.102.

course of their affair, there are cumulative references to the wolf figure in the sexual context: “He traces road maps of blue veins on my skin, talks about how hungry I make him, that he’d eat me if he could.”⁷⁴⁴ Feminist critics see a clear case of rape in *Little Red Riding Hood*, where an active predator attacks a passive heroine. Some literary critics questioned the absence of the father in the fairy tale, who is, by the way, absent in *My Dark Vanessa*, too. When their affair becomes public, and Vanessa is expelled from Brown, the image of a hungry wolf is reintroduced into the narrative. Vanessa sacrifices her studies, saving Strane’s career and his image; whereas he expresses his gratitude, stating that it’s very brave of her to take responsibility, “offering herself to the wolves. It’s evidence of love.”⁷⁴⁵ Before leaving the campus, Vanessa imagines running to his house, “breaking in, climbing into his bed, hiding beneath the covers,” which reminds the reader of the scene in *The Little Red Riding Hood*, when the wolf pretends being the grandmother hiding in her bed.⁷⁴⁶ In this scene we can see a reversal of the roles, which implies that Vanessa sees herself as an equal evildoer rather than as an innocent victim.

During the kiss, Vanessa experiences depersonalization, feeling detached from herself, whereas everything seems unreal and hazy: “I can’t focus on what is happening, my mind is so far away it might as well belong to someone else. The whole time all I can think about is how weird it is that he has a tongue.”⁷⁴⁷ Depersonalization is a classic response to a traumatic experience and is considered to be a coping mechanism because it decreases the intensity of the unpleasant experience. When Vanessa meets Strane again at the age of 32, five years after their last encounter, she experiences a similar sentiment: “For years, I’ve imagined this – being in front of him again, within reach – but now that I’m here, I just feel outside myself, like I’m watching from a table across the room.”⁷⁴⁸ Vanessa had spent such a long time in her fantasy world that she is not able to face reality, instinctively fleeing

⁷⁴⁴ Russell, p.123.

⁷⁴⁵ Russell, p.179.

⁷⁴⁶ Russell, p.183.

⁷⁴⁷ Russell, p.82.

⁷⁴⁸ Russell, p.56.

from the unspoken and unbearable past. Depersonalization becomes a habitual reaction in her everyday life: she feels disconnected as if she were “only half there” – everything feels unreal, like a simulation – and Vanessa recounts:

“I have no choice but to pretend I’m the same as ever, but a canyon surrounds me now, sets me apart. I’m not sure if sex created the canyon or if it’s been there all along and Strane finally made me see it. Strane says it’s the latter. He says he sensed my difference as soon as he laid eyes on me.”⁷⁴⁹

Besides an unmistakable symbol of isolation and alienation, a canyon may refer to the Grand Canyon in the American context, one of the seven natural wonders of the world. On the one hand, it is as “precious and rare” as Vanessa’s image; whereas on the other hand, the Grand Canyon is a dark place, where numerous border wars took place, which goes in line with the central motive of the novel. In addition, it could also refer to the canyon, above which Humbert misses Lolita’s voice at the end of Nabokov’s novel. In general, a canyon represents an abyss and may stand for the depth of unconscious, symbolizing hidden emotions. Vanessa often feels disassociated from her own story, being unable to process the feelings left in the dark for almost twenty years. On the whole, *My Dark Vanessa* is about crossing the borders, wandering into dark places.

There is a curious reference to another famous writer in this novel, namely, Jonathan Swift. One afternoon Strane tells Vanessa Swift’s story. He was in love with his student Esther Vanhomrigh, who was twenty-two years younger. Swift broke her name apart and put it back as something new so that Van-essa became Vanessa. Strane draws a parallel between Swift’s young lover and Vanessa, telling her that it is fate: “[she] became you.”⁷⁵⁰ In this way, he equates two entirely different persons, projecting his preposterous vision on Vanessa without perceiving her actual personality, as it was the case with Humbert’s projection of his love to Annabel Leigh on Dolores Haze. Similar to *Lolita*, where Humbert reshaped and reinvented Dolly’s name, Strane treats Vanessa as his own creation and a gift of destiny. Vanessa admits to herself that she feels fragmented and fragile: “I don’t say it, but

⁷⁴⁹ Russell, p.114.

⁷⁵⁰ Russell, p.87.

sometimes I feel like that's exactly what he's doing to me – breaking me apart, putting me back together as someone new.”⁷⁵¹ In this scene, Strane's face looks distorted and fragmented: “Up close, his face is disjointed, enormous.”⁷⁵² She is afraid of his size and his grown-up expectations.

Before their first night together, Strane buys her childish clothes, and Vanessa pictures him browsing a girls' section, as Humbert did before his first night with Lolita. In addition, Strane shows her three pints of expensive ice cream in the freezer, a six-pack of Cherry Coke in the fridge, and two big bags of potato chips on the kitchen counter. This bears a striking resemblance to “an elaborated ice-cream concoction topped with synthetic syrup” ordered by Lolita in a candy bar and “a huge wedge of cherry pie for the young lady and vanilla ice cream for her protector, most of which she expeditiously added to her pie,” that they were served in the restaurant of *The Enchanted Hunters* later that day.⁷⁵³ Vanessa feels brave all the way, but not brave enough to say that she is not ready for sex and that it feels forced. Instead, she is crying and crying, but Strane would not stop. Once again, not being able to react adequately, she experiences depersonalization, thinking: “I'm stunned and my body plays dead.”⁷⁵⁴ In spite of her pain, Vanessa makes excuses for his behavior, being persuaded that the risks he took are greater than hers. Like Humbert, Strane intimidates Vanessa by picturing the dramatic consequences of his exposure, threatening that she would be sent packing and end up in a foster home: “You'd be shipped off to some hellhole – a group home of kids fresh out of juvie who would do god knows what to you. Your whole future would be out of your hands.”⁷⁵⁵ Similar to Humbert, Strane believes in fate and in the futility of choice. Strane insists that “this whole thing is destiny,” giving her a copy of Swift's poem “*Cadenus and Vanessa*.” Venus is a recurrent image in this poem, which brings us back to Lolita, who was repeatedly compared to Venus. As an adult, Vanessa finds herself

⁷⁵¹ Russell, p.87.

⁷⁵² Russell, p.89.

⁷⁵³ Nabokov, pp. 115-122.

⁷⁵⁴ Russell, p.99.

⁷⁵⁵ Russell, p.119.

ruminating on the quirks of fate, wondering: “Maybe the universe forced us together, rendering us both powerless, blameless.”⁷⁵⁶

While analyzing with the class Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken,” Strane claims that by believing in endless possibilities “we stave off the horrifying truth that to live is merely to move forward through time while an internal clock counts down to a final, fatal moment.”⁷⁵⁷ He teaches his students that the choices we make do not matter at all at the end, which means that we are not responsible for our actions and can neither control the events nor change their outcome. Strane repeats that she is in charge and should decide what to do. However, Vanessa feels that he actively and consciously initiated every step of their affair, whereas she just yielded to his charm and eloquence. Later on, Strane starts contradicting himself, praising Vanessa’s passivity: “You’re so yielding, he’d say as I let him move my body around. He made it a compliment, my passivity a precious and rare thing.”⁷⁵⁸

Keeping the affair secret becomes increasingly excruciating for Vanessa over the years. She admits:

“They don’t know what happened, can never know, but still I want to scream it. Or, if I can’t scream it, I want to press the heels of my hands against the table, break through the wood until the whole thing cracks apart and the splintered pieces fall in such way that the secret spells out across the floor.”⁷⁵⁹

This is how she feels two months later after the first kiss. Secrecy is progressively isolating the secret-keeper from others because his or her perceptions cannot be validated. In the meantime, in class, they are analyzing *Ethan Frome*, and Strane asks the central question: *Who is to blame?* Vanessa is struggling with this question, drawing parallels to her present situation. She feels that love could be an excuse for Ethan’s affair with a much younger girl, thinking that Mattie should share some of the blame, too. Strane reinforces these feelings, exclaiming: “People will risk everything for a little bit of something beautiful,” and Vanessa wants to obtain the

⁷⁵⁶ Russell, p.303.

⁷⁵⁷ Russell, p.70.

⁷⁵⁸ Russell, p.110.

⁷⁵⁹ Russell, p.83.

status of something beautiful that it worth risking of his career and his whole life.⁷⁶⁰ The themes of silence, guilt and isolation are prominent motives in *Ethan Frome*, which creates a dark atmosphere and gloomy anticipation of an unhappy end.

Vanessa gradually becomes mute, stating: “I learn that it’s easier to keep my mouth shut, to be a vessel they empty themselves into.”⁷⁶¹ She feels like an object, a hollow container, in which numerous men met on a dating app unload their sexual and emotional burden. The communication with her mother is poor and distorted. Vanessa’s mother doesn’t like talking about the past, saying: “I don’t want to pull those old books off the shelf.”⁷⁶² Vanessa does not find access to her, feeling that there is a wall around her mother and builds one around herself. Vanessa experiences voicelessness as a result of her traumatic experience, being unable to communicate her feelings to her mother: “I don’t tell her again she couldn’t have stopped it, that it wasn’t her fault and that she didn’t deserve it. I swallow those words instead. Maybe somewhere deep in my belly, they’ll take root and grow.”⁷⁶³ The past seems like a “maze swallowed by the darkness. Unthinkable. Unspeakable.”⁷⁶⁴

When Strane’s assaults of other girls become public, and he is suspended from Browick, Vanessa still cannot speak up, silently watching the spreading news: “I sit and stay quiet, let my silence speak while I watch Taylor share the article again and again, captioning it with raised-fist emojis and words that read like nails in a coffin: *Hide all you want, but the truth will always find you.*”⁷⁶⁵ The repetition of the “s” sound, that is, sibilance, creates a twofold effect: on the one hand, it has a hushing or hissing quality, reinforcing the meaning of the line; on the other hand, this sound is traditionally associated with snakes, which symbolize danger or seduction. Vanessa feels personally attacked because she is hiding from the truth, scared to reveal that she was not the only one groomed by Strane. For many years, she has been hoping

⁷⁶⁰ Russell, p.82.

⁷⁶¹ Russell, p.355.

⁷⁶² Russell, p.256.

⁷⁶³ Russell, p.364.

⁷⁶⁴ Russell, p.110.

⁷⁶⁵ Russell, p.186.

that their affair was a love story, similar to *Lolita* that was perceived by many critics as a story of forbidden love and terrible obsession. For instance, in “Dolor, Dolores: The Duality of Love within *Lolita*,” Butler proceeds to explain that a love story can be painful and unhappy, arguing:

“Collectively, the world views the idea of love in the sense of fleeting butterflies and rainbows of angst. People assume that love is beauty and happiness, laced with a blissful hopelessness... What Nabokov presents in the way of love is that these things are not mutually exclusive. There does not need to be happiness for there to be beauty, nor bliss in hopelessness. He provides for us, the other side of the coin: the pain, consumption, torture and the severe ruthlessness of love. He showcases the dark corner of our emotions that we, as humans, never wish to admit even exists, let alone, venture into.”⁷⁶⁶

In *My Dark Vanessa*, Strane ascribes a teenage girl a mythical dark corner of emotions, insisting on them secretly sharing this dark side. In *Lolita*, Humbert seems to repent as he confesses to Dolly: “I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and torpid, and everything, *mais je t’amais, je t’amais!*”⁷⁶⁷ Similarly, Strane contacts Vanessa many years later, telling her: “It’s all over, but know that I loved you. Even if I was a monster, I did love you.”⁷⁶⁸ However, does he repent?

As remarked earlier, Strane is an eloquent and articulate speaker whose words have a powerful physical impact on Vanessa, who declares: “[...] his words break my chest wide open and leave me helpless.”⁷⁶⁹ It is a highly violent image that reminds of Prometheus, who was bound to the rock as a punishment for his transgression, whereas an eagle – the emblem of Zeus – continuously tortured him by ripping his liver out of his body. Similarly to Prometheus, Vanessa dares to commit a transgression, hoping to bring the light into Strane’s life, sacrificing herself, but is bound to suffer on a daily basis. She promises him not to be jealous, sensing that he expects “not quite forgiveness, more like an absolution,” and this sacrifice makes her feel generous.⁷⁷⁰ Absolution is a traditional theological term that involves repentance

⁷⁶⁶ Butler, p. 59.

⁷⁶⁷ Nabokov, p.284.

⁷⁶⁸ Russell, p.187.

⁷⁶⁹ Russell, p. 125.

⁷⁷⁰ Russell, p.130.

in the face of divine judgment. Vanessa is certainly flattered by being cast in the role of a holy figure. So does Strane truly repent? The answer would be no. It looks like he does not. Till the end of the story, the reader witnesses gaslighting and manipulation on his part, while Strane lectures Vanessa on what puritanical hysteria is. Finally, Strane commits suicide, unable to face the punishment for his transgression. On the contrary, both Humbert and Raskolnikov go to prison, viewing the sentence as righteous retribution for their wrongdoings.

There is another direct allusion to Nabokov, namely to his novel *Pale Fire*. Strane brings Vanessa a new book to read and shows her the lines:

*“Come and be worshiped, come and be caressed,
My dark Vanessa, crimson-barred, my blest
My admirable butterfly! Explain
How could you, in the gloom of Lilac Lane,
Have let uncouth, hysterical John Shade
Blubber your face, and ear, and shoulder blade?”*⁷⁷¹

A butterfly is a recurring image in the works of Nabokov, who used to be a dedicated lepidopterist. MacRae states that butterflies are masters of metamorphosis and also of mimicry, whereas “mimic and model both benefit, as the clear identity of either may become blurred.”⁷⁷² Similarly to the works of Nabokov, butterflies “evade our categories and call into question our ways of knowing the world.”⁷⁷³ There is a sudden moment of magical transformation in all his works, as when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. For instance, such a transformation is humorously pictured by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in the Wonderland*, when a hookah-smoking vulgar caterpillar suddenly turns into a beautiful butterfly. Some critics suggest that a caterpillar represents the threat of sexuality due to its phallic shape. Curiously, Nabokov had composed a brilliant translation into Russian of Carroll’s fairy tale, renaming Alice

⁷⁷¹ Russell, p.124.

⁷⁷² MacRae, p.6.

⁷⁷³ MacRae, p.7.

to Anya. Moreover, Nabokov called Carroll “the first Humbert Humbert.”⁷⁷⁴ *Lolita* is “nymphic,” whereas a nymph is a stage in the middle of such a transformation, meaning “an insect in that stage between larva and imago, a pupa.”⁷⁷⁵ In Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, mentioned twice in *Lolita*, the appearance of butterflies signals the crucial moments in Emma’s transformation.

In “Butterfly Chronicles: Imagination and Desire in Natural & Literary Histories,” Ian MacRae calls Nabokov an ambassador between lepidoptera and literature, remarking that in his works, butterflies often symbolize the flutterings of memory, the fragility of creation, and poetic desire. MacRae concludes his argument by stating that a change is often vital for a successful social and cultural development:

“a culture needs to undermine its categories and systems of knowledge, to destabilize its ways of categorizing and conceiving of world, otherwise new forms will find no way of making an appearance, certain concepts and feelings will continue to elude expression.”⁷⁷⁶

This statement can be applied to the appearance of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, which was such an innovative creation, which could not be put into any existing category.

The issue of incest is introduced to the narrative as Strane starts insisting on Vanessa’s calling him ‘Daddy.’ As she does it, unwillingly, she feels disintegration – her mind flies out of her body – which is a common coping strategy of traumatized individuals:

“He asks me to say it again, and again my mouth forms the words, but it’s just my body, not my brain. I’m far away... Now I fly out of the house, into the night, through the pines and across the frozen lake where the water moves and moans beneath the ice. He asks me to again say the words. I see myself in earmuffs and white skates, gliding across the surface, followed by a shadow underneath the foot-sick ice – Strane, swimming along the murky bottom, his screams muted to groans.”⁷⁷⁷

When Strane sneaks into the house of Vanessa’s parents, where she spent her childhood, he acts out several fantasies, which are reminiscent of Humbert’s dream of a “sleepy nymphet”⁷⁷⁸ sedated by purple sleeping pills: “Before we have sex, he

⁷⁷⁴ Joyce, p.339.

⁷⁷⁵ MacRae, p.22.

⁷⁷⁶ MacRae, p.20.

⁷⁷⁷ Russell, p.133.

⁷⁷⁸ Nabokov, p.109.

has me pretend to be asleep so he can crawl into bed and touch me as I feign waking up. When he pushes inside me, he clamps a hand over my mouth and says, ‘We have to be quiet,’ as though there was someone else in the house.”⁷⁷⁹ The only toy mentioned in Vanessa’s room is a ballerina, which evokes the image of the only toy mentioned in *Lolita* – “a ballerina of wool and gauge which she played with and kept sticking into my lap.”⁷⁸⁰ Later they go for a drive in Strane’s station wagon, heading to the coast, when Vanessa makes alludes to *Lolita* and Humbert going on a road trip. Strane is amused and remarks: “Maybe one day I’ll just keep driving rather than bring you home. I’ll steal you away.”⁷⁸¹ Vanessa gets used to the feeling of danger and gradually becomes addicted to it: “We’re miles from anyone and anywhere, free to do whatever we want, our isolation as safe as it is dangerous. I don’t know how to feel one without the other anymore.”⁷⁸² Wilderness landscape is a common setting in Romantic literature and paintings. Being free to do whatever they want is only possible outside the society, beyond the dense woods that symbolize the wilderness, meaning freedom to follow the basic instincts.

Strane and Vanessa “reveal a rolling blueberry barren,” which is worth dwelling on because of two aspects: firstly, blueberries make one remember the famous poem “Blueberries” by Robert Frost; and secondly, there is alliteration, which was one of Nabokov’s favorite literary devices. In Frost’s poem, blueberries represent a natural wonder, a delightful discovery. The reader senses an intense desire to become the first picker of a breathtaking blueberry that could symbolize innocence. Alliteration makes the scene sound poetic, evoking a romantic, relaxed mood. Russell frequently resorts to the use of alliteration: Strane in a khaki jacket is described as “some nondescript middle-aged dork, mild as milk.”⁷⁸³ After Vanessa tells her friend Henry about her past affair, his features “go soft – soft and so, so sad.”⁷⁸⁴ She feels “battered and bruised,” “dark and deeply bad,” “sitting silently” through writing

⁷⁷⁹ Russell, p.154.

⁷⁸⁰ Nabokov, p.45.

⁷⁸¹ Russell, p.155.

⁷⁸² Russell, 156.

⁷⁸³ Russell, p.153.

⁷⁸⁴ Russell, p.331.

workshops.⁷⁸⁵ One day in the Atlantica college Vanessa witnesses an accident – she sees “a deer dart out into the road and five cars, one after another, pile into a wreck.”⁷⁸⁶ This accident brings to mind the one that killed Charlotte Haze, Dolly’s mother: “hurrying housewife, slippery pavement, a pest of a dog, steep grade, big car, baboon at its wheel.”⁷⁸⁷ Both accidents evoke a feeling that a life-changing disaster may unexpectedly happen within seconds, as a “fat fate’s formal handshake.”⁷⁸⁸

Becoming an adult, Vanessa compulsively rereads *Lolita*, feeling powerless and abandoned: “All I can do is suffer through... read *Lolita* for the millionth time and scrutinize Strane’ faded annotations.”⁷⁸⁹ She muses over Strane’s highlighting the following lines on page 140, in the scene where Humbert and Lolita are in the car the morning after they have sex for the first time: “It was something quite special, that feeling: an oppressive, hideous constraint as if I were sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed.”⁷⁹⁰ The image of a ghost emphasizes the duality of spirit and body. While the body is numb and “dead,” the spirit is wandering around, finding no peace. In fact, the survivors of sexual abuse frequently suffer from body disruptions that involve mind splitting from the body as a trauma response. This statement could be linked to Dolly’s alleged immortality, granted to her by Humbert’s confession. While reading *Lolita*, Vanessa looks at the text through the prism of Strane’s perception, feeling like a ghost in her own body.

There is no particular moment of revelation, which gives the narrative a realistic touch. The story contains perceptual and emotional flashbacks, containing often contradictory or ambiguous judgments. Vanessa refuses to discuss her traumatic experience, being unable to find the right terms: “Trying to talk about it only makes

⁷⁸⁵ Russell, pp.270-271.

⁷⁸⁶ Russell, p.237.

⁷⁸⁷ Nabokov, p.103.

⁷⁸⁸ Nabokov, p.103.

⁷⁸⁹ Russell, p.202.

⁷⁹⁰ Russell, p.203.

you sound like a lunatic, one minute calling it rape and the next clarifying, *Well, it was not rape rape.*”

On the whole, Russell’s language is not as ornate and poetic as Nabokov’s. The descriptions of Vanessa’s sexual encounters with Strane are detailed and down-to-earth. However, she is trying to romanticize and fictionalize their story, repeatedly coming back to him, even after she realizes in her late twenties that he cannot have sex with her anymore because she is too old. In this regard, *Lolita* had a more effective coping mechanism, escaping Humbert at the first possible occasion and trying to have a healthy relationship with Dick Schiller, who is deaf, which implies that he would not hear the story she does not want to share.

The detailed description of post-traumatic experiences is typical of 21st-century novels that explore the nuances of abuse and manipulation, drawing attention to the unsettling concordance between trauma and libidinal fantasy. In her work “21st Century Trauma and the Uncanny,” Evette Horton compares and contrasts the major understandings of trauma as defined by trauma theorists. I would like to linger on Caruth’s interpretation of the concept, who maintains:

“the pathology of trauma cannot be defined either by the event itself – which may or may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significance attached to it.”⁷⁹¹

If the event is not fully conceived and comprehended at the time, but only belatedly, then it constitutes the core of pathology. Neither *Lolita* nor Vanessa could process the traumatic experience in their teenage years, being unaware of the limits of a parental or romantic love. Vanessa confesses: “Sometimes it feels like that’s all I’m doing every time I reach out – trying to haunt, to drag him back in time, asking him to tell me again what happened. Make me understand it once and for all. Because I’m still stuck here. I can’t move on.”⁷⁹² Perhaps *Lolita*’s death is a metaphor for her inability to lead an adult life after all she had experienced. On the contrary, Vanessa

⁷⁹¹ Caruth, C. Trauma: Explorations in Memory, in Horton.

⁷⁹² Russell, p.59.

grows up, struggles with her present, starts attending therapy, confronts her past, and finally moves on, accepting it.

A list of Vanessa's symptoms is quite long and correlates in every respect with the symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). She suffers from nightmares and numbs herself with alcohol, Ativan, and pot, refusing to acknowledge that she has a problem: "It's nothing. It's normal. All interesting women had older lovers when they were young. It's a rite of passage."⁷⁹³ When she talks about the past trauma, her body starts shaking. Most of the time she is only half there, acknowledging: "My brain feels split, one part in the moment, the other existing within all the things that have happened to me."⁷⁹⁴ She is unable to have a relationship or enjoy sex, punishing herself for her transgression. Vanessa's memories are shadowy and incomplete, making her narration even more unreliable.

As in *Lolita*, the question of freedom in *My Dark Vanessa* is posed as a philosophical issue but is never directly answered. As a woman in her thirties, Vanessa misses the forbidden nature of their affair, sadly remarking that the world would not even notice it anymore if Strane touched her: "I know there should be freedom in that, but to me it only feels like loss."⁷⁹⁵ For years, Vanessa experiences mixed feelings of fear, embarrassment, and curiosity, which used to send her on an emotional roller coaster, leaving her mentally and psychically drained. The only desire she experiences as a teenager is "the dull-ache desire for meaning," being confused and infuriated by his attempt to pretend that nothing serious has happened between them.

In the end, Vanessa is left with a box Strane sent her before his suicide, in which she finds Polaroids, letters, cards, and photocopies of essays she wrote for his class, everything on a bed of the strawberry pajamas he bought her before the first time they slept together. Vanessa was hoping for something completely different: "He'd leave me something real: his house, his car, or just money. Like Humbert at the very

⁷⁹³ Russell, p.192.

⁷⁹⁴ Russell, p.113.

⁷⁹⁵ Russell, p.58.

end, giving Lo that envelope stuffed with cash, a tangible payment for all he'd put her through.⁷⁹⁶ As we remember, Humbert voluntarily presented Dolly *son petit cadeau*, to enable her new start in Alaska with her husband. As he does so, he breaks in "the hottest tears" he had ever had, repeatedly asking Dolly if she would reconsider coming to live with him again.⁷⁹⁷ As for Strane, he does not include any note in his box, which looks like getting rid of the evidence, instead of compensation for the years of suffering.

At some point, Vanessa starts confusing her own story with the story of Lolita. When she comes to visit her new professor Henry in Atlantica College, she presents her idea of the final paper, namely "How Shakespeare shows up in *Lolita*."⁷⁹⁸ As Henry asks her to explain, she proceeds to explain the parallels:

"Lavinia from *Titus* scratching her rapists' names in the dirt and raped, orphaned Lo scoffing at the suggestion she does the same thing if strange men offer her candy; how *Henry IV*'s Falstaff lures Hal away from his family the way a pedophile lures a wayward child; the virginal symbolism of *Othello*'s strawberry handkerchief and the strawberry-print pajamas Humbert gives Lo."⁷⁹⁹

Henry remarks that he does not recall the scene with the strawberry-print pajamas, and Vanessa suddenly realizes that what she remembers as a line from a novel or a scene from a movie, "something observed from a safe distance," is what actually happened to her.⁸⁰⁰ She feels that this novel belongs to her, wanting it to be her story. Vanessa admits to idolizing the story of Lolita, which is why she blames herself, feeling that it would be a fraud being called a victim, "looking like a Lolita and knowing exactly what I wanted, what I was. I wonder how much victimhood they'd be willing to grant a girl like me."⁸⁰¹ This passage demonstrates that she is manipulated by Strane to view herself as an equal accomplice or even the only culprit, rather than a target. Throughout the novel, Vanessa cross-examines her role in the affair, blaming herself in the first place.

⁷⁹⁶ Russell, p.197.

⁷⁹⁷ Nabokov, p.279.

⁷⁹⁸ Russell, p.290.

⁷⁹⁹ Russell, p.291.

⁸⁰⁰ Russell, p.291.

⁸⁰¹ Russell, p.234.

As another Strane's victim, Taylor, who publicly announced her accusations against him, finally meets Vanessa, the latter tries to differentiate herself, "to draw a line and make clear that we are not the same at all."⁸⁰² Desperately defending their relationship, Vanessa tells Taylor that they were in contact right up until the end and that she was the last person Strane called before committing the suicide, implying that their relationship was confiding and profound. Despite the defense mechanism, her conversation with Taylor helps Vanessa view the affair from a different angle, realizing that Strane was often berating himself to make her feel sorry for him. As Taylor recounts that Strane gave her a copy of Nabokov's *Lolita*, too, she draws a parallel between Vanessa and Annabel Leigh:

"The way he talked about you reminded me of the first girl Humbert Humbert is in love with, the one who dies and supposedly makes him a pedophile. At the time, I thought a man being wounded like that was *romantic*. Looking back, the whole thing was just deranged."⁸⁰³

As Humbert the Wounded Spider, Strane creates an impression of being wounded and abandoned, whereas Vanessa's expulsion equals her death. She becomes a legend, almost a myth, as Taylor puts it:

"You were practically an urban legend, the girl he'd had an affair with who disappeared after it all came out. But the story was so vague. No one knew the truth. So I believed him at first, when he said the story wasn't true."⁸⁰⁴

Still, Vanessa keeps on insisting that she is not a victim, telling Taylor that she was aware of what she was getting into, till her therapist guides her through her partly distorted memories to find out the truth. Gradually, Vanessa realizes that it was Strane who initiated their affair, whereas she neither understood it nor asked for it. Finally, she admits that the most difficult part is losing the belief she held on for so long, the conviction that Strane sincerely loves her.

In one of his letters, Strane compares her to Joan of Arc, making her feel like a heroine and a saint, stating:

⁸⁰² Russell, p.310.

⁸⁰³ Russell, p.311.

⁸⁰⁴ Russell, p.311.

“The power you hold over my life is immense. I wonder how it must feel to go about your day, masquerading as an average college girl, all the while knowing you could destroy a man with one well-placed phone call. [...] You were so brave then, more a warrior than a girl. You were my own Joan of Arc, refusing to give in even as the flames licked your feet.”⁸⁰⁵

Joan of Arc symbolizes the struggle for freedom, whereas Vanessa sacrifices her future for Strane, who gets away scot-free and carefree. Additionally, Strane assumes she is masquerading as a college girl, as a nymphet pretending to be an ordinary girl, whereas Vanessa **is** actually a regular college girl, never pretending to be anyone else. The words “my own” reflect ownership and possessiveness, reminding the reader of Humbert, who frequently refers to Dolly as “his own Lolita.” It is worth mentioning that Joan of Arc is one of the most prominent women who successfully broke gender stereotypes in the Middle Ages, challenging traditional gender roles by wearing men’s clothing and fighting as a masculine warrior. By comparing Vanessa to Joan of Arc, Strane ascribes her traditional masculine qualities, such as strength and courage, putting himself into a stereotypical feminine role of a damsel in distress that has to be saved by a brave hero.

Concerning the issue of desire, Vanessa repeatedly experiences pervasive numbness during sexual intercourse. She recounts: “I clamp my legs shut. [...] I tense every muscle in my body. Light as a feather, stiff as a board.”⁸⁰⁶ She refuses to experience pleasure, trying to avoid the shame caused by the original abuse. Moreover, Vanessa cannot bear intimacy, immediately dissociating:

“Strane is there, standing on a slab of pink granite, his hands cupped around his mouth. *Let me do it. Let me pleasure you.* He keeps calling, but I’m out of reach. I’m a speckled seal swimming past the breakers, a seabird with a wingspan so strong I can fly for miles. I’m the new moon, hidden and safe from him, from everyone.”⁸⁰⁷

The above description evokes animal and nature images, reminiscent of a Native American concept of a “spirit animal” that may guide and rescue one in a difficult situation. Seals symbolize providence and safety, whereas seabirds represent

⁸⁰⁵ Russell, p.327.

⁸⁰⁶ Russell, p.276.

⁸⁰⁷ Russell, p.276.

endurance and perseverance. These are the qualities Vanessa is lacking in her everyday life. The moon is a feminine symbol denoting love and lovesickness. Vanessa is exhausted from being stuck in this affair but cannot find the strength to break up and break free.

Additionally, Vanessa experiences hysterical blindness during sex with Strane, being unable to see him. Her psychological stress physically exhibits itself. The only thing that helps her in this situation is pain: "I grab at my own throat. I need him to choke me; it's the only thing that will bring me back."⁸⁰⁸ Many survivors of sexual abuse seek pain, for instance, in erotic asphyxiation, in order to attain a calm, detached feeling. As maintained in "Post-Traumatic Stress, Sexual Trauma and Dissociative Disorder: Issues Related to Intimacy and Sexuality," those who experienced sexual abuse do not seem to fear any compulsive or violent components in the interaction. However, when placed in a situation of physical intimacy with a safe, trusted partner they are terrified: "Objectification and/or pain reinforces the dissociative defenses - without them to mask it, there is only the excruciating and visceral vulnerability to anticipated harm."⁸⁰⁹ Similarly, Vanessa seems to be excited by danger, admitting: "the thought of a monster's breath on the back of my neck gives me a thrill. It propels me forward, the epitome of asking for it."⁸¹⁰ A few pages later, she explains that Strane's innumerable intrusive calls represent this breath on the back of her neck. Thus, she pictures Strane as a malevolent monster, following her closely for years.

Vanessa still displays signs of a wounded attachment five years later after her expulsion from Browick. In Atlantica college, she immediately singles out her lit seminar professor Henry Plough, noticing: "At first glance, he is Strane, all beard and glasses, heavy footsteps and wide shoulders. [...] He's Strane in the pulpal stage, still soft."⁸¹¹ In fact, it is typical for survivors of sexual abuse to be

⁸⁰⁸ Russell, p.277.

⁸⁰⁹ Schwartz, p.25.

⁸¹⁰ Russell, p.273.

⁸¹¹ Russell, p.272.

attracted to those who remind them of their trauma, subconsciously looking for relationships that reinforce the wounded aspect of themselves.⁸¹² Finally, Vanessa realizes that this is an unsafe and unsound pattern, refusing the position of Henry's assistant offered by him. Neither can she imagine herself going to grad school, fearing the reappearance of the precarious pattern:

"Looking ahead, I can see that, too – another classroom, another man at the head of the seminar table reading my name off the roster, his eyes drinking me in. The thought makes me so tired all I can think is *I'd rather be dead than go through this again.*"⁸¹³

So does Vanessa attain liberation from the traumatic experience that keeps haunting her for years? She attempts to obtain relief through writing, confessing her experience – first, in an anonymous blog, gradually sensing an increased desire to tell the story under her real name, in person. She frankly admits to being an unreliable narrator. First, Vanessa tells her flatmate Bridget "a disjointed history of the whole mess," romanticizing the story:

"I told her that he singled me out and I fell in love, that I was expelled because I wouldn't betray him, but we ended up back together because we can't stay away from each other, despite the age difference, despite everything."⁸¹⁴

After that, Vanessa gives Henry a completely different, darker version of the events:

"A momentum gains within me, an increased righteousness, a sense that I lived through something horrible, a disaster so stark it split my life in two. And now, in the aftershock of survival comes the desire to tell. Shouldn't I be able to tell this story if I want to? Even if I manipulate the truth and obscure the details, don't I deserve to see the evidence of what Strane did to me on another person's sympathetic face?"⁸¹⁵

After years of gaslighting, as Strane incessantly makes her question her reality, Vanessa does not trust her own judgment any more, repeating that she does not know what she knows. She doubts her own perceptions, needing an impartial listener that would offer an appropriate reaction, confirming her fears that this relationship is far less healthy than she was made to believe. However, Vanessa dreads that no one else would be able to make her feel as unique and desired as

⁸¹² Granot, "Trauma, attachment style, and somatization: a study of women with dyspareunia and women survivors of sexual abuse," 2018.

⁸¹³ Russell, p.351.

⁸¹⁴ Russell, p.268.

⁸¹⁵ Russell, p.331.

Strane did, conceding that she compulsively imagines what he is doing all day long, unable to think about anything else:

“I go to work, sit at the concierge desk and imagine him moving through the rooms, trailing the bright-haired girls. In my mind, I follow along behind, don’t let him out of my sight. This, I think, is probably what I’ll do for the rest of my life: chase after him and what he gave me.”⁸¹⁶

This passage makes the reader discern that this is a codependent relationship, in which Vanessa feels worthless unless needed by her enabler. As a result, she ignores her own needs and desires, not knowing how to lead an equal, two-sided relationship.

The turning point occurs at the very end of the novel, as Vanessa reads an article about a teacher at a boarding school who abused girl students throughout his forty-year career. She recognizes the lines he used on all the girls for all those years, for they are identical with what Strane used to tell her: “You’re the only one who understands me, little one.”⁸¹⁷ Vanessa finally comprehends that Strane has applied common grooming strategies to exploit her needs and manipulate her. As Vanessa starts recovering attending therapy in her early thirties, she starts grieving herself instead of grieving Strane, recognizing that her feelings are valid, too. In order to break the cycle, she starts being honest with herself and finally talks to her mother about what happened. Vanessa’s mother opens up and reveals that she did not report Strane to the police because she was scared of the publicity: “I didn’t want to put you through some horror show. [...] Police, lawyers, a trial. I didn’t want them to tear you apart.”⁸¹⁸ Indeed, sexual abuse is still the most unreported crime because of feelings of shame and fear.

Additionally, the aftereffects of abuse are often underestimated. Vanessa’s mother neither discussed the matter with her daughter nor considered treating the repercussion, stating: “Once I got you back home, I thought, ok, whatever happened is over.”⁸¹⁹ Eventually, Vanessa discusses with Taylor the reasons of them staying silent for years, concealing the abuse. She has a feeling that they were not “helpless

⁸¹⁶ Russell, p.357.

⁸¹⁷ Russell, p.359.

⁸¹⁸ Russell, p.363.

⁸¹⁹ Russell, p.363.

by choice,” but that the world forced them to be defenseless and insecure.⁸²⁰ Taylor admits that making the affair public did not bring her the closure she was hoping for. Instead of feeling liberated and empowered, it made her even angrier than before.

The ending is not too sentimental. Vanessa neither hugs Taylor nor wishes to become friends with her, remarking: “It seems absurd to expect two women to love each other just because they were groped by the same man.”⁸²¹ Thus, there is no emergence of sisterhood through solidarity praised by #MeToo. Still, Vanessa senses a slow change taking place inside her: she ceases seeing the world through his eyes, focusing on herself. By adopting a dog from a shelter and watching it get used to “the freedom and space,” Vanessa is also gradually getting used to being free and independent.⁸²² A prominent Russian critic Galina Yuzefovich calls *My Dark Vanessa* “an encyclopedia of trauma” because of its accurate and detailed representation:

“ [...]литературный дебют американки Кейт Элизабет Рассел «Моя темная Ванесса» стоит особняком как текст, рассчитанный не столько на эмоциональное, сколько на интеллектуальное проживание и переживание. Пожалуй, его можно рассматривать как своего рода энциклопедию травмы — не в силу разнообразия представленных объектов (травма-то там как раз одна-единственная), а исключительно в силу энциклопедически подробной, стереоскопической и протяженной по времени ее репрезентации.”⁸²³

In Russell’s interpretation, trauma does not appear as one global monolithic event but as a series of minor events, bad decisions, and fatal accidents. Furthermore, Yuzefovich states that Russell deprives the reader of the comfortable certainty of knowing who is right and who is wrong. She does not summon to sympathize and pity Vanessa. Instead, the reader is forced to constantly analyze and evaluate the information, searching for the forks in the road when something goes wrong. By doing this, Russell achieves a paradoxical and at the same time valuable effect: she allows us to see the trauma in all its ugliness and complexity, thereby calling for reflection and resistance to abuse.

⁸²⁰ Russell, p.366.

⁸²¹ Russell, p.367.

⁸²² Russell, p.368.

⁸²³ meduza.io/feature/2021/03/06/

7.4. *Putney* by Sofka Zinovieff

Putney is the novel by Sofka Zinovieff, labeled as “a *Lolita* for the age of #MeToo” by journalists and critics. Similar to *My Dark Vanessa*, the plot turns around a grown-up woman who reflects on her teenage relationship with a much older man. A nostalgic quest becomes dark and uneasy as she unveils the multiple layers of her childhood romance. This novel is about the ambiguous notion of consent, abuse of power, and overstepping of boundaries.

In an interview with BBC, Sofka Zinovieff says that to be mentioned together with Nabokov is a great honor. She also compares her book with *Lolita*, mentioning that it was crucial to her to let the girl narrate the story, describing the relationship not only when it happened, and she thought she was in love, but also years later, when she started viewing it differently and said to herself: “Wait, it looks like well-thought-out grooming and elaborate seduction, not a romantic and mysterious love story.”⁸²⁴

In *Putney*, the time frame is twice as long as in Russell’s novel, forty years instead of twenty, and the heroine is much younger than Vanessa: Daphne is nine when she first meets Ralph, a promising composer in his late twenties. The name Daphne signifies a naiad, a variety of female nymphs, associated with wells, springs, brooks, and other fresh water sources. According to Ancient Greek mythology, Apollo continually followed Daphne, harassing her, if we use modern language, till she was transformed into a tree by her father. Unequivocally, an intertextual reference to the term “nymphet” coined by Nabokov leaps to the reader’s eye. In addition, being immobile and intangible symbolizes the traumatic aftermath of sexual abuse. Ralph alludes to the mythical context by telling her: “You’re a spirit from another world, my Daff. You are magical and mysterious.”⁸²⁵

⁸²⁴ [bbc.com/russian/features-53643565](https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53643565)

⁸²⁵ Zinovieff, p.48.

From the first page of the novel, the reader senses Ralph's obsession with Daphne: "it was like being one of Pavlov's experimental dogs, and he pictured her as soon as he smelled the iodine disinfectant and warm rubber, well before he got to the odors of suffering humanity in the lift and started to sweat."⁸²⁶ Ralph is seventy and dying at the beginning of the narration, which reminds us of Humbert, whose death is announced in the foreword. The image of a dog is a recurrent image in *Lolita*, starting with a dog that caused the death of Mrs. Haze and ending with the dog in Dolly's house on Hunter Road. In Chapter 10 (Part 2,) Humbert depicts himself as a dog, crawling on all fours to his mistress who coldly rejects him: "But never mind, never mind, I am only a brute, never mind, let us go on with my miserable story."⁸²⁷ The word "brute" has a double meaning in English, signifying either a savagely violent person or an animal as opposed to human. In the Russian version, Nabokov chooses the unequivocal word "животное," which means "an animal."⁸²⁸ The repeatedly occurring expression "never mind" reminds of a common gate sign in the US: "Never mind the dog, beware of the owner." Humbert is persistently trying to persuade the reader that he is rather the pet than the owner, although it is quite obvious that he often plays a double game. Similarly, in *Putney*, Ralph signs his letters to Daphne calling himself a dog: "Love and big lick on the ear from your devoted Dog."⁸²⁹ The repetition of hard and plosives letter "d" creates an opposite effect – instead of giving a feeling of something soft and passive, this consonance gives the reader a sense of abruptness or authority.

Interestingly enough, the image of Pavlov's dog can be found in *My Dark Vanessa* on several occasions, too. Shortly after their first encounter, Vanessa joins the creative writing club led by Strane and finds herself alone with him in a room. This is the moment when he gives her a copy of Nabokov's *Lolita*:

"My breath catches at the thought of being so close to a serious misstep. One wrong reaction on my part could wreck this whole thing. He reaches down then and opens his bottom desk drawer, pulls out

⁸²⁶ Zinovieff, p.1.

⁸²⁷ Nabokov, p.193.

⁸²⁸ Nabokov, RV, p.247.

⁸²⁹ Zinovieff, p.36.

a book, and my ears prick like a dog'. Pavlovian – we have learned about that in my psychology last spring.”⁸³⁰

Vanessa feels that she cannot control her curiosity: feeling excited being treated as a secret accomplice. Many years later, Strane used to talk to grown-up Vanessa about other girls in his classes, describing “the pale underbellies of their arms when they raise their hands, the tendrils that escape their ponytails, the flush that travels down their necks when he tells them they’re precious and rare.”⁸³¹ Strane laments that their beauty is unbearable, recounting how he calls them up to his desk, his hand on their knees: “I pretend they’re you,” he says, and my mouth waters as though a bell’s been rung, signaling a long-buried craving.”⁸³² Here, once again, the image of a Pavlovian dog conveys a feeling of a helpless animal, serving as a subject in an experiment. Classical conditioning refers to the learning process, in which an automatic response is elicited first by the potent stimulus and finally by the neutral stimulus. Vanessa hears Strane voice, which acts as a bell, causing her to relive painful emotions.

As in *My Dark Vanessa*, in *Putney*, there are narrative shifts between the past and the present, but additionally, there comes a shift in perspective between three characters: Ralph, Daphne, and her childhood friend Jane, which gives the reader a unique possibility to view the story from different angles. However, all narrators seem quite unreliable, and the reader is at loss whom to trust. Similarly to Vanessa, Daphne is unable to acknowledge the damage of the abusive relationship, seeing it as a love story, although she was a kid:

“It didn’t damage me. I loved him. And he loved me. What happened with Ralph was one of the many complicated things in my life. Actually, probably one of the less traumatic. It was an intimate relationship with someone older. End of story. Not everyone fits into the tidy boxes society lays out for us.”⁸³³

Daphne calls her life after Ralph “her own Dark Ages,” with an abominably misjudged marriage on the verge of violence, “her twenties squandered in the mess

⁸³⁰ Russell, p.72.

⁸³¹ Russell, p.358.

⁸³² Russell, p.358.

⁸³³ Zinovieff, p.65.

of ‘substances,’ her thirties climbing out of that swamp.”⁸³⁴ Similarly to Vanessa, it took Daphne around twenty years to rethink and reevaluate the past.

On their first encounter, Ralph is immediately overwhelmed and enchanted by Daphne, although initially he confuses this feeling with a pure inspiration:

“It was certainly not something sleazy or sinister. I didn’t want to *do* something to her... I felt like a child next to her. I felt free. But I was also a captive as the lowest slave with an Egyptian high priestess. She couldn’t have known what I was feeling but I wanted to lie down before her and let her walk on me.”⁸³⁵

There is alliteration – the words “sleazy and sinister” – the “s” sound imitating the snake and implying the seduction, as mentioned earlier. In this paragraph, the age gap seems to disappear, and Ralph feels young again, as it was the case with Strane in *My Dark Vanessa*, who felt like a teenager when next to her. Analogously to Humbert, Ralph often contemplates on the notions of freedom and desire, sadly admitting: “We are all walking around with invisible weights and chains.”⁸³⁶ Ralph’s notion of freedom is congruent with Rousseau’s, as cited earlier, who claimed that freedom is our birthright, however, we are everywhere in chains, being slaves who imagine themselves masters.

Similar to Humbert and Strane, Ralph buys special gifts and sweets for Daphne – an Egyptian scarab from an antique shop, placed in a miniature, metal cash-box with a gold stripe and “an extravagant number of chocolate eclairs.”⁸³⁷ A scarab represents an idea of rebirth and regeneration, which goes in line with Ralph’s assertion that Daphne made him feel young and free, as though he was reborn. However, a metal cash-box seems to be an inappropriate casing for such a gift, implying materialism and seclusion.

⁸³⁴ Zinovieff, p.25.

⁸³⁵ Zinovieff, p.14.

⁸³⁶ Zinovieff, p.279.

⁸³⁷ Zinovieff, p.14.

As Daphne is leading him to the tree house to have a picnic, Ralph follows her, thinking: “Certainly, it was the path of no return.”⁸³⁸ Once again, this passage is reminiscent of Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken.” Ralph senses that his passion is fatal but still follows this way. Daphne fills the basket, putting there a bottle of Ribena, “purple as poison.” The letters “b” and “p” possess enormous resonance, being explosive sounds that create anticipation of danger. There seem to be an allusion to at least two fairy tales – again, Little Red Riding Hood, who took a basket and went into the woods, and Snow White poisoned for her beauty. It is worth noticing that name Ralph means wolf, which supports this reading. Later on, when Ralph and Daphne have a secret trip to Greece, he jokingly chases her, pretending to be a wolf from the fairy tale “The Three Little Pigs.” Daphne suddenly has a feeling that she does not know him anymore, being terrified:

“Racing up the steps to the loggia she felt a stab of actual fear, as though her pursuer wasn’t the man she knew, but an attacker. She made it to the upstairs landing and ran into her grandparents’ room, locking the door and leaning against it, heart drumming. Hot tears slipped from her eyes.”⁸³⁹

Ralph makes “lovely little piglet” believe that it wins and retrieves downstairs to prepare supper. Ironically enough, after the affair with Ralph, Daphne actually loses her home, moving from one “rented dungeon” to another “shithole.”⁸⁴⁰

The eight eclairs brought by Ralph suddenly looked “undeniably phallic,” which reinforces the sexual tension in this scene.⁸⁴¹ Number eight is a symbol of infinity, which correlates with Ralph’s wish to escape the world and stay forever with Daphne in her tree house. His picnic with Daphne reminds him of his childhood, “where was simplicity to his happiness.”⁸⁴² This emotion often arises when Ralph spends time in the woods near his home. Woods traditionally symbolize the opposite of civilization and its discontents, making one lose the sense of boundaries. That is, Ralph, similarly to Humbert, is longing for freedom outside the societal norms and judgments.

⁸³⁸Zinovieff, p.16.

⁸³⁹Zinovieff, p.100.

⁸⁴⁰Zinovieff, p.63.

⁸⁴¹Zinovieff, p.16.

⁸⁴²Zinovieff, p.18.

Later on, there is an allusion to one more fairy tale, namely to *Gingerbread House*, when an adult Daphne is working on her new piece of art:

“The candy-covered doors and windows would open to reveal a terrifying man-witch lurking inside next to a cage and an oven. Odd, she thought, how the term wizard held none of the same menace as witch.”⁸⁴³

She feels that this collage would be an appropriate testimony to Ralph’s legacy. The word “wizard” means in Russian “волшебник”, which is the title of Nabokov’s famous novella written in Russian and published in 1939 in Paris. The English title of this novella is “The Enchanter”; it is closely linked to the *Lolita* theme and was called by Nabokov his “pre-*Lolita*.”

Daphne’s home is described as “a marvelous jungle of a household” by the edge of the river or an “outlandish Eden”:

“There had been no rules, no constriction, no bars. No bras either. And very often, no shoes. She travelled barefoot around London and reveled in the rebellion, masquerading in her father’s hats and her mother’s scarves and racing across the bridge, waving wildly to passengers on boats below and trains beside.”⁸⁴⁴

The words “jungle,” “Eden,” and “wildly” convey an impression of a paradisiac and delightful place, where one can freely express oneself without any restrictions, being granted the freedom Ralph dreams of. Being an adult, Daphne tries to reconstruct her childhood by creating an art object she names Putney. Daphne intuitively chooses visual art to process her trauma, being unable to verbalize her experience. It reminds of the poem “Philomela” by an American poet Paisley Rekdal that was published in one of the first books that came from the #MeToo movement, *Indelible in the Hippocampus: Writings from the Me Too Movement*. Paisley tells the story of a girl called Silla Mela who uses art weaving a tapestry to tell her story after being raped and her tongue was cut out to prevent her from speaking out. Rekdal believes that art can transform and heal suffering and pain; it is an experience where the past is married with the present.

⁸⁴³ Zinovieff, p.218.

⁸⁴⁴ Zinovieff, p.24.

Daphne explicitly remarks that it is not a confession, unlike *Lolita*, but a “private vision of this forbidden but genuine love... A distillation of the past.”⁸⁴⁵ A distillation is a tricky term, denoting not only the extraction of the essential meaning but also the action of purifying a liquid. It looks like Daphne is searching for the significance of their relationship, simultaneously purifying it. Among the gifts presented to her by Ralph when she was a child, Daphne places in the middle of the collage a figure of a man and girl who float Chagall-style in the sky. They soar over the city, leaving the world behind them. The dreamlike quality of this painting makes it look as an alternative reality. In his article “A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Painting of Marc Chagall,” Daniel Schneider asserts that the lovers flying in the sky “in an embrace and a posture clearly suggestive of the sexual act” remind the viewer of birds, the equivalent of the German word *vögeln*.⁸⁴⁶ One should pay close attention to the gaze of Chagall’s characters: instead of facing forwards, they look backward, which gives an impression that they are floating in the past. All of the above can be applied to the relationship between Daphne and Ralph that is essentially sexual and has no future.

The bird symbolism can be found further in the novel when Ralph compares Daphne and her friend Jane to birds:

“You are a swallow, full of speed and light, but poor Jane is more like a goose. Geese are fine. Nothing wrong with them – after all, they lay the golden egg. But swallow is celestial, something that makes your spirit soar.”⁸⁴⁷

The repetition of the sound “s” produces the rustle of little wings fluttering in the wind, which creates an onomatopoeic “echo effect.” A swallow is an epitome of joyful movement, known in the Bible as “the bird of freedom” (Psalms 84:3). Additionally, as a scarab mentioned above, a swallow is a symbol of rebirth. Like Venus, Daphne is able to cast away the past, rebuilding her present and future. There is a cotton scarf printed with wild strawberries among Ralph’s other presents. This

⁸⁴⁵ Zinovieff, pp. 26-27.

⁸⁴⁶ Schneider, p.121.

⁸⁴⁷ Zinovieff, p.32.

detail immediately reminds us of strawberry-printed pajamas bought by Strane in *My Dark Vanessa*. On the one hand, it is quite a typical childish print. On the other hand, though, strawberries represent the symbol of Venus, the goddess of love, because of its heart shape and pink-through-red color associated with arousal and passion. Additionally, in his letters, Ralph calls Daphne “my dear Strawberry girl.”⁸⁴⁸ In this way, the sexual connotation creates a double entendre, contributing to the overall eroticized atmosphere of the novel. Later on, another Ralph’s present related to strawberries is mentioned: “an empty box of Balkan Sobranie Turkish cigarettes containing a dried sprig of wild strawberries.”⁸⁴⁹ Here, we have got a clash of natural and artificial, a soft strawberry smell versus a harsh cigarette stench. This item is accompanied by a trio of brass monkeys who hear no evil, see no evil, and speak no evil, which can be applied to Daphne (called “my dear monkey” by Ralph) because she refuses to see any evil in what he has done to her and cannot speak about it for so many years. This image may also refer to people who feel no evil because of lacking moral responsibility or empathy, which is the case with Ralph, Strane and Humbert.

When Ralph first meets his future wife, Nina, Daphne is ten. Nina has “a doe-eyed face with pleasing, regular features” and extravagantly long chestnut hair.⁸⁵⁰ Ralph compares her to a caryatid, for her being classical and timeless, whereas Daphne’s mom Ellie remarks that “Nina would be a perfect match for Ralph, being both pretty and intelligent but, most important, silent. This would allow him his fantasies. And that’s what men need.”⁸⁵¹ In architecture, a caryatid is a sculpted female figure carved from stone used as decorative support of a building. This implies that a wife would serve Ralph as silent decorative support. Historically, Caryatids were the women of Caraye who were condemned to slavery and doomed to hard labor, which also resonates with Nina’s role, who spent all her life in Ralph’s shadow taking care of his needs, their children and household simultaneously trying to ignore his countless affairs.

⁸⁴⁸ Zinovieff, p.36.

⁸⁴⁹ Zinovieff, p.44.

⁸⁵⁰ Zinovieff, p.37.

⁸⁵¹ Zinovieff, p.37.

Ralph presents his connection to Daphne as entirely different from his relationship to his wife – he calls Daphne his true friend and confidante, who “should know everything,” even the details of his sexual escapades.⁸⁵² When he finally gets married to Nina one year later, Daphne feels “a spasm of envy she couldn’t express or even comprehend,” but Ralph reassures her that his feeling for Nina are totally different from “the unique attachment to his young friend.”⁸⁵³ Ralph calls Daphne “my Miss Monkey,” which reminds the reader of Humbert addressing Dolly: “[...] God, what would I not have given to kiss then and there those delicate-boned, long-toed, monkeyish feet!”⁸⁵⁴ Labeling a girl a monkey means treating her as a subhuman primate that has a lower position on the scale of evolution. When Ralph’s first child is born, Daphne keeps out of the way and refuses to hold him, without analyzing her discomfort or admitting to jealousy. She is too young to process and analyze certain emotions. Similarly to Strane praising Vanessa for being brave and special, Ralph encourages Daphne to cut her hair short without consulting the parents and praises her for doing that: “It suits you to be brave and unusual.”⁸⁵⁵ Afterwards, he compares her hair to animal’s fur, calling her an otter – “a sleek water animal.”⁸⁵⁶ Once again, animal imagery denigrates and dehumanizes Daphne, casting her in a role of a cuddly pet.

When Daphne is twelve, they kiss for the first time, “kissed properly, ‘like in films,’ as she thought of it as a child.”⁸⁵⁷ On that day, before it happens, Ralph brings two reproduction Victorian masks – a blond plumed monkey and a dog with worried wrinkles on his forehead, calling Daphne once again “a beautiful little monkey” and speaking of himself as her “loyal servant and obedient hound.”⁸⁵⁸ These costumes assisted their transformation into animals before they went into a wooded park area:

⁸⁵² Zinovieff, p.38.

⁸⁵³ Zinovieff, p.39.

⁸⁵⁴ Nabokov, p.51.

⁸⁵⁵ Zinovieff, p.47.

⁸⁵⁶ Zinovieff, p.47.

⁸⁵⁷ Zinovieff, p.39.

⁸⁵⁸ Zinovieff, p.40.

“The ability to step outside herself, to masquerade as someone else, was a skill she learned from Ralph and quickly made her own. It was a recipe for instant freedom – as simple as changing your trousers or putting on a hat but being transformed by it.”⁸⁵⁹

Feeling like animals in nature has a liberating effect; Ralph feels free from societal norms and makes the first move, kissing Daphne on the lips. Similarly to Strane, who tells Vanessa that she is in charge, Ralph tells Daphne: “You are the boss. I like it when you tell me what to do.”⁸⁶⁰ The masquerade gives an impression of Bakhtin’s carnivalisation mentioned earlier in relation to Nabokov, transmitting Ralph’s antipathy to the conventional adult life in a society with its official and hierarchical structures. Ralph jokingly remarks that he would be “a madman in the forest, making music only the animals can understand.”⁸⁶¹ For Bakhtin, carnival rituals are the assertions of freedom, “the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter,” functioning as a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.”⁸⁶² The relationship with Daphne gives Ralph a possibility of a second life, in parallel to his principal life with his wife Nina. Moreover, Bakhtin argues that “everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)” is suspended during carnival.⁸⁶³ The age gap between Ralph and Daphne vanishes when they put on the masks and take on their carnivalesque roles.

Carnival as a celebration of freedom enables “a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterpoised to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life.”⁸⁶⁴ Probably, this is why Daphne accepts the kiss, even though she does not respond to it at first. A relationship with Daphne makes Ralph feel young again, erasing the age gap for him: “Loving Daphne enabled him to share experiences that were brand new – bright, shiny, unsullied – and this was intoxicating. It was like a return to his own youth and initiations. First orgasm, first

⁸⁵⁹ Zinovieff, p.40.

⁸⁶⁰ Zinovieff, p.41.

⁸⁶¹ Zinovieff, p.39.

⁸⁶² Bakhtin, pp.8-10.

⁸⁶³ Bakhtin, pp.122-123.

⁸⁶⁴ Bakhtin, p.123.

travel abroad without parents, first time with a girl.”⁸⁶⁵ However, Daphne is still very conscious of the significant age difference and has no second life or relationship, where she could retreat to when Ralph is unavailable.

Keeping the affair secret is an excruciating task Daphne is bound to accomplish for many years: “It went without saying that none of it could be spoken about. In any case, she didn’t have the words.”⁸⁶⁶ She longs to discuss with Ralph what is happening, but he does not want to explain or analyze anything:

“They just existed. The secrecy and the lack of vocabulary to describe what they were doing made it all the more powerful, as if the concentrated emotions were never diluted by being spoken about or revealed.”⁸⁶⁷

As Daphne keeps on carrying this overwhelming feeling inside, she becomes more and more anxious, sabotaging her health and well-being:

“For so long she had lived in dread of the unknown disaster that was sure to be lurking like a mugger around the next corner... So much did she expect disasters to befall her that she walked under ladders and stepped into roaring traffic, as if that would confuse vengeful gods.”⁸⁶⁸

Risky behavior is prominent among those who experienced sexual abuse because it provides temporary relief from intense emotional pain.

When we get an insight into Ralph’s perspective of the story, we learn that he is bisexual and leads a promiscuous life, in which Daphne does not play such a central role as he makes her believe. He even had sex with her mother once - “the madly risky fuck (locked in the bathroom at Barnabas Road, while a party was taking place downstairs.)”⁸⁶⁹ Similarly to Humbert and Strane, Ralph believes in fate while coining the plan of Daphne’s seduction: “The plan proceeded so smoothly it was as if a natural order was merely falling into place.”⁸⁷⁰ The word “natural” emphasizes Ralph’s belief in the legitimacy of spontaneous and noncommittal satisfaction of his sexual impulses.

⁸⁶⁵ Zinovieff, p.82.

⁸⁶⁶ Zinovieff, p.42.

⁸⁶⁷ Zinovieff, p.88.

⁸⁶⁸ Zinovieff, p.84.

⁸⁶⁹ Zinovieff, p.71.

⁸⁷⁰ Zinovieff, p.72.

Ralph leads two separate existences, “compartmentalizing” his life: “He pictured it like the old-fashioned train carriages that were just being phased out, where there was no corridor or link between compartments; you merely entered and left at the platform.”⁸⁷¹ In this way, Daphne and Nina are pictured as two inanimate objects, two carriages, in which he may enter – which is a clear sexual innuendo – as he wishes. Daphne once tells Ralph that she hates those closed carriages on trains because she feels trapped. Moreover, two carriages are outwardly linked together and have to move in the same direction, independent of their will, which inanimate objects are not supposed to have anyway. Still, Ralph considers these carriages to be the sexiest form of transport, stating: “If you were lucky enough to get such a carriage to yourself and the object of your desire, you were free to exist totally and exclusively in that space – at least between one station and the next.”⁸⁷² Freedom is, according to Ralph, letting his manly instincts dominate over other instincts, as Nietzsche puts it. Consequently, Ralph seems unable to distinguish between good and bad, selfishly concentrating on his own desires.

There is another interesting parallel between *Putney* and *Lolita*: namely, the protagonists’ multiple personalities or subpersonalities. Similar to Humbert the Terrible, Humbert le Bel, Humbert the Small, Humbert the Hound, Humbert the Hoarse, Humbert the Hummer, Humbert the Cubus, and many others, Daphne can be Elusive Daphne, Wild Daphne, Teasing Daphne, or Soft Daphne.⁸⁷³ However, in Daphne’s case it is not a self-evaluation but a heteronomous observation made by Ralph.

Ralph lets Daphne smoke cigarettes and weed and drink alcohol, immediately giving her all she requires, whereas she is compared to a “toddler about to have a tantrum.”⁸⁷⁴ The repetition of an abrupt and plosive letter “t” gives an impression of

⁸⁷¹ Zinovieff, p.73.

⁸⁷² Zinovieff, p.73.

⁸⁷³ Zinovieff, p.74.

⁸⁷⁴ Zinovieff, p.78.

an explosive temper, of a forceful demand. Ralph is ready to succumb to any wish, even dangerous or unhealthy, just in order to jolly Daphne along, getting in his turn what he desires. All he wants is to avoid drama by any means, keeping the light carnivalesque mood. This is exactly what Humbert did to Dolly, trying hard to keep her in a passable mood. Comparing Daphne to a toddler highlights her childishness, vulnerability, and immaturity.

Ralph feels like a demigod, comparing himself to Odysseus, “ready to fight or to fall in love with a sorceress.”⁸⁷⁵ Similarly to Humbert, he claims to be powerless facing the spell of a nymph, therefore denying any responsibility for his actions. After their trip to Greece, Ralph writes a piece for orchestra and six bouzoukis named *Ithaca* because he had a feeling of arriving home when they got to the island. However, Odysseus is an ambiguous figure in Greek mythology who shares some character traits with Ralph. He is unfaithful to his wife Penelope, who waits twenty years for his final return, refusing numerous suitors. Similar to Odysseus, Ralph positions himself as a conqueror that comes and goes as he pleases, whereas Daphne is bound to carry this trip inside her all her life: “Travelling to Greece with him was also something that had formed her. It was internalized, essential as bone marrow.”⁸⁷⁶ Bone marrow is essential for people’s health and immune system: it gives body support and allows it to move. However, in the case of a bone marrow disease, blood cells are not produced regularly, which can cause cancer and even death. Daphne senses that something is internally wrong with her all her life, without being able to detect it or to name it. Meanwhile, Ralph is flourishing and bathing in glory. Ironically, it is Ralph who is finally riddled with cancer and struggling with treatment, whereas Daphne is gradually regenerated and reawakened. This juxtaposition serves as some kind of divine justice.

The scene of their first sex is narrated from Ralph’s perspective first. Daphne’s fragmented body parts pass by before the reader’s eyes as Ralph examines them: “her

⁸⁷⁵ Zinovieff, p.81.

⁸⁷⁶ Zinovieff, p.87.

smooth boy's legs," her breasts "so recently swelled out of flatness, like an illusion," "her beloved monkey hands, so pretty, with their bitten nails."⁸⁷⁷ We know nothing about Daphne's facial expression or her feelings before or during the act. Ralph realizes that it is selfish to concentrate on his pleasure only but still does it, closing his eyes and drifting away: "When he opened his eyes, she was sitting upright, dark tresses around her face, cheeks prettily pink and an analytical expression as she examined the white spill rolling down her hands and dripping to the bed."⁸⁷⁸ Daphne's calm and perplexed reaction contrasts greatly with Ralph's loud and excited response to the intercourse, which gives an impression that she felt nothing much besides confusion and curiosity. Ralph compares his ejaculation to a volcano, namely to the Vesuvius eruption, which becomes another word for their private lexicon. Actually, Vesuvius symbolizes destruction, for its most famous eruption in 79AD was the deadliest in European history. Similar to Daphne, the inhabitants of Pompeii and Herculaneum were unprepared for the catastrophe. This metaphor creates an atmosphere of downfall and ruin, correlating with an image of a fallen woman.

As in *Lolita*, there are recurring images of heaven and hell in *Putney*. After Daphne's first sex, she gets a message that her grandfather died, so she has to leave Ralph in Aegina and go to her family in Athens. She sadly remarks that "their experiment to create a miniature, private version of paradise was over."⁸⁷⁹ In the figurative sense, Daphne is immediately banished from Paradise after having tasted the forbidden fruit. When she meets Jane almost forty years later, she bashfully admits that she is stuck at her job: "Too many years now at a crappy little travel agency called Hellenic Heaven! Or Hell, as it's more commonly referred to."⁸⁸⁰ The notions of heaven and hell are interchanged and interwoven, as in Nabokov's *Lolita*, cited earlier.

⁸⁷⁷ Zinovieff, pp.82-83.

⁸⁷⁸ Zinovieff, p.83.

⁸⁷⁹ Zinovieff, p.110.

⁸⁸⁰ Zinovieff, p.63.

There is a direct allusion to Nabokov's *Lolita*, as Ralph is listening to BBC news on the radio. There is a report about an art teacher who runs away with a pupil of fifteen and travels with her to France. The man was arrested, whereas the girl said they were in love. Ralph could partially relate to the story but then thought that this teacher was probably chasing after lots of young girls: "I wasn't some Humbert Humbert obsessed with nymphets. And it's not only that I never did anything against her will, it's that we met as spirits, Plato's twinned flames. It was genuine and pure."⁸⁸¹ Theoretically, this sounds splendid and innocent; however, the reader should not forget that Ralph is an unreliable narrator. Practically, their relationship is far from being platonic, and Ralph does not wish to reunite with his "lost half" after she turns eighteen, as Daphne secretly hopes. Moreover, he sexually assaults her friend Jane whom he even does not find attractive either physically or spiritually. In comparison to him, Humbert can boast of introspection and self-reflection, acknowledging his guilt and accepting the punishment.

The turning point in Daphne's perception of the past arrives when her daughter Libby turns thirteen and Jane asks her: "What would you do if a man made Libby love him?" Daphne first ignores the question but later repeatedly comes back to it, by and by realizing that a teenage curiosity and longing for freedom and independence may be artfully abused by malevolent adults in many different ways. Ultimately, she recognizes that her exotic and free life has its drawbacks, acknowledging to Jane:

"I always used to think that all this freedom was a privilege. That image of us running free, flinging our clothes, walking barefoot around the streets – like urban Mowgli girls finding our own tracks through the jungle. But now I think of that jungle as dangerous. I didn't really know what I was doing."⁸⁸²

The switch in perspective happens when Daphne and Libby move to the flat on the other side of the bridge, where Daphne regularly observes through binoculars the old house where she spent her childhood. Being a mother of a teenager means being on the other side of the bridge, being able to inspect the past from a safe distance.

⁸⁸¹ Zinovieff, p.150.

⁸⁸² Zinovieff, p.182.

Libby means Liberty, the English version of Eleftheria, which was the name of Daphne's mother. Eleftheria i Thanatos (which means "Freedom or Death") is the national motto of the Hellenic Republic that arose during the Greek War of Independence in the 1820s. Some philosophers use the words "freedom" and "liberty" interchangeably. However, some others claim that the word "liberty" is slightly different from "freedom," meaning the responsible use of freedom under the rule of law without depriving others of their freedom, whereas freedom has a more general meaning representing an unrestrained ability to fulfill one's desires. Libby is characterized as a sensible girl who enjoys her independence but is conscious of its boundaries, which she does not wish to overstep.

Eventually, Daphne is confronted by her teenage daughter, who realizes after reading the news that her mother is the teenager abused by the prominent composer Ralph Boyd. Daphne explains the reason for her being silent: "I didn't have the words. I couldn't bear the idea of dragging you into that bloody mess."⁸⁸³ However, her daughter Libby, coming from a different generation, does not comprehend it, keeping asking: "But, Mum, that's so wrong. Why didn't you tell anyone? Your mum? What about ChildLine?"⁸⁸⁴ Daphne's mother, however, was never a reliable significant other to whom she could confess her sorrows: "On any particular day, Daphne could not predict whether her mother would be an absent, ideology-ridden protestor or a smothering mother." Daphne feels abandoned and deceived, complaining: "When I was little I never knew where she was or what to expect and then she'd swoop in like an avenging angel."⁸⁸⁵ This is an extremely violent image of a divine creature that is supposed to provide encouragement and comfort but can be vengeful and destructive when punishing the wicked for their sins. Sensing herself a sinner, understandably, Daphne is afraid to solicit an avenging angel for help.

As Lolita, Daphne is viewed as a seductress by Ralph's wife Nina. She is enraged by the accusations against her husband and confronts Daphne:

⁸⁸³ Zinovieff, p.298.

⁸⁸⁴ Zinovieff, p.299.

⁸⁸⁵ Zinovieff, p.258.

“So you say you were abused as a child. But it seems to me, Daphnoola, that you weren’t a child. You were a teenager – a young woman. You were chasing Ralph, testing him. Don’t think I didn’t notice your pathetic little games, even if I chose to ignore them.”⁸⁸⁶

The reader is, once again, left to wonder where this thin line between a child and an adult, capable of giving consent, is.

There is an image of a butterfly in this novel, too. When the accusation is read out loud: “vaginal penetration by the accused penis,” Ralph listens to the echo and imagines turning these words into a piece of music. He wonders how “bitter, authoritarian words” can describe “something so beautiful” and mentally compares the procedure with “using a machine gun on a butterfly.”⁸⁸⁷ A butterfly might symbolize something breathtaking and ephemeral, like a hedonistic pleasure. Lawful punishment is compared to a machine gun, a powerful weapon, however absolutely inadequate when dealing with butterflies.

When Daphne and Jane meet after thirty-nine years, Jane is struggling with the past memories of Ralph: “It was jarring to hear his name. Horrifying to see this awful man glorified and honored.”⁸⁸⁸ Thinking about Ralph makes her angry and even causes physical pain: “a swell of nausea rose inside her,”⁸⁸⁹ “she gagged and almost threw up,” “she wondered whether she was coming down with flu, such was her physical discomfort.”⁸⁹⁰ The reader wonders what is going on and initially might confuse Jane’s feelings with jealousy because she silently recounts: “Yet she remembered how compelling he had been, how much she wanted him to twinkle his eyes and honey his words at her too.”⁸⁹¹ Her profound need for adoration and approval is typical for insecure teenagers, whereas facing the past made Jane feel “as

⁸⁸⁶ Zinovieff, p.256.

⁸⁸⁷ Zinovieff, p.239.

⁸⁸⁸ Zinovieff, p.65.

⁸⁸⁹ Zinovieff, p.64.

⁸⁹⁰ Zinovieff, pp.66-68.

⁸⁹¹ Zinovieff, p.66.

if she'd been flung back in time and now inhabited the plump, hormonal flesh of her teenage self."⁸⁹²

Jane frequently spends her free time scrutinizing sex-abuse cases online. She admits that it has become an obsession: "It brought on a satisfying pain, like picking at a scab that was not ready, the raw, pink wound visible below."⁸⁹³ However, she does not feel ready to uncover her own wounds yet. Jane's memories about her past are "nauseating but clear, like meat in aspic."⁸⁹⁴ Later on, while analyzing the past, she imagines cutting the disgusting dish in fine slices, which clearly shows her revulsion towards facing the past. The aspic encases meat and keeps out air, which can symbolize isolation and suffocation. At the very end of the novel, the reader gets to know that Jane was sexually assaulted by Ralph, too, and kept it secret all the years. She reflects on her past, recalling and reevaluating her experience:

"It was only in recent years that she had finally been able to view these events through the correct lens: adolescents want to experiment and push boundaries, they are obsessed with their bodies and it's up to adults to help them do the right thing."⁸⁹⁵

However, the responsible adults are absent in *Putney*, so that Daphne has to find her own way through a lot of obstacles. Finally, she recognizes as well that she "had been far too young to understand what was happening when she was swept into the deep waters of a love affair" and she could see that twelve or thirteen or even fifteen "are not ages for being taken seriously by men of thirty. And certainly not for being taken into their beds."⁸⁹⁶ She asks herself who had been there to protect her and becomes aware of the fact that her Bohemian parents were too absorbed by their own love affairs.

The issue of freedom is brought up once more by Ralph in the final part of the novel, as Daphne visits him in the hospital. His last wish is to get to the sea together with Libby and Daphne, who go to Greece by ferry. Ralph is pleading: "Give me the smell

⁸⁹² Zinovieff, p.69.

⁸⁹³ Zinovieff, p.267.

⁸⁹⁴ Zinovieff, p.313.

⁸⁹⁵ Zinovieff, p.316.

⁸⁹⁶ Zinovieff, pp.158-159.

of freedom.”⁸⁹⁷ He calls Daphne his guardian angel, announcing: “You’re the only person in the world who is free-spirited enough to understand why I need to feel liberated once more, to be part of the elements, sprayed with sea salt for the last time.”⁸⁹⁸ By saying this, Ralph refers to John Ireland’s song “I Must Go Down to the Seas Again” that expresses a longing for a free gypsy life, beyond the societal limits. According to the Bible, sea salt symbolizes purification, being a disinfectant. Ralph is seeking purification and redemption, feeling guilty and ashamed. Although Daphne is “fascinated by the power of a dying man’s desires,” she finds strength to say “no,” as Dolly does during her final encounter with Humbert.⁸⁹⁹ However, Ralph stealthily follows her on the ferry, disregarding her opinion and neglecting her feelings. Daphne is aghast as she sees him climbing on the deck: “‘No!’ Her exclamation came before thought. This was like a new violation.”⁹⁰⁰ Ralph’s behavior shows that he is solely focused on his desire to be free, ignoring others’ desires and possible consequences for other’s mental health and wellbeing. Moreover, he commits suicide, jumping into the water from the deck, and Daphne has to be taken to the police station to be interrogated as a witness. The tragic incident is presented as “a juicy story” by the media, for it combines all the scandalous elements that attract the reader’s attention: “a mysterious, unsolved death, a famous composer, and the recent accusations of child sex abuse.”⁹⁰¹ This shows the double impact of the media: by revealing the offender and the offended to the public, it hurts, stigmatizes and traumatizes both of them.

Similar to *My Dark Vanessa*, there is no feeling of female solidarity as Jane finally confesses to Daphne that she was abused by Ralph, too. On the contrary, Daphne is appalled and offended, considering it a double betrayal:

“Daphne felt such a shock she feared she might faint. Jane saw her turn white and made her put her head between her knees and take deep breaths. Once she recovered enough to speak, Daphne absorbed the gravity of betrayal by both Ralph and Jane. So Ralph *was* a rapist.”⁹⁰²

⁸⁹⁷ Zinovieff, p.351.

⁸⁹⁸ Zinovieff, p.352.

⁸⁹⁹ Zinovieff, pp.352-353.

⁹⁰⁰ Zinovieff, pp.355.

⁹⁰¹ Zinovieff, pp.358.

⁹⁰² Zinovieff, p.360.

Daphne accuses Jane of hypocrisy, for she does not speak up for herself, reporting and confronting the abuser. Instead, she forces Daphne to come forward, surmounting the scruples and shame. Jane tries to defend herself by saying: “I hoped you’d be the one to slay the dragon.”⁹⁰³ Slaying the dragon implies a stereotypical masculine task, a heroic quest that demands bravery and strength. However, Jane is not able to overcome her fear, staying passive and stagnant. Daphne reproaches Jane, exclaiming: “You left me alone and you didn’t even allow me to see the real dragon.”⁹⁰⁴ Obviously, Jane could save Daphne years of questionable attachment to Ralph by revealing the abuse earlier. On the whole, timely reporting of the abuse could prevent the suffering of future victims. Thus, it was clear to Daphne that they no longer could be friends with Jane. Still, at the end of the novel, a year after Ralph’s death, Daphne feels calm and even happy, “discovering surprising reserves of patience and perseverance.”⁹⁰⁵ Her piece of art, *Putney*, was sold at an exhibition in London, to a person who would never decipher its hidden meaning, which emblemizes Daphne’s letting go of her past.

⁹⁰³ Zinovieff, p.361.

⁹⁰⁴ Zinovieff, p.361.

⁹⁰⁵ Zinovieff, p.363.

7.5. *Being Lolita* by Alisson Wood

Being Lolita is a novel written by Alisson Wood and published in 2020, which literary critics described as a dark romance and breathtakingly powerful memoir of obsession, passion, and manipulation. The protagonists are a mentally unstable seventeen-year-old Alisson, who suffers from depression and anxiety, and her handsome and charismatic English teacher Mr. North, who is twenty-six. After successful psychological treatment, Alisson returns to high school to find herself an outsider due to the rumors about her immoral behavior and mental health issues. Mr. North supports her, praising her writing so that Alisson is tempted to believe that the teacher is her savior. Gradually, Alisson is groomed and lured into an abusive relationship with Mr. North, who is passionate about Nabokov's *Lolita*. Finally, she is made to perform the role of an idealized and silent 'nymphet,' a fantasy created by Nick North, who identifies himself with Humbert. The perspective changes as Alisson becomes a professor, almost twenty years later, so that the story begins at one chalkboard and ends at another one, where she stands as a teacher, having found her own voice. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Wood maintains:

"I also realized that by choosing to end with me at a chalkboard teaching creative writing, versus addressing my relationship with the teacher, that I was unconsciously tracing the traditional hero's journey, the path of a primary character starting one place, facing obstacles, fighting a monster, and then returning home where everything is different, to give a quick and dirty explanation. The classroom was home in this story, writing was home. But now, instead of being the student, as I was in the beginning, I am the teacher."⁹⁰⁶

Wood admits that as a woman, she feels somewhat narcissistic and awkward calling herself the hero, simultaneously doubting a man would have had the same discomfort.

Alisson's narrative of her teenage years is occasionally interrupted by her adult perspective. Wood states that she thought that telling the story strictly from her

⁹⁰⁶ theparisreview.org/blog/2020/08/04/dissecting-pain-an-interview-with-alisson-wood/

current perspective as a thirty-six-year-old woman would be tedious and less accurate. Wood was praised for addressing such a sensitive issue with effortless ability to demonstrate how easily innocence can be stolen by subtle manipulative actions and how fast a situation can spiral and get out of control. Alisson mentions that this story is about boundaries, comparing the subjective narration with a mirror, in which one sees one's reflection only, being trapped on one side.⁹⁰⁷ Wood acknowledges that although she was initially intimidated by the idea of overtly engaging with Nabokov, still she decided to apply the lens of Western literature, weaving in literary and historical allusions into her confession in an attempt to attain a comparable awareness of language that Nabokov brought to *Lolita*. I would call it an ambitious aspiration that was not quite accomplished. Still, Wood's writing is imaginative and symbolic, which makes her story subtle and reflective. Somehow, she manages to maintain a balance between complexity and simplicity. In addition, in *Being Lolita*, Wood incorporates a brief and cursory study of Nabokov's *Lolita*, exploring the context and the allusions used in the original novel. Wood mentions that she teaches undergraduate students, and the offered sketchy overview would be suitable for freshmen, but one should not expect an innovative analysis of the novel.

The novel opens with Alisson mentioning "the book," whereas the reader still does not know that she refers to Nabokov's *Lolita*. She recounts: "The first time he kissed me, it wasn't on the mouth. I hadn't read the book yet. He told me it was a beautiful story about love."⁹⁰⁸ That night Mr. North is reciting *Lolita* in a booth, speaking to Alisson in Nabokov's opening lines: "light of my life, fire of my loins."⁹⁰⁹ She finds it truly romantic, but is distracted, slyly scratching a mosquito bite on her ankle, being afraid to annoy him:

"He began rubbing the edges of the pages with his thumb, harder and harder as his voice grew louder, creating tiny rips in the paper as he stroked them. [...]"

'You know,' he said, 'saliva can stop the itch.'

He looked at me. He had green eyes. My flip-flopped feet were on the cracked red leather next to him on the booth, my legs under the table bridging the gap between our benches. Not touching, just beside

⁹⁰⁷ Wood, p.59.

⁹⁰⁸ Wood, p.1.

⁹⁰⁹ Wood, p.3.

him. I followed the rules. He leaned down to my foot next to him and put his lips on my pink, swollen ankle. I felt his breath on my skin.”⁹¹⁰

This passage reminds the reader of the famous scene in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, in which Humbert presses “his quivering sting along her rolling salty eyeball,” helping Dolly to get rid of a speck of something.⁹¹¹ Dolly behaves “co-operatively” as he presses his mouth “to her fluttering eyelid,” although the reader does not know how she feels about it.⁹¹² In the Russian version, Dolly behaves “покладисто” (meaning “malleable” or “obedient,”) which adds a hint of polite submissiveness, distinctly different from a congenial collaboration. How does Alisson feel about this sudden physical contact? She uses the following metaphor to describe her feelings: “And it was like every locker in the halls of my high school swung open at once, metal kissing cinder-block walls. It felt just like that.”⁹¹³ This dramatic metaphor makes the reader perceive a thunderous sound of metal against cinder that emphasizes a striking and soul-stirring experience. This reverberant sound corresponds with Ray Bradbury’s short story “A Sound of Thunder,” analyzed later in this paper. The sound of thunder is an old-school theatrical effect that was frequently used, for instance, in Shakespeare’s plays to create an anticipation of a coming disaster. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Wood states that she remembers feeling an internal bang, an explosion in her body that made her feel free instead of trapped in her teenage body. Furthermore, she remarks that the basic, cold building architecture stands in contrast to this overwhelming and empowering sensation. Although the word “kissing” implies a sensual experience, the depicted sound is sharp and piercing, creating a feeling of shock and dismay.

During their regular secret dates, Alisson and Mr. North sit in a booth in the back corner of the diner. He reads her some great authors out loud, laughing at literary jokes, which Alisson does not quite get but pretends to make sense of, laughing with him. She explains her hypocrisy, telling the reader: “I lapped it up, knowing how

⁹¹⁰ Wood, p.3.

⁹¹¹ Nabokov, p.43.

⁹¹² Nabokov, p.44.

⁹¹³ Wood, p.3.

lucky I was to have this kind of private instruction.”⁹¹⁴ Alisson feels that there is a gap between them, which she would like to bridge, becoming closer to her favorite teacher. Before returning to Hunt High School and meeting Mr. North, Alisson has never read Nabokov. She recounts: “I only knew tangentially of the *Lolita* myth – the sexy girl who traps men and so suffers for it.”⁹¹⁵ Nick North, whose abbreviation would be N.N., which reminds the reader of Nabokov’s H.H. (Humbert Humbert), gives her “the book” in a dark parking lot: “The cover was a black-and-white photograph of a girl’s legs, spinning in saddle shoes and a skirt.”⁹¹⁶ This must be the 1997 edition of the novel, with a quote from *Vanity Fair* on its cover: “The only convincing love story of our century.” Undoubtedly, the function of this intentionally misleading cover is to increase sales. Durham states that the Lolita Effect operates in a commercial sphere, being “driven by profit motives.”⁹¹⁷ The readers would be far less likely to buy a book that has a quotation about heartless abuse on its cover. This is the teacher’s own copy, containing his notes, so that Alisson involuntarily reads the story together with his interpretation, adopting Mr. North’s perspective. Thus, for a long time, Alisson is convinced that *Lolita* is a sad love story. Additionally, he inscribes the book, writing:

“To Alisson,

This book is lust, yearning, and occupational hazards.

And lightning.

Enjoy.

- N.N.”

In this way, the teacher mentally prepares Alisson for the reading, shaping her expectations. Furthermore, he claims that it would blow her mind, and she would never be the same after: “He read me the opening, cars on the highways behind us. [...] He touched my arm with the back of his finger. Just for a second, but everything

⁹¹⁴ Wood, p.3.

⁹¹⁵ Wood, p.17.

⁹¹⁶ Wood, p.45.

⁹¹⁷ Durham, p.67.

came alive inside me and I was sure. I knew what I wanted.”⁹¹⁸ Then Alisson starts acting out an imitation of Humbert’s narration, paying special attention to the lines underlined by Mr. North. For instance, in Chapter 11 of *Lolita*, Humbert notes: “Saturday. [...] Dorsal view. Glimpse of shiny skin between T-shirt and white gym shorts.”⁹¹⁹ The same day the classroom she attempts to give her teacher a seducing dorsal view:

“I leaned over, deeply, into the book, now facing the windows, still on my knees, my back to him. I knew that as I delved into the pages he had given me, the upper edge of my black lace underwear, bought with my father’s credit card, would creep above the back of my low-rise jeans, that when Mr. North turned to address his students, I was all that he would see, a strip of skin.”

Mentioning her father’s credit card, Alisson emphasizes her financial dependency on her parents, simultaneously referring to her being underage. At this moment, she believes to perceive how Lolita worked her magic on Humbert. She feels noticed and powerful, able to make the rules. Nevertheless, she is the one who follows N.N.’s rules all the way.

Mr. North’s rules restrict Alisson’s freedom. He is the one who always dictates the place and the time of their “dates.” The numbers Mr.North writes on the chalkboard and quickly erases during class signify the time Alisson should meet up with him at the diner. The notes they write to each other must be ripped and dissolved in water. Alisson recollects: “I would watch them lose their shape and the ink bleed. I wasn’t allowed to keep things.”⁹²⁰ Destroying potential evidence, he hopes to exhibit Alisson as an unreliable narrator, questioning her memories. Afraid of being fired, Mr.North insists that Alisson should start dating someone else as a cover for their romance, which she unwillingly does, suffering from guilt and shame. Despite their romantic relationship, they do not have sex until she graduates.

What does Alisson desire? She openly talks about her wish to be noticed and appreciated: “All I wanted was to be seen. To be acknowledged, to be understood. To

⁹¹⁸ Wood, p.45.

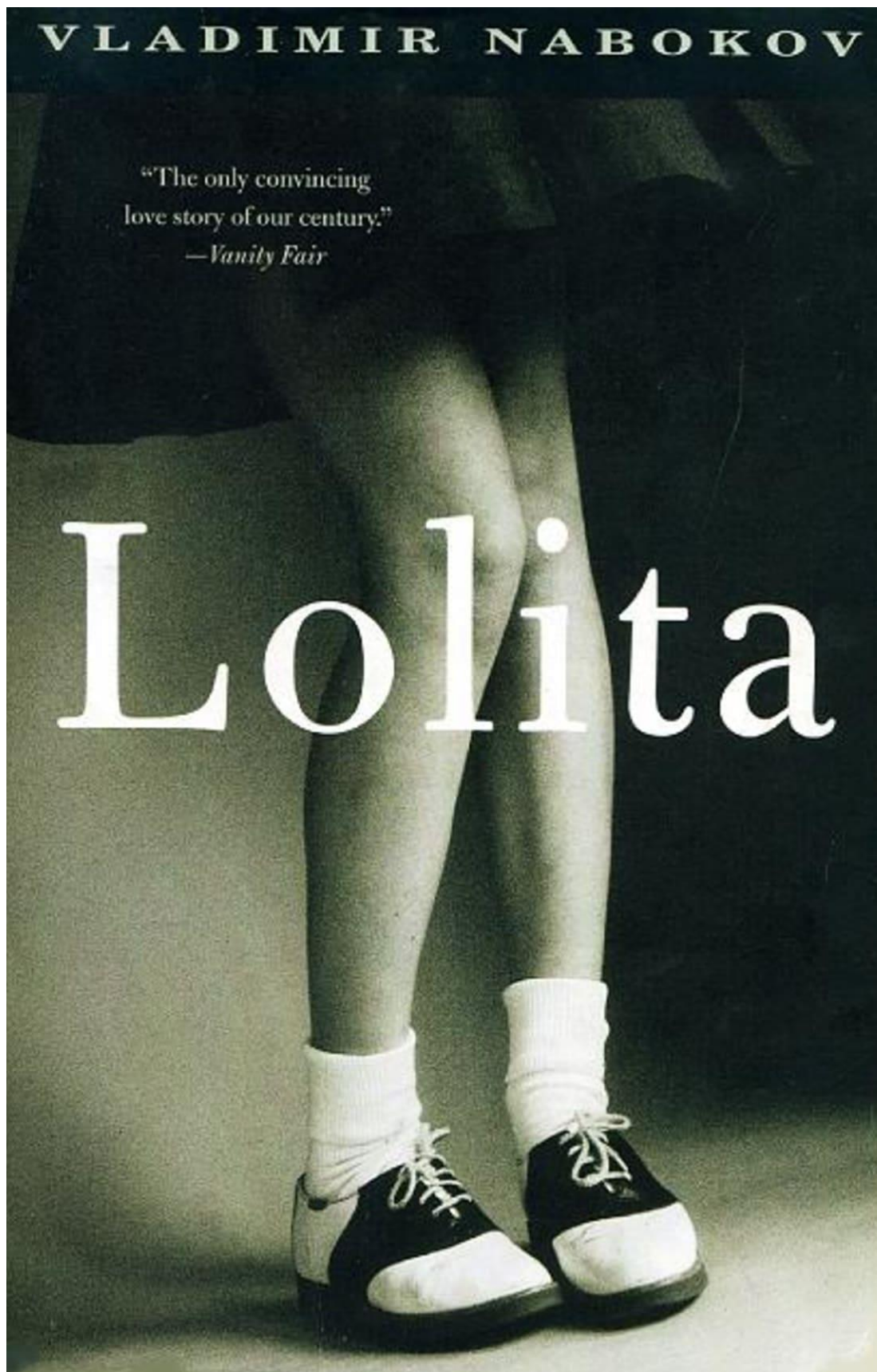
⁹¹⁹ Nabokov, p.54.

⁹²⁰ Wood, p.2.

feel that connection when eyes meet and communication is instant without a word.”⁹²¹ She wants to believe that she is special, that Mr.North would never risk his job for any other girl. However, Alisson sadly remarks: “It would be years before I found out that wasn’t true. That it wasn’t about being special at all.”⁹²² Thus the reader is initially prepared for an inevitable disappointment.

⁹²¹ Wood, p.59.

⁹²²Wood, p.58.



Alisson confesses that after having read Chapter 13 of *Lolita*, in which she is stage-struck, she truly identifies with her:

“This was the first time I felt like I had something in common with Lolita. While, of course, I had wanted to *be* like her this whole time- the level of desire and power and enchantment she had – I knew I was a poor imitation. Perhaps an improving one, but still – a copy. I watched Lolita through the looking glass of Nabokov’s language on the page and was hypnotized. All I wanted was to mimic her in everything, since; really, she was in control the whole time.”⁹²³

As Allison gets the message that she passed the audition and got the part in a school play directed by Mr. North, she is excited and thankful, knowing that he voted for her: “I was suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to kiss him. Like a flash in my mind – the image of me reaching across space and pushing my toes into the ground to rise up and press my mouth against his. A moment of make-believe.”⁹²⁴ This image is cinematographical and quite banal. Alisson’s standing on her toes emphasizes the height difference, making her appear small and fragile. On the other hand, she imagines taking the initiative and making the first step, which is untypical of a passive romantic heroine. However, Alisson stays passive, waiting for the events to unfold. She appreciates his support, regarding him as a noble hero: “It was like my prince had come.”⁹²⁵ The image of a singing siren is inverted, as we read the description of the teacher singing at a show in Brew, the local café. The reader senses Alisson’s emotions brewing up, as she attends Mr. North’s shows packed with other students: “The girls thought he was *so cute*, the boys thought he was *so cool*. His dark hair and easy smile, former quarterback for the Hunt football team. Something for everyone.”⁹²⁶ As he sings, strumming the body of his guitar, Alisson feels her body go “gooseflesh and soft;” she regards his sets as “a metaphor for desire.”⁹²⁷

Mr. North continually evokes his girlfriend, which causes Alisson discomfort and pain. Moreover, he persuades Alisson to attend Ithaca College, promising to go back to Cornell to be close to each other and have a stable relationship. However, Mr. North hardly ever visits her until she breaks up with him and later begins her own

⁹²³ Wood, p.67.

⁹²⁴ Wood, p.29.

⁹²⁵ Wood, p.29.

⁹²⁶ Wood, p.56.

⁹²⁷ Wood, p.57

teaching career. It takes time till Alisson comes to terms with the reality of their relationship, realizing that it was rather an act of abuse than a romance. Not until her female professor in college elucidates Nabokov's *Lolita* in a different light, Alisson gains a different perspective on her own story.

Similarly to Humbert, Alisson occasionally directly addresses the implied reader, revealing her thoughts and feelings:

"Dear reader, if it seems like this is all happening awful fast, that's because it did. Within a matter of weeks I went from feeling utterly alone to being cast as the lead in the school play; my writing not only encouraged but admired; having someone I knew I could turn to, someone who made me feel safe. And all of this was because of him. My teacher, my knight in shining armor, my secret admirer."⁹²⁸

The image of a knight in shining armor may superficially suggest someone who appears kind, chivalrous, and brave. On a deeper level though, it signifies a masked figure wearing impressive lustrous armor that covers indistinguishable and hazy content. "Damsel in Distress" and "Knight in Shining Armor" are two of the most recurrent mythical gender archetypes in literature, whereas a damsel is a young, beautiful, naïve, and sexually attractive woman who needs a man to save her: "Men and women are seen in terms of the binary opposition regarding their roles, where the woman is always the helpless creature and the man is always the Messiah of that helpless woman."⁹²⁹ Nowadays the expression "knight in shining armor" is critically viewed by modern male speakers, who consider the image of the chivalrous hero to be a tacky stereotype, conveying unrealistic standards of conduct.

Additionally, in *Being Lolita* there are multiple references to myths and fairy tales that revolve around the theme of loneliness:

"There is a long history of loneliness in literature. Of loneliness as a prerequisite of love. Almost like you can't really love someone unless you've been alone and loveless for a long time. At least, if you're a woman. Almost as if this protracted alone time is a purification, prepares a girl to be worthy of a man's love."⁹³⁰

⁹²⁸ Wood, p.55.

⁹²⁹ Idris, p.138.

⁹³⁰ Wood, p.8.

Alisson evokes Calypso, a nymph that attempts to keep Odysseus on her island, enchanting him with her singing. Furthermore, she mentions Penelope waiting twenty years for her wandering husband to return. Then Alisson moves on to fairy tales, citing Cinderella “toiling in the dust before she can be fitted for those slippers” and Rapunzel living in a tower “with only her long hair as silent company.”⁹³¹ Finally, she mentions *Sleeping Beauty* trapped in slumber and openly expresses her desire “to wake up from these years of sadness and loneliness and be normal.”⁹³² Alisson quotes Nabokov, who states that all good stories are fairy tales, feeling ready to become someone’s princess at the age of seventeen.

As Alisson asks the reader: “At what point does a man transform into wolf?” she most probably tries to figure out when exactly her teacher crossed the line, transforming into a predator.⁹³³ She admits that in contrast to fairy tales, where the transformation is often swift and sudden – “A wicked witch points, a god nods. Poof. There may be some smoke and sulfur” – in real life, the transition is gradual and inconspicuous: “A ripening of fruit to something edible from a cold pit, a shift in the way someone looks at you.”⁹³⁴ Similarly to *Putney* and *My Dark Vanessa*, the image of a wolf that suggests the desire to devour and destroy, indicates a looming danger.

The contrasting images of heaven and hell, also prominent in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, are represented by the words “sulfur,” a smell associated with devils, and “ripening fruit,” which alludes to the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. As mentioned earlier in the analysis of *Lolita*, the fruit, conventionally depicted as an apple (although there are theories that state that it was a grape, a fig, or a pomegranate,) symbolizes a desire to gain knowledge and the loss of innocence. All heroines cannot resist the temptation, not knowing that their lives will change dramatically afterward. Eve was immediately banished from Paradise into the wilderness, which is believed to stand for gaining autonomy and wisdom through painful experience. However,

⁹³¹ Wood, p.8.

⁹³² Wood, p.17.

⁹³³ Wood, p.52.

⁹³⁴ Wood, p.52.

this myth results in the loss of autonomy for many women that lasted for many centuries. In *Eve Was Right to Eat the Apple*, Sally Frank states that men in Western culture “have used this story for millennia to explain and justify the subservient position of females in society,” claiming that women are “easily duped into committing wrongful acts and should therefore be under tight control of their husbands or fathers.”⁹³⁵ Thus, this story created the “Eve Myth,” which is comparable with the “Lolita Myth,” in which a woman is viewed as a dangerous temptress that leads men into wrongdoing, being a symbol of various negative traits assigned to women.

Furthermore, Mr. North compares Alisson to “one of Poe’s Annabel sirens, one of Odysseus’s distractions, sad and singing, longing for someone. Needed to be pulled apart by someone who knew better.”⁹³⁶ The teacher claims that it was Alisson, who “called to him,” which implies that he is a powerless victim seduced by a singing siren. Alisson associates the time spent with her teacher with Margaret Atwood’s poem “Siren Song”:

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:
the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls
the song nobody knows
because anyone who has heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.
Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?
I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical
with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.
I will tell the secret to you,

⁹³⁵ Frank, p.79.

⁹³⁶ Wood, p.44.

Berg

to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song
is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique
at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.

Alisson wishes to perceive herself as a beautiful, dangerous and powerful mythical creature with a voice no one can ever resist. In one of the interviews, Wood compares Nabokov's *Lolita* with a siren song because it is captivating, powerful, and dangerous. As women seduce men, poets seduce their readers, using a carefully crafted language. Sirens symbolize enchantment and desire. However, the siren in the poem confesses that she no longer wants to be a desired mythical creature begging someone to save her. Still, she is unable to leave the assigned role, whereas her cry for help lures more and more victims. Although men anticipate their tragic destiny, seeing the skulls, they cannot overcome the temptation. Nor can they escape Karpman drama triangle, abandoning the role of dysfunctional rescuer.

The poem expresses the distress a woman experiences, being stuck in an innate or imposed role, lacking the ability to break free. She is unsatisfied with being reduced to her looks, staying stationary, and unable to utter anything else besides the old boring song. The song represents the tedious routine in which one cannot express one's individuality. Being "irresistible" turns out to be a curse rather than a blessing, whereas the siren's feelings, thoughts, and desires are disregarded. Nevertheless, Alisson feels guilty for having this alleged power over her teacher, sensing that her "child body" is undergoing a transformation and grieving this change: "My body was actively betraying me with hips, menstruation, stretch marks like purple marker on my breasts, all of the things that shifted the way men looked at me. If this *was* power, I wasn't sure it was worth it."⁹³⁷ She senses that the power of sex deprives her of the safety of childhood.

⁹³⁷ Wood, p.45.

Alisson confesses being deeply insecure, feeling persuaded that she is not capable of being loved, and also certain that her body is her “only possible source of power.”⁹³⁸ Thus, she assumes that her only chance to get what she wants, feeling as if she were in control of her life, is through being attractive. Alisson recounts which media images influenced her and other teenage girls at that time, mentioning Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Fiona Apple, who stripped and danced in their underwear on MTV looking hot and seductive. Alisson admits that the most difficult part was finding a balance between making a certain amount of effort to be pretty, simultaneously making it look like you were not trying too hard.

Similarly to Humbert, Alisson’s teacher renames her, first calling her Alice, referring to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Later on, he starts calling her Dinah as Alice’s little pet kitten that appears in the first four chapters of Carroll’s book. Dinah is Alice’s invisible companion. The cat is not physically present, but Alice sometimes talks to her. Dinah functions as Schrödinger’s cat, isolated and unseen, being both dead and alive as long as nobody opens the sealed box. The described situation bears a noteworthy resemblance to Alisson’s state: her story is kept secret as the loose notes hidden in a box under her bed until she decides to publish her memoir. Many years later, she realizes the power of naming and renaming, exploring the authority of language, confessing: “I had no idea about those things. I thought you just picked a name you liked. I didn’t realize their power.”⁹³⁹ It has been long established and proven that there is great power in naming things. Through the act of naming we can identify, symbolize and tame things, triggering bonding with a particular object or person. Furthermore, the act of naming builds and reinforces psychological ownership. In “The Social Psychology of Name Change,” Drury and McCarthy assert that our names “objectify our presence as participants in interpersonal transactions, not only for others, but for ourselves as well.”⁹⁴⁰ By continuously

⁹³⁸ Wood, p.37.

⁹³⁹ Wood, p.39.

⁹⁴⁰ Drury; McCarthy,p.310.

calling Alisson a cat name, her teacher dehumanizes and objectifies her, casting her into the role of his secret, silent and invisible pet.

Imitating Humbert, Mr. North drinks pineapple gimlets, “Humbert’s drink in *Lolita*” before their first night together in his apartment.⁹⁴¹ Although it was not Alisson’s first sexual experience, she describes it as a completely different one: “I had never been in a full-size bed with someone before. This wasn’t the same at all – the boys I had slept with before were scrawny, just the same soft, bare skin,” and always asking if she were okay or whether it hurts.⁹⁴² Alisson recalls that they never “crushed” her, implying that her teacher did:

“With the teacher, sex was different. It was blurry, all at haze, he tugged at me, I made noises like it hurt because it did, but he didn’t ask what they meant so he didn’t know. I let him hurt me. I had such bravado before, I had told him I knew what I was doing. But now I was drunk. [...] I went rag doll and he pushed my legs farther apart. And then it was over.”⁹⁴³

This concise description is full of constrained pain. The verb “tug” suggests a strong pulling force, a struggle. However, Alisson does not feel quite present. She cannot see clearly and feels unheard, as if visually and audibly detached from her partner. There is no connection and no desire on her part. Similar to *Lolita*, she wishes to appear brave and experienced, being afraid to speak up and stop the hurt. Alisson compares herself to a rag doll, which conveys an impression of her being an inanimate object, having absolutely no agency over the situation. This scene concludes Part One, with Alisson realizing that after all, she was not ready for the dispassionate and prosaic physical contact, needing intimacy on a different level. However, the reality was dramatically different from the fairy-tale image she anticipated.

Part Two opens with another allusion to fairy tales. Alisson speculates: “If this were a fairy tale, my story would be over.”⁹⁴⁴ She remarks ironically that Nabokov or a different author would have added a beautiful description of nature or a sophisticated

⁹⁴¹ Wood, p.130.

⁹⁴² Wood, p.132.

⁹⁴³ Wood, p.132.

⁹⁴⁴ Wood, p.138.

metaphor at this point. On the contrary, Alisson plainly continues her narration, stating that looking back she realizes that this is the moment where the narrative breaks down:

“This is the part in my story where, as an adult, I can see how a schoolgirl’s everyday unrequited crush transformed into something much darker, much more dangerous. This is the part where things begin to go wrong in ways that I, as a girl, could not anticipate. This is the part of the story that, even almost twenty years later, I hate to tell. There is no fairy tale here.”⁹⁴⁵

The morning after their first night together, the teacher aggressively attacks her because of the bloodstain Alisson left on the sheets. He suspects that she lied to him about not being a virgin, “yelling about Charlie the rapist, not Humbert the therapist,” which Alisson could not quite understand at the moment.⁹⁴⁶ Mr. North alludes to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Part 2 Chapter 1, in which Humbert attempts to intimidate Dolly, simultaneously denying being “a criminal sexual psychopath,” by proclaiming: “The rapist was Charlie Holmes; I am the therapist – a matter of nice spacing in the way of distinction.”⁹⁴⁷ In the Russian version, Nabokov incorporates a less felicitous wordplay (“*Расплением* занимался Чарли Холмс, я же занимаюсь *растением*, детским растением,”)⁹⁴⁸ meaning the juxtaposition of molestation and upbringing, whereas the term “растение” is actually never used in this sense, but is normally utilized as a noun meaning “a plant.”

The previous discussion of Alisson’s sexual experience is compared to an apple tossed back and forth between hands: “From his view, bites had already been taken. Having the first taste would have been wrong, but the fruit was already rotting. What was the harm in him just taking another bite of me?”⁹⁴⁹ On the one hand, this is an allusion to the original sin discussed earlier. Only Adam and Eve who took the first bites are considered sinners. Alisson compares herself to a bitten-off, rotting fruit consumed by others. There is no mutuality in this interaction. She depicts herself as a passive object, seeing her natural function in satisfying others’ hunger. On the other hand, the image of an apple tossed between hands could be viewed as an allusion to

⁹⁴⁵ Wood, p.138.

⁹⁴⁶ Wood, p.142.

⁹⁴⁷ Nabokov, p.150.

⁹⁴⁸ Nabokov, RV, p.190.

⁹⁴⁹ Wood, p.143.

the famous sofa scene, in which “Humbert Humbert intercepted the apple” from Dolly’s hands.⁹⁵⁰

As a grown-up woman, Alisson reflects on the past events, remarking: “Years later, I will be able to articulate that pain during sex has nothing to do with sexual inexperience – it’s about your partner being too rough. I bled after sex with the teacher because I was a child.”⁹⁵¹ She realizes that at the age of eighteen, she still did not understand her body, being unaware and ashamed of it: “My body was simply not prepared for the force, for the aggression, of sex with a grown-up.”⁹⁵² Alisson does not know how to pacify the teacher’s anger, swearing she did not lie and apologizing for ruining his parents’ expensive luxury sheets. Apropos fairy tales, this bloodstain reminds the reader of Bluebeard’s wife, punished as Pandora and Psyche, for her curiosity, which is considered to be a fatal female trait. Alisson lies to her parents and comes to her teacher’s house, fueled by a strong desire to get to know him better, which results in a catastrophe. The key to a hidden chamber is referred to by Jungian psychoanalysts as “the key of knowing,” which correlates with the theme of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Modern critics speak of Bluebeard’s toxic masculinity that evolves into domestic violence. Steven Ridgely states that Gilles de Rais, the fifteen-century aristocrat who abused and killed hundreds of children, served as a prototype for the main character of Charles Perrault’s cautionary tale.⁹⁵³ Sherrill Grace asserts that this story is about a power struggle between men and women, suggesting that women “must not only open doors, but destroy the castle” to be free.⁹⁵⁴ Alisson evokes Pandora a few chapters later, asserting that the reason behind her actions was not the curiosity, but the misapprehension: “It was already too late – everything awful in the world pouring out in front of her – but there must have been a moment after it began when she understood the error of judgment.”⁹⁵⁵ Alisson identifies with Pandora, wondering

⁹⁵⁰ Nabokov, p.58.

⁹⁵¹ Wood, p.141.

⁹⁵² Wood, p.141.

⁹⁵³ Ridgely, p.290.

⁹⁵⁴ Grace, p.262.

⁹⁵⁵ Wood, p.199.

what this woman felt as a torrent of troubles broke out of the box. She projects her emotions on the mythological heroine, assuming that she was scared, ashamed, feeling alone, and blaming herself for the disaster, all of which are typical sentiments of victims of sexual abuse.

In order to appease the teacher's rage, Alisson resorts to the power of female sexuality, nuzzling his arm, fluttering her eyelashes and apologizing, which leads to them having sex again, which was not her intention, "and it hurt the whole time, so much I made noises, but I didn't say stop, so later I would tell myself it was my fault he didn't stop."⁹⁵⁶ Therefore, she assumes that the essence of sex is pain, which she has to conceal, keeping the semblance of pleasure. Unlike Mr. North, Humbert rapidly detects Dolly's lack of desire, calling her "My Frigid Princess,"⁹⁵⁷ which Nabokov translates as "ледяная принцесса" ("ice princess" or "snow princess") instead of "фригидная принцесса," alluding to Andersen's fairy tale "The Snow Queen."⁹⁵⁸ Yet this alteration dramatically changes the significance of the utterance. The Snow Queen is a powerful figure that transforms, kidnaps and keeps captive an innocent boy, which represents a role reversal of Nabokov's novel. She is beautiful and delicate, but her kisses are enchanting and dangerous, which correlates with the lethal power of nymphets, described by Humbert. The Snow Queen objectifies and dominates Kai, symbolizing cold reason as opposed to romantic love based on friendship. "Frigid Queen" has a slightly different connotation, implying the lack of enthusiasm or sexual desire.

Initially, before going to college, Alisson stated that she loved writing and drawing, sensing she had a potential, because she "had lots to say."⁹⁵⁹ However, after their first night the teacher forbids her to write, considering it too risky: "He said I couldn't, no way, no how."⁹⁶⁰ Mr. North gets furious, as Alisson laughs at his

⁹⁵⁶ Wood, p.145.

⁹⁵⁷ Nabokov, p.166.

⁹⁵⁸ Nabokov, RV, p.213.

⁹⁵⁹ Wood, p.41.

⁹⁶⁰ Wood, p.147.

ridiculous request, and sets “new rules.” She is deprived of her voice, feeling that her world is getting smaller. As an adult, Alisson recalls that she had no one to talk about the problematic relationship because no one was worried about her. Moreover, Mr. North repeatedly insists that no one would be able to understand their relationship.⁹⁶¹ Alisson begins isolating herself on purpose, being entirely dependent on his schedule. Mr. North disputes the literary knowledge she gains at college, calling her confused and gullible, although her professors give her high grades. Gradually, Alisson feels that his words are losing their influence on her, admitting: “Words weren’t enough anymore; they had lost their hold on me. I wasn’t even angry about it. I was bored.”⁹⁶² She recalls Humbert’s description of Lolita’s behavior, starting to comprehend “her fits of disorganized boredom,” and believes that “if Lolita could make another choice, a choice to leave,” so could she.⁹⁶³ Finally, Alisson decides to tell someone about her affair, which created an overwhelming sensation of inner freedom: “I just remember this lift inside, like every word was something leaving. [...] And I remember what it felt like to tell someone – to open my hand and let the secret fly away. How free.”⁹⁶⁴ This metaphor suggests that by opening her mouth, Alisson is also able to open her hands, gaining an ability to connect with other people. Open palms are associated with honesty, as opposed to the lies envenoming her life and impeding confidential relationships with others.

In order to liberate herself from the past, Alisson feels a strong urge to destroy her copy of *Lolita*. One night she takes the teacher’s forgotten matches and tramps “into the darkness,” into the woods behind the dorm, which could be a symbol of starting anew, woods representing untouched land and symbolizing innocence. Alisson imagines “a cleansing fire, the kind in myths, the kind witches conjured to break spells – the cover would morph from *Lolita/Nabokov* to black smoke and my heart would be free.”⁹⁶⁵ However, once again, the reality proves to be diametrically

⁹⁶¹ Wood, p.179.

⁹⁶² Wood, p.227.

⁹⁶³ Wood, p.227.

⁹⁶⁴ Wood, p.234.

⁹⁶⁵ Wood, p.236.

opposed to her romantic vision: the book is just smoldering, giving her a sensation of another failure. This is the end of Part Two, which may imply that derivational stories may come to an end, but Nabokov's art is immortal.

Nabokov's *Lolita* is divided into Part One and Part Two, whereas the first one describes Humbert's foreground and his extended grooming of Dolly; and the second part gives an account of their road trip and his lolitaless years. The break between the two parts is their stop at The Enchanted Hunters, where Humbert has sexual intercourse with Dolly for the first time. Wood's story bears a similar structure: Part One of her book is her senior year of high school or the extended "seduction" period; Part Two is a series of road trips that summer (really) since the relationship was still secret and her final breakout. In Part Two, Wood cites the opening lines of *Lolita*'s Part Two, read out by Mr. North in his bed: "It was then that began our extensive travels all over..."⁹⁶⁶ At the time, she considers it terribly romantic, adopting his interpretation of disjointed passages of Nabokov's novel. Alisson skims the second part of the book, instead of reading it, because she loses interest when Dolly runs away. Similar to *Lolita*, the rupture between the two parts is the scene of the first sex. However, unlike *Lolita*, Alisson does not die at the end of Part Two. Instead, she composes Part Three, depicting her life since that experience and the impact it has had on her, claiming: "While the mirror between *Lolita* and my life ends here, the images continued to warp and multiply. And so, without a book to guide me anymore, I went on."⁹⁶⁷ Alisson starts creating her own story, finding her voice. The first two parts are called "Nymph" and "Capture," whereas the third part is named "Dissection." This is a clear allusion to the prominent leitmotif deployed in Nabokov's *Lolita*, namely an image of a butterfly, being caught and cut open. As Wood states in her interview with *The Paris Review*, she intentionally chose the section names to invoke an image of a female body conjoined with that of a butterfly, being trapped in an abusive relationship like in a spider web. The final part, "Dissection" she deliberately avoids a traditional happy ending that usually consists

⁹⁶⁶ Wood, p.152.

⁹⁶⁷ Wood, p.241.

of a man and marriage, because she wanted to show that a woman's happiness does not necessarily require a domestic bliss, but can be achieved through work and writing. Wood states:

"I see myself as the dissector in that third part—as the one with agency, taking a magnifying glass to the remains of this part of my life, investigating primary sources and trying to understand. And yes, explicitly reckoning with what happened to me, reclaiming my story and my life. And the story of *Lolita*, at the same time. I tried to connect the patterns in the book, to show how abuse and trauma echoes, how long it can take for things in your past to make sense."⁹⁶⁸

Wood admits that analyzing the past is hard work. Moreover, she states that it is a cathartic process that neither changes the facts of what happened nor makes her feel better. However, she claims to have found strength in the power of sharing her story, hoping it could positively impact her readers.

Alisson's teacher compares her to a beautiful butterfly as he pins her arms to his sheets with his hands. Fifteen years later, she feels compelled to buy a butterfly although she hates them, considering this image to be too overused and dull: "Butterflies are tramp stamp tattoos, stickers on teen girls' notebooks, metaphors about transformation that are so obvious they define cliché."⁹⁶⁹ At first, she pities pinned butterflies, till the store assistant assures her that her butterfly had already led a full life. Alisson explains: "They are ready for death at the height of their beauty. Their purpose at that point is purely sexual, to lay eggs, to multiply. And then to die."⁹⁷⁰ Then she proceeds to describe how to kill a butterfly without destroying its beauty. In this procedure, it does not matter whether the butterfly suffers: "Butterflies do not make sounds."⁹⁷¹ In this passage she seems to address the issue of voicelessness as a common reaction to trauma. Further Alisson quotes Nabokov, who states: "Beauty plus pity, that is the closest we can get to art."⁹⁷² This statement implies that beauty inevitably fades and dies, whereas an admiration of something fragile and ephemeral is the sensation we get while observing great art objects. Alisson offers her interpretation of Dolly's tragic death, which corresponds to that of

⁹⁶⁸ theparisreview.org/blog/2020/08/04/dissecting-pain-an-interview-with-alisson-wood/

⁹⁶⁹ Wood, p.273.

⁹⁷⁰ Wood, p.275.

⁹⁷¹ Wood, p.276.

⁹⁷² Wood, p.276.

many other literary critics: “In the book, Nabokov kills Lolita off before she can complete her life cycle. [...] Nabokov made her nymphet forever.”⁹⁷³ Alisson puts her butterfly in a simple black wooden frame above her desk, hoping that by watching it while writing; she could find the right words when she is at a loss. As Alisson observes Mr. North’s final present, a stamp collection titled *Revised Evidence: Vladimir Nabokov’s Collection of Inscriptions, Annotations, Corrections, and Butterfly Descriptions*, she reads Nabokov’s quote, “*My pleasures are the most intense known to man: writing and butterfly hunting*,” she cognizes that for him, “love didn’t always mean hearts beating.”⁹⁷⁴ Although these images of beautiful butterflies were made from love, admiration, and care, the comely creatures were murdered in order to be put on public display. As victims of sexual abuse, the displayed butterflies seem externally intact, being inwardly damaged.

Not reading, but rereading *Lolita* breaks Alisson’s heart, when she finally apprehends its meaning after having analyzed the novel in her advanced course Psychoanalysis of Literature. The first question her professor asks the class is “Who’s seduced whom?”⁹⁷⁵ During this class, Alisson learns that Humbert is an unreliable narrator, realizing that Mr. North is an unreliable interpreter of the story who even does not know how to pronounce Nabokov’s name correctly. Professor Cadwell states that this story is about abuse and obsession, elaborating: “If you let a teenage girl eat whatever she wanted, she would eat pizza every day. But she would die of scurvy. Teenagers are not equipped to make the best choices for themselves.”⁹⁷⁶ This statement reminds the reader of Dolly’s exaggerated consumption of sweets, allowed by Humbert in *Lolita*, and Daphne’s consumption of alcohol and drugs, permitted by Ralph in *Putney*. Analogously, Mr. North regularly prepares multiple cocktails for Alisson before sex till she is so intoxicated that she can neither fully perceive what is going on, nor resist him.

⁹⁷³ Wood, p.276.

⁹⁷⁴ Wood, p.270.

⁹⁷⁵ Wood, p.242.

⁹⁷⁶ Wood, p.243.

Concerning desire, Alisson cannot experience pleasure with her teacher, for she is always in pain and still sometimes bleeds during intercourse, which annoys and angers Mr. North. She is intimidated, fearing that something is wrong with her, questioning her sexuality:

“Wasn’t this supposed to be fun the whole time? It never occurred to me even for a second that maybe the sex I was having with the teacher was too rough, too unkind, that I was unprepared in every way and so had the opposite of a good time – pain blood. This thought never even began to flower.”⁹⁷⁷

Alisson obtains the needed knowledge from *Cosmopolitan* magazine, realizing: “My pleasure was up to me.”⁹⁷⁸ However, as she tells Mr. North about her desires and gets “exceptionally drunk” to be brave, Mr. North does not fulfill her wish, doing something different instead, which feels “absolutely *not* enjoyable.”⁹⁷⁹ As Alisson experiences a panic attack, begging him to stop, Mr. North gets upset and violent. The reason Alisson still stays with him, is her interest in his personality, and her fondness of his compliments and promises of a shared future, which could be classified as platonic love on her part.

As Alisson starts carefully rereading the novel, she stumbles upon the enumeration of Humbert’s presents on Chapter 33: “In the middle of the paragraph-long catalog of items, including comic books, a box of candy, nail polish, sodas, tucked in the middle of all these girl-child baubles, is a *box of sanitary pads*.”⁹⁸⁰ Suddenly she becomes aware that Dolly was bleeding from rough sex as she did, and this realization made her examine her own relationship with her teacher from a different perspective, admitting that it was toxic and abusive: “They were both leveraging poetry in their storytelling, the power of allusions to other heralded male authors, to intimidate and persuade their audience of their version of things.”⁹⁸¹ This is how Alisson discovers and becomes conscious of the power of words. Belatedly, she perceives that she herself had probably been the unreliable narrator of her story. This is an explicit metapoetic statement that offers the reader a challenge, raising more

⁹⁷⁷ Wood, p.177.

⁹⁷⁸ Wood, p.176.

⁹⁷⁹ Wood, p.178.

⁹⁸⁰ Wood, p.244.

⁹⁸¹ Wood, p.246.

questions than it answers. According to Matthias Freise, it represents a higher level of intertextuality:

“Es gibt nun noch eine höhere Stufe von Intertextualität, die im Weiteren als Metapoetik bezeichnet werden soll. Hier verweist der Text nicht nur aktiv auf seinen Kontext; er verweist darüber hinaus auf seine eigene Stellung in diesem Kontext.”⁹⁸²

There is a textual reference both to the context and the position of the text in this context. Probably, Wood resorts to metapoesis to display self-reflection. Besides being a “mirror in the text,” it could serve as an ironic play or a “safe passage” (*охранная грамота*) to preserve Nabokov’s tradition and “insure its transport to some future, more auspicious communication situation.”⁹⁸³ Both Humbert and Alisson resort to bonding unreliability, thus reducing the affective distance between the narrator and the reader.

The name Mr. North could refer to his coldness and lack of empathy, as pictured by Alisson. For a long time after their *liason dangereux*, Alisson is attracted solely to emotionally unavailable men who wish to keep their relationship secret – “illicit affairs, married men, guys who couldn’t commit” to even being called her boyfriend.⁹⁸⁴ In a review of *Being Lolita*, published in *The Guardian*, Rachel Cook states that secrets are corrosive, for they induce a loss of self: “If you do not exist in the minds of a lover’s friends and family, you’re halfway to not existing at all.”⁹⁸⁵ For many years, Alisson senses that she is unlucky and broken, deserving such a treatment for being a “bad girl.” Mr. North claimed that Dolly had to die at the end of the novel, because she had to suffer a consequence for her betrayal. Identifying with her, Alisson feels a clear impact on her life, being stuck with a mold of what she believed to be romance. It takes her a long time to become cognizant of certain behavioral patterns with the help of therapy. Not only does Mr. North misread Nabokov’s novel, but he also mispronounces his name, which Alisson realizes years later, starting to question her teacher’s competence and intentions. Mr. North’s

⁹⁸² Freise, „Metapoetik als Begegnung mit Gott in Čapeks *Hora*, p.229.

⁹⁸³ Segal in Finke, p.168.

⁹⁸⁴ Wood, p.264.

⁹⁸⁵ www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/16/being-lolita-by-alisson-wood-review-memoir-of-illicit-relationship (16.02.2021)

manipulative misinterpretation of Nabokov's *Lolita* as a beautiful love story aids him to lure Alisson into a precarious relationship, making her believe in her dangerous power.

Alisson is slowly learning to make different choices that do not make her unhappy. She tries to justify her difficulties, stating: "If Lolita, Dolores, had lived, I bet she would have been in a string of shitty relationships too. How can you understand what love is supposed to be if *Lolita* is the greatest love story of our century? If that is your first romance?"⁹⁸⁶ She wishes she had understood the novel on a deeper level when she read it as a teenager. Alisson refers to the black-and-white book cover with a quotation by Gregor von Rezzori that appeared in *Vanity Fair*, an American magazine of popular culture, suggesting that media has an enormous influence on teenagers' mentality, shaping their unexperienced minds.

At the end of the novel, Alisson becomes a teacher, titling her first creative writing course "Powerful Women." As she is standing at the blackboard, she gets insecure and dizzy first, recalling Mr. North's cursive, his words and his hand with a piece of chalk in it. Nevertheless, Alisson pulls herself together, suddenly feeling strong and competent, pondering: "I looked at the chalk again, in *my* hand now."⁹⁸⁷ This statement correlates with a famous figurative comparison of a pen with a penis, which defines male sexuality as the essence of social and literary power.⁹⁸⁸ Mentioning her career as a teacher, Wood emphasizes that she always reads and analyzes *Lolita* with her students as the culmination of the semester. Additionally, she cites two critical essays she habitually hands out to her students: "Men Explain *Lolita* to Me" by Rebecca Solnit and "If Women Wrote Men the Way Men Write Women" by Meg Elison. The former essay is quite superficial and pretentious that discredits all men discussing Nabokov's novel as mansplainers; whereas the latter is meant to be a witty satire but seems to parody solely mediocre male writers,

⁹⁸⁶ Wood, p.266.

⁹⁸⁷ Wood, p.278.

⁹⁸⁸ Gilbert; Gubar, p.4.

disremembering the great ones. Both essays are clichéd and simplistic, which makes me question Wood's academic competence.

In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Wood admits that she has always been fascinated by the duality of gender roles, “and how those social constructions bleed into the mirrors of emotion and violence, pain and love, masculine and feminine.”⁹⁸⁹ She states that in a Western heteronormative culture, women are made to be fragile to receive the needed protection, which creates a role for a man. Thus, the idea of a woman in need often interacts with the masculine desire to help to feel needed. Wood acknowledges that this is an oversimplification, but she strongly believes that the awareness of this duality is essential to question the established system.

Moreover, Wood admits that it was years later that she realized that her romantic and passionate affair with her teacher was abusive and predatory. At seventeen, she thought that she was deeply in love and overwhelmingly in lust, feeling special and desired. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Wood confesses that sharing this story was an incredibly painful, embarrassing, and shameful experience, which made her angry first at herself, then at the teacher, and finally at the adults who did not prepare her for the painful possibility to be exploited and abused. However, Wood asserts that could move past those feeling to the tender and unhealed behind them, writing from a place of empathy for her younger self. She emphasizes that she intended to be fair to everyone – neither to blame others nor to be too hard on herself. Wood explicitly states that she never envisioned painting Mr. North as a monster because that would be inaccurate. Instead, her purpose was to reveal the duplicity, the awful and the gentle, avowing that she was lying and cheating, too. This is, according to Wood, how abusive relationships become toxic quicksand: one feels guilty of one's misdeeds and thus pardons or disregards those of one's partner.

When asked about breaking the silence, Wood quotes James Baldwin: “That victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he, or

⁹⁸⁹ www.theparisreview.org

she, has become a threat.” As social studies have shown, many victims are reluctant to share their experience, afraid to be stuck in the victim role, meaning occupy a lower position in a social hierarchy, unable to break free from this “destructive pattern of dominance and submission established within the peer network.”⁹⁹⁰ Wood feels grateful for being able to publish her book, referring to the #MeToo movement that has brought a metamorphosis in our culture and justice system. She asserts: “The acknowledgement of abuse and abusers is the first step to create change, and the support of women’s stories is a vital piece of that work. When I published my essay about being raped in 2015, it was a very lonely experience. I’m not alone in telling my story anymore.”⁹⁹¹

⁹⁹⁰ Romera, p.5.

⁹⁹¹ www.bombmagazine.org/articles/alisson-wood-interviewed

8. #MeToo and Its Influence on Contemporary Literature

Long before the emergence of the #MeToo movement, autobiographies, memoirs and diaries constituted the platform of shared personal experiences, offering “self-help” to their readers by stimulating a process of realization and often serving as a “springboard for change.”⁹⁹² Many women sensing they were living in a “man’s world” could profit from women’s literature that allowed them to explore “more of themselves and society,” promoting their confidence and encouraging creative power.⁹⁹³ Furthermore, confessional works bear a strong resemblance to the personal experiences shared in the context of the #MeToo movement, reflecting the modern tendency of self-awareness and introspection. In “Confessional Narrative,” Brooks asserts that in a confession, the narrator reveals “something that is hidden, possibly shameful, and difficult to articulate.”⁹⁹⁴ A confession is often self-reflective, whereas its narrator seeks miscellaneous ways to overcome the shame of living in an unjust world. The feeling of shame is implied in all writing but particularly in writing about the self. According to Sartre, shame is dependent on self, other, and perception: “shame of self is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object.”⁹⁹⁵ Therefore, in order to write a confessional text and make it public, one must inevitably overcome the feeling of shame. However, the feeling of shame could impede the narrator from writing a truthful account of events. For example, various critics pointed out that Rousseau deliberately lied in his confessions out of vanity. Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* is exposed to the same temptations of vanity:

“Like his predecessor, he finds himself unable to reconcile his ideal of unbiased confession with the real demands of a form which it proves impossible to abandon. Ironically, he ends in heightening and perpetuating the conflicts that dogged Rousseau’s attempt at self-portrait.”⁹⁹⁶

⁹⁹² Blaha, p.43.

⁹⁹³ Blaha, p.44.

⁹⁹⁴ Brooks, p.82.

⁹⁹⁵ Sartre, p.350.

⁹⁹⁶ Howard, p.18.

Thus Dostoevsky transforms Rousseauesque confession into a parody of itself. Similarly, in *Lolita*, the confessional rhetoric is deliberately exaggerated, for Humbert attempts to influence the reader, winning his sympathy. All in all, in Rousseau's, Dostoevsky's, and Nabokov's confessions the relationship of author to reader is comparable to that of offender to judge, whereas the #MeToo movement introduces a different kind of confession, in which the author is not a perpetrator, but a victim.

Andrew S. Gross and MaryAnn Snyder-Körber explore the term "trauma," looking at the specific ways it has been used in historical and literary discourse. They cite Mark Seltzer, who calls the widespread fascination with injury in the United States "wound culture," claiming that "it has become the primary mode of social, cultural, and erotic interaction in an era marked by the mechanization of the body and disintegrating communal bonds."⁹⁹⁷ Usually, people are inclined to read about others' traumatic experiences, feeling their pain or "developing a voyeuristic interest in their suffering."⁹⁹⁸ The recent definition of the term "trauma-bonding" refers to emotionally entangled dynamics where people bond through shared traumatic experiences, projecting emotions, judgments and images from the past onto each other. This pattern is called "merging." One of the side-effects of the #MeToo campaign is the appeal for bonding through confession of collective traumatic experiences, which could be unhealthy in some cases. On the whole, it is maintained that trauma becomes a theoretical obsession in the context of postmodernism.

The #MeToo movement has had a colossal impact on socio-political and cultural attitudes towards sexual assault. It started in October 2017 as a response to the allegations against the film producer Harvey Weinstein by more than a hundred women and very soon went viral. The actress Alyssa Milano posted the first tweet that suggested: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted, write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." In fact, this concept had been previously coined by Tarana Burke

⁹⁹⁷ Seltzer, pp.31-34 in Gross; Snyder-Körber, p.371.

⁹⁹⁸ Gross; Snyder-Körber, p.371.

a decade earlier to assist survivors of sexual assaults, especially in marginalized communities. However, this time, the massive response was unprecedented: the movement has immediately attracted widespread media coverage and captured public attention. Still, it generated and keeps generating not only praise and support but also a backlash of criticism and resentment. For instance, in 2018, Catherine Deneuve, among other 100 women, signed an open letter denouncing the #MeToo movement, calling it a witch hunt against the right of a man to make a sexual advance. Some other prominent celebrities compared #MeToo to “mob rule” that created a world of victims.

In “Reckoning with the Silences of #MeToo,” Tambe examines the emergence of the modern phenomenon that enabled millions of people to share their painful experiences, overcoming the feelings of shame and guilt: “The viral force of the hashtag #Metoo took most people by surprise. Within the first twenty-four hours, it had been retweeted half a million times.”⁹⁹⁹ She suggests that it was Trump’s impunity that “served as a trigger provoking the fury at the heart of #MeToo” because he faced no consequences after acknowledging being a sexual predator. She explains: “For victims of sexual trauma, it is already painful to watch perpetrators roam free because of how high the burdens of proof are in legal cases. When a person such as Trump is grandly affirmed by an election, it retraumatizes victims.”¹⁰⁰⁰ According to Tambe, #MeToo’s affective focus on pain is out of step with currents in contemporary academic feminism that center pleasure, play, and healing, accepting sex as a currency: “In many contexts—both within and outside marriage—sex is exchanged for security, affection, and money.” However, Tambe warns that one should keep in mind that transactional sex can be negative, too: only if one has power over the other person that is seen as a threat, then that sexual advance is coerced.¹⁰⁰¹ For instance, in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Humbert uses sex as currency to bargain for control and ownership, whereas Dolly exchanges it primarily for material support. On the contrary, in *Putney, Being Lolita*, and *My Dark Vanessa*, female protagonists are emotionally dependent on their

⁹⁹⁹Tambe, p.197.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Tambe, p.198.

¹⁰⁰¹ Tambe, pp.200-201.

manipulative partners, exchanging sex for the partial fulfillment of their psychological needs, such as confirming their self-worth.

It is worth mentioning that it took a few years till the #MeToo movement took off in Russia, most probably because of a prevailing strong patriarchal culture. Rape and domestic violence are rarely reported to the authorities because of the existing culture of victim-blaming. In January 2017, Putin passed a law decriminalizing domestic violence that does not involve “serious” injuries, such as broken bones, that require hospital treatment. However, beatings that leave bleeding, bruises or scratches are not considered a criminal offense. Nadezhda Azhgikhina, a prominent journalist and writer who fights gender inequality, claims in an article for *The Nation* magazine: “The *Homo sovieticus mentality* is still alive in post-Soviet Russia. *Homo sovieticus* is not a free human being; he is a slave and resents any attempt to overcome slavery. This syndrome is an inheritance of the Stalinist camps. Deeply traumatized and humiliated, an oppressed person looks for another person to humiliate. Throughout history, the other person has been a woman.”¹⁰⁰² In addition, the prevalence of patriarchy in Russia is visible in popular culture and the entertainment industry. Numerous television shows in Russia (*Comedy Club* and *Comedy Women*, two television shows that have English titles, as well as *Male/Female* (Мужское/женское) propagate the sexism of gender stereotypes, suggesting that marriage ought to be the primary goal for women and that domestic violence victims and those who have been raped probably are to blame. It should be mentioned that Russia has finally adopted the Ukrainian movement #ЯНеБоюсьСказать (#IAmNot-ScaredToSpeak), which spread rapidly by way of sharing, similarly to the American one. The major difference between these two movements is that the Russian #IAmNotScaredToSpeak movement, unlike the #MeToo movement, did not concern or affect in any way men in powerful public positions. One could argue, that the Russian campaign was not as successful as the American one, but after all, one should take into account that the previously taboo topic of sexual harassment can now be publicly discussed and debated, which is an

¹⁰⁰² Azhgikhina, 22.02.2018

outstanding achievement. Certainly, one should take into account cultural differences: for centuries, Russian family life was based on patriarchal tyranny of Domostroy (a set of household rules encouraging wife beating.) In “The Extremes of Patriarchy: Spousal Abuse and Murder in Early Modern Russia,” Kollmann recounts that men were given “not only the right, but responsibility,” to use physical violence to inspire “piety, humility and submission” in their family members.¹⁰⁰³

In 2017 a book #I’mNotScaredToSpeak written by a public figure and journalist Anastasia Melnichenko was published in Ukraine. The writer states that she considered it necessary, in the first place, to teach children and adolescents ways to avoid sexual violence. Meanwhile, this book has become an international bestseller. Its purpose is to frankly tell young readers and their parents about the existing problem, to teach how to build harmonious relationships and sexual partnerships. The readers learn what to do if they have experienced sexual abuse, how to identify a child’s abuse, and respond to it correctly. This is the most outspoken and daring book about sex education in the former Soviet Union, free from prejudices and falsehoods. Indeed, in the post-soviet society, it is not customary to openly discuss these issues so that the majority learns the answers purely intuitively or from poorly informed peers. Moreover, the book raises questions concerning personal physical and moral boundaries, acceptance of one’s body, bullying, solidarity, and feminism.

In 2020 the #MeToo movement agitated the literary scene in Turkey. Numerous women have accused the famous writer #MeToo Hasan Ali Toptaş, whom The Frankfurter Allgemeine referred to as Turkey’s Franz Kafka. A journalist Kenan Bahzat Sharpe questions whether the author’s private life should affect the reception of his works, scrutinizing a new approach to an old dilemma: “Do we still read Heidegger’s philosophical works though we know he was a Nazi? Can we be aware that Woody Allen is a rapist and still watch his films?”¹⁰⁰⁴ Sharpe claims that a sexual predator is not able to empathize or feel remorse, and therefore, cannot delve into the deep contradictions and anxieties of human relationships. Nevertheless,

¹⁰⁰³ Kollmann, p.134.

¹⁰⁰⁴ www.duvarenglish.com/the-metoo-moment-of-turkish-literature-article-55428

scientific research has shown that sexual offenders have different rates of shame and guilt responses depending on treatment programs and messages they may have received from friends, loved ones and society as a whole concerning their crime.¹⁰⁰⁵ In “Shame, Guilt and Empathy in Sex Offenders,” Abigail San maintains that there are “significantly higher levels of empathic concern among sex offenders than non-sex offenders, and also significant positive correlations between personal distress and shame, as well as personal distress and guilt.”¹⁰⁰⁶ However, as a female researcher, she suspects that the male offenders in this study were trying to present themselves positively in her eyes, and suggests “employing more subtle methods for assessing emotions in this population, a lie scale for detecting dishonesty in responses, and also a male researcher to lessen the effects of social desirability.”¹⁰⁰⁷ Ironically, we come back to the issue of gender and unreliable narration of events.

In fact, there also were some allegations against Nabokov regarding *Lolita* that supposedly advocates or even glamorizes pedophilia. For example, in “Hiding in Plain Sight: Nabokov and Pedophilia,” Centerwall intrudes upon Nabokov’s privacy, attempting to find out whether “*Lolita* embodies the author’s hopeless desire for forbidden fruit.”¹⁰⁰⁸ He justifies this intrusion by his wish to voice Dolly’s strangled rage. As mentioned in Chapter 3, I would argue that in a fictional novel, the author’s private life should not be taken into account during literary analysis. Still, I would position myself between these two poles, as Marcel Couturier does. He points out that sexuality is a dangerously powerful force in human life, stating: “The novelist wants to give a free rein to his desires but claims at the same time that he should not be blamed for the sins committed by his protagonists. There is a great deal of bad faith involved there, not only on the part of the author but also of the institutions, the critics and the readers.”¹⁰⁰⁹ Couturier concludes that a modern novel is a powerful

¹⁰⁰⁵ Crutchley, pp.29-30.

¹⁰⁰⁶ San, p.133.

¹⁰⁰⁷ San, p.134.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Centerwall, p.468.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Couturier, p.252.

machine that fastens together the fates of all those involved in its composition and its consumption.

In the course of a BBC interview of Sofka Zinovieff, the interviewer mentions Gabriel Matzneff, an 83-year-old prizewinning writer whose reputation was destroyed after Vanessa Springora publicly announced that he seduced her when she was 14 and he in his 50s. In the article “The Matzneff scandal shows France’s attitude to consent is finally starting to change” published by The Guardian in 2020, Natasha Lehrer claims that Matzneff’s predilection for underage girls and boys was widely known in Parisian literary circles. In 1977 he has written an open letter defending three men accused of the sexual abuse of siblings aged 12 and 13, which was signed by 67 people including Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre; and published by Le Monde and Libération. In 1990 Matzneff talked openly about his penchant for Lolitas on a television show, and was deeply offended when a Canadian writer Denise Bombardier expressed an aversion due to his confession. Later on, the writer Jaque Lanzmann declared that “someone should have slapped her for being so rude.”¹⁰¹⁰ A French journalist Bernard Pivo, who interviewed Matzneff, asserts that in the 1970s and 1980s, literature was more important than morality, whereas nowadays morality is more important than literature.

When Sofka Zinovieff was asked if she was not afraid that writers like Lev Tolstoy, who did not often treat women well, or Fyodor Dostoevsky, known for his anti-Semitic views, will be “canceled,” she responded that it would be a great tragedy to ban brilliant books. Furthermore, she states that it is very important to continue reading great authors of the past, and after having read them, we can certainly argue why someone wrote one way or another, or why someone was a racist or a misogynist.

¹⁰¹⁰ www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/10/matzneff-scandal-france-consent-literary-establishment

Deborah Rhode discusses the changes #MeToo has propelled, exploring its evolution, implications, and potential in her essay “#MeToo: Why Now? What Next?” She quotes Gloria Steinem, who has been at the forefront of American feminism for the last fifty years: “The truth will set you free. But first it will piss you off.”¹⁰¹¹ This is an extremely abbreviated version of five stages of grief one goes through after a traumatic event, namely: 1) shock and denial; 2) pain and guilt; 3) anger and bargaining; 4) depression, reflection and loneliness; 5) adaptation, reconstruction and acceptance. This model of grief, developed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969, reflects the emotional cycle the victims of sexual abuse experience, which in most respects correlates with the structure of the derivational novels discussed above.

How does the #MeToo phenomenon affect literary studies? Literature is the art of sharing stories and making voices heard. It raises awareness and helps make a change. Moreover, it is scientifically proven that creative expression can expedite the healing process: “throughout history, people have used pictures, stories, dances, and chants as healing rituals.”¹⁰¹² In 1990, Bronwyn Davies describes a strategy of undertaking collective memory work that is consonant with the contemporary #MeToo movement:

“This is a research technique especially suited to poststructuralist theory, because it begins with the particular memories of individual people – memories that they take to be their own personal stories, which belong to them, are of them and that signify who they are – their subjectivity. [...] Through sharing their stories with each other the group begins to recognize the ways in which their particular stories are *cultural* productions that intersect and overlap with the stories of others. Other’s stories bear unexpected similarities to one’s own – they engender a more detailed recall of one’s own stories.”¹⁰¹³

The #MeToo movement has generated a new genre of writing in the form of feminist, millennial stories, such as memoirs, viral personal essays, and fiction about sexual harassment. It attempts to redefine sexual harassment in the millennial age of social media, creating a strong bond of intergenerational feminism. For readers, these stories create a unique space to explore the feelings of shame and guilt, joining a

¹⁰¹¹ Rhode, p.378.

¹⁰¹² Graham-Pole.

¹⁰¹³ Davies, p.511.

virtual communal realm of other, mostly female, readers who share the depicted experiences.

The book *Teaching Nabokov's 'Lolita' in the #MeToo Era* evaluates the teachability of the famous novel in the twenty-first century. Its authors attempt to establish a balance between the analysis of *Lolita's* aesthetic complexity and contemporary analysis of its troubling content, offering innovative student assignments, creative-writing exercises, and new critical interpretations. Eléna Rakhimova-Sommers asserts that the #MeToo movement has incited the reassessment of the ways controversial works should be taught. She claims: “After teaching Nabokov for decades, a great number of faculty members have witnessed (and continue to witness) a fascinating shift in student responses to the novel.”¹⁰¹⁴ According to Rakhimova-Sommers, the responses range from questioning *Lolita's* established place on the syllabus on embracing it as “a groundbreaking textbook on predatory rhetoric and its dismantling.”¹⁰¹⁵ She warns that while analyzing *Lolita* we should examine not only the context that generated it, but also the context in which it is read. Furthermore, Rakhimova-Sommers highlights the need for innovative pedagogy that allows students to engage actively and intervene in the novel “to help alleviate the commonly reported ‘helpless bystander’ syndrome,” which is indispensable after “the tsunami of #MeToo” cleared the ground for a multi-voiced conversation.¹⁰¹⁶

In her essay “(How) Should a Feminist Teach *Lolita* in the Wake of #MeToo?” Marilyn Edelstein proclaims that the cultural, political, and social climate has dramatically changed between 1955 and 2020, which should be considered while critically analyzing the novel. Edelstein’s essay discusses “trigger warnings,” cautioning against re-traumatizing students and urging the instructors to keep in mind that some readers could have been survivors of sexual assaults. She persistently advocates reconsidering a complex relationship between literature and reality,

¹⁰¹⁴ Rakhimova-Sommers, p.2.

¹⁰¹⁵ Rakhimova-Sommers, p.2.

¹⁰¹⁶ Rakhimova-Sommers, p.3.

helping the students become “not only better readers and writers but also better critical thinkers – skilled in analyzing and using language, able to connect texts to their historical and cultural contexts, and attentive to both text’s nuances and their larger implications.”¹⁰¹⁷ To me, this appeal surprisingly resonates with John Ray’s call to “all of us – parents, social workers, educators – apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world,” ironically mentioned in the foreword to *Lolita*.¹⁰¹⁸ However, Edelstein is truly serious about that, transforming the original irony into a grim and straightforward admonition, which Nabokov himself would have probably found ridiculous.

Shifting from general phrases to specific suggestions, Edelstein proposes opening up classroom discussions of how Humbert’s case can assist in illuminating patriarchal culture’s sexual objectification of women, “which contributes to the continuing problems of not only sexual harassment but also sexual abuse.”¹⁰¹⁹ She recommends a comparative analysis of Nabokov’s *Lolita* and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, framing the discussion with feminist analyses of these novels. All in all, Edelstein emphasizes the increasing awareness of how widespread sexual abuse is (“in part but not only through the #MeToo movement”) and encourages educators to “explore the complex relations between ethics and aesthetics in the novel and in the real world,” understanding and resisting misogyny and sexual objectification.¹⁰²⁰

José Vergara joins the discussion, proposing to include *Lolita* in a “Prison Literature” course together with Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Susan Sonntag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s *My Fellow Prisoners*. He suggests that a comparative analysis of these novels could lead to #MeToo inspired discussions on topics including guilt, shame and power relations. Vergara remarks that “Humbert’s calculated method of hijacking Dolores’s narrative

¹⁰¹⁷ Edelstein in Rakhimova-Sommers, p.16.

¹⁰¹⁸ Nabokov, p.6.

¹⁰¹⁹ Edelstein in Rakhimova-Sommers, p.16.

¹⁰²⁰ Edelstein in Rakhimova-Sommers, p.24.

generates a second-level captivity echoing the #MeToo era scenarios.”¹⁰²¹ Finally, he states that modern students are better equipped to recognize and comprehend Humbert’s manipulative techniques due to numerous stories being published lately on this topic. Alisa Zhulina suggests adapting the novel into a performative medium while teaching it in the #MeToo era in order to explore the relationship between the artist and the art. Moreover, this approach would make the students reconsider Dolly’s body image and the importance of her voice. Finally, Zhulina asks: “Should we take John Ray’s advice and be ‘entranced with the book while abhorring its author’?”¹⁰²²

According to Carroll, expressive writing is a way to access the unconscious self, and it helps processing traumatic experiences and brings relief:

“Our voices are saturated with who we are, embodied in the rhythms, tonal variations, associations, images and other somato-sensory metaphors in addition to the content meaning of the words. Our voices are embodiments of ourselves, whether written or spoken. It is in times of extremity that we long to find words or hear another human voice letting us know we are not alone.”¹⁰²³

Thus, the disguise of fiction often allows us to deal more openly with societal taboos and cultural norms. Moreover, global connectivity can lessen the feeling of isolation and foster a sense of community.

Anne Dwyer admits that the main difficulty of teaching Nabokov is “a clash of historic and national sensibilities.”¹⁰²⁴ She maintains that in *Lolita*, the reader has to deal with at least four layers of history: first, considering that Nabokov belongs to the turn-of-the-century European elite; second, accounting for his outsider’s perspective on postwar American life; third, dealing with layers of literary allusions to past centuries; and finally, relating the novel to the contemporary context of American culture. I would add that many Russian critics still consider Nabokov primarily a Russian writer, viewing his works through the prism of contemporary Russian culture, which should also be taken into account.

¹⁰²¹ Vergara in Rakhimova-Sommers, p.62.

¹⁰²² Zhulina in Rakhimova-Sommers, p.74.

¹⁰²³ Carroll, p.164.

¹⁰²⁴ Dwyer in Rakhimova-Sommers, p.36.

Our attitudes towards sex are historically constructed, reminds Dwyer, stating that in Nabokov's novels, "sex is dangerous, revealing, but also hilarious."¹⁰²⁵ However, since the rise of the #MeToo movement in 2018, many people have realized that sex should be "healthy, consensual and (probably) serious."¹⁰²⁶ Still, sex between a child and an adult remains a taboo topic that is seldom brought into a public discussion. Dwyer concludes that students need to read difficult books, especially those that have had an immense resonance in our culture, whereas it is essential to remember that people feel when they read; "and that *Lolita* makes many readers feel angry, disgusted, or hurt."¹⁰²⁷ Dwyer believes that teaching *Lolita* successfully in the era of #MeToo means teaching the art of distance, which was called "отстранение" by Russian formalists. Students could acknowledge the emotional toll of the novel and still should be able to access different text layers, applying close reading, reflecting on the role of art in our today's lives.

In *#MeToo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture*, Hewett and Holland encourage teachers to explore and analyze literary works dealing with sexual assault and rape culture. In twenty-eight pedagogical essays, literary scholars and teachers propose a variety of methods for teaching these difficult topics in transformative ways, asserting that "the classroom is a powerful space in which to catalyze the kind of reflection that leads to individual and cultural change."¹⁰²⁸ The book rudimentarily addresses queer perspective, attempting to bring diversity into discussion. However, the main focus of this volume is male violence against women in the context of misogyny because it is by far the most pervasive form of sexual violence.

Krasny labels the #MeToo movement "a hysterical turn in the twenty-first century," reevaluating the pejorative notion of hysteria coined and explored by Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*. Foucault claims: "women invent, exaggerate and repeat all the various absurdities of which disordered imagination are capable, which has

¹⁰²⁵ Dwyer in Rakhimova-Sommers, p.36.

¹⁰²⁶ Dwyer in Rakhimova-Sommers, p.36.

¹⁰²⁷ Dwyer in Rakhimova-Sommers, p.38.

¹⁰²⁸ Hewett; Holland, p.12.

sometimes become epidemic and contagious.”¹⁰²⁹ She asserts that this “hysteria activism” is a critical reaction to “traumas and wound inflicted by patriarchal misogyny.”¹⁰³⁰ The attack has a dual nature: “the attack suffered from patriarchy and the attack performed by hysteria, both unplanned and planned, unwanted and deliberate.”¹⁰³¹ In *My Dark Vanessa*, Strane mentions the #MeToo movement, using the word “hysteria” in a derogatory way, being scared of the possible consequences. He says: “I understand it might be tempting to join in on the hysteria going on right now... But my god, Vanessa, do you really want this attached to you for the rest of your life? Because if you do this, if you come forward, it’s going to stick to you –...”¹⁰³² Shame and fear are two strong feelings one must overcome in order to come forward, and many people are not able to do that. Later on, Vanessa adopts the term “hysteria” when talking to her therapist Ruby. She feels that people unnecessarily dramatize the past events, claiming: “When you see a movement with so much momentum, it’s natural to want to join, but to be accepted into this one you need something horrible to have happened to you. Exaggeration is inevitable. Plus, it’s all so vague. These terms are easy to manipulate. Assault can be anything.”¹⁰³³ The therapist accepts and supports her decision not to speak up; explaining that coming out could create a dangerous amount of pressure for someone who is dealing with trauma. Vanessa is frustrated and defensive because she feels that other people who were abused are judging her for “enabling rapists.”¹⁰³⁴

Additionally, Vanessa declines to participate “in this movement of women upon women upon women lining the walls with every bad thing that’s ever happened to them” because she refuses to see herself as a victim, clinging to the hope that his love for her made the affair different from the other ones. The image of numerous naked bodies piled up makes the reader think of the Holocaust, a mass murder, still denied by some people. Vanessa equally loathes the term “survivor,” used by the journalist Janine Bailey: “That word, with its cloying empathy, that patronizing, flattening word that makes my whole body

¹⁰²⁹ Foucault, p. 139 quoted in Bronfen, p. 112.

¹⁰³⁰ Krasny, p. 125.

¹⁰³¹ Krasny, p. 126.

¹⁰³² Russell, p.146.

¹⁰³³ Russell, p.263.

¹⁰³⁴ Russell, p.259.

cringe no matter the context – it pushes too far.”¹⁰³⁵ As the story of Strane’s assault is spreading across the country, it is picked by local TV, then by papers in Boston and New York, and then people start writing think pieces, reacting to the revelation: “The think pieces feature Taylor alongside Strane and out of her they craft an archetype of the overzealous accuser, a millennial social justice warrior, who never stopped to think about the consequences of her actions.”¹⁰³⁶ Russell realistically depicts a wide range of reactions, following this kind of posts. Some voices defend Taylor, but some vilify her, calling her selfish and heartless murderer, whereas Strane is labeled as “a victim of the tyranny of feminism.”¹⁰³⁷ Vanessa recalls how Strane lamented that she turned him into a criminal, reversing the roles and addressing her as a sinister seductress. This made Vanessa feel strong and mighty: “I saw such power in that. I could have sent him to jail, and in my brattiest moments, I’d imagined it – Strane in a lonely little cell, with nothing to do but think about me.”¹⁰³⁸ As he secluded Vanessa from the outer world, she, in her turn, fantasizes about isolating him with the memory of her. Another reversal of the roles is visible after Vanessa turns eighteen and decides to visit Strane, banging on his door “like a cop.”¹⁰³⁹ As Strane touches her face, she jerks away because she thinks of the line from *Lolita* when Humbert finds Lo after so many years: “I’ll die if you touch me.”¹⁰⁴⁰ This line shows that Vanessa puts herself in Humbert’s position, feeling the obsession and the pain of loss.

In *Putney*, Ralph witnesses a wave of public accusations of sexual abuse that date as far as the 1970s or ‘80s, stating: “There was regularly a new bout of shaming some seedy, long-forgotten pop singer, now reincarnated as a molesting predator, an evil fiend.”¹⁰⁴¹ The term “reincarnation” means soul transformation to a different body, which implies that Ralph assumes that the media is the authority that labels initially innocent people as evil. He finds it grotesque that a man of ninety-six is jailed for abusing two children, who

¹⁰³⁵ Russell, p.232.

¹⁰³⁶ Russell, p.190.

¹⁰³⁷ Russell, p.191.

¹⁰³⁸ Russell, p.191.

¹⁰³⁹ Russell, p.242.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Russell, p.243.

¹⁰⁴¹ Zinovieff, p.149.

are presumably pensioners by now. Ralph seems to believe that sins are magically erased with time, even if one does not repent.

Shengold asks the readers: “How frequent are the seduction and abuse of children?” and maintains that they are “certainly more common than had been realized for decades.” Nowadays people become increasingly aware of the fact of child abuse, “accounts fill our newspapers, magazines, and even television (as well as the psychiatric literature).”¹⁰⁴² However, it was the hashtag #MeToo that revealed the magnitude of sexual violence around the world. #MeToo movement was followed by #TimesUp movement founded in 2018 as a charity that raises money to support the survivors of sexual abuse. The use of hashtags – “global mass signifiers” – makes it easier to find information with a specific content and reach target groups. The hashtag #MeToo raises awareness of an issue and exposes the abusers while supporting the survivors. Overall, social media is used as a platform for building relationships, reflecting identity, discussing sensitive topics and stimulating changes.

In “Four perspectives on world literature – reader, producer, text, and system,” Matthias Freise remarks:

“Functionally related to the social system as a whole, the system of literature reduces conflict on the outside by producing conflict within the secluded semantic space of the fictional world. Literature is a system, which homogenizes the world outside the system by transforming conflict into its own semantic space. From a system point of view, literature is a strategy of conflict resolution. In psychology, this process is known as internalization, which leads to external harmony by producing internal conflict. World literature, therefore, is the process of promoting harmony between peoples by the internalization of conflicts between them into the semantic space of literary texts.”¹⁰⁴³

According to Freise, a conflict could be transformed into a symbol, thus giving rise to qualitative cultural globalization that encapsulates conflicts. We should not disjoin and dissect the system of literature in an effort to define a victim and an offender but apply a new differentiated view that leads to external harmony.

In modern terms, Dolores Haze is a survivor. In his most recent masterpiece, *The Spirit of Trust*, the American philosopher Robert Brandom proposes the term

¹⁰⁴² Shengold, p.309.

¹⁰⁴³ Freise, p.13.

“forgiving recollection” as the key notion of our postmodern society. The gap between an offender and a severe judge could be overcome through reconciliation, achieved by the agent confessing his sin and by the accuser confessing his condemnation and even hatred. Thus the forgiving judge exhibits the power of Spirit, even if the wounds of the Spirit are not fully healed. Brandom admits the limits of his theory, stating: “Some things people have done strike us, even upon due reflection, as simply unforgivable.”¹⁰⁴⁴ Still, he calls upon the reader to reflect upon the hidden motives of an evil act, trying to understand what appears to us as evil. Brandom maintains that concrete, practical forgiveness signifies an effort to change the negative consequences of the act because a wrong action is seldom “a finished thing, sitting there fully formed” but a chain of events.¹⁰⁴⁵ In order to achieve forgiving recollection, a concrete recollective reconstruction of the deed must be produced. I would argue that the #MeToo movement encourages and promotes such a recollective reconstruction of traumatic events, which continues emerging in novels and memoirs in the 21st century.

Numerous authors who contributed to the book *#MeToo* edited by Lori Perkins, claim without a hint of irony that speaking up makes abuse survivors feel strong in their bodies, confident in their mind, and “emotionally equipped to deal with people who would try to belittle, intimidate, harass” or otherwise sexually assault them.¹⁰⁴⁶ They strongly believe that it is highly important to openly address this subject, for “if girls and young women know what sexual abuse, harassment and assault look like, they will have a better idea how to combat it, and more importantly, report it.”¹⁰⁴⁷ It is asserted that change must occur on two levels: culturally and personally, appealing to the readers: “Let’s get educated on sexual predators, and on our own vulnerabilities, so that we can help the collective movement toward a better world.”¹⁰⁴⁸ Sexual abuse used to be a forbidden topic loaded with shame and fear,

¹⁰⁴⁴ Brandom, p.716.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Brandom, p.602.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Saly-Monzingo in Perkins, p.54.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Billiter in Perkins, p.60.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Ramsland in Perkins, p.68.

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and it is still an uncomfortable theme, but not a taboo anymore. There is a gradual societal change, although it may take another generation until this topic becomes less prevalent due to growing awareness and hopefully decreasing abuse.

9. Butterfly Effect and Lolita Effect

Words have power, and literature is a key to raising awareness, understanding, and action when the author addresses a social or a sensitive issue in his work. Toker claims that the metaphysical background of *Lolita* is, “as usual in Nabokov, inseparable from its ethical principle. Both proclaim that the destruction of a single life, or a single childhood, is a crime of cosmic dimension.”¹⁰⁴⁹ This statement correlates with the message of Ray Bradbury’s short story “A Sound of Thunder” (1952), where a wealthy hunter goes for a safari in the distant past, seeking the excitement he cannot find in the present, and accidentally crushes a butterfly, thus making dramatical changes in the nature of the alternative present. The story takes place in 2055 at a company called Time Safari Inc. The main character, Eckels, wishes to shoot a dinosaur; however, when seeing the gigantic animal, he becomes terrified and runs off the Path. Analogously to Humbert’s immutable sense of doom represented by McFate and called by Alexandrov “a happier version of Tolstoyan fatalism,” Eckels undergoes a sudden realization that one’s destiny could be fundamentally and irrevocably changed by seemingly a minor event.¹⁰⁵⁰ The reader of *Lolita*, might come to the same realization, too, asking oneself a question what would have happened, had Humbert stuck to the initial plan, staying in a different house. Thus Bradbury’s Path could symbolize the destiny one can follow or take an alternative road, as suggested by Robert Frost in “The Road Not Taken.” Correspondingly, Nabokov’s fire that destroyed McCoo’s house could also stand for the deviation in the Path of Destiny.

Both Humbert and Eckels prefer not to see themselves as autonomous agents that preside over their destinies but as toys in the hands of the Divine Power, although they do make autarkic decisions that change their and others’ lives. The term “the butterfly effect” is often connected to Bradbury’s story, although it was coined by meteorologist Dr. Edward Norton Lorenz in 1963, who claimed: “if a butterfly moves

¹⁰⁴⁹Toker, p.227.

¹⁰⁵⁰Alexandrov, p.115.

its wings in one corner of the globe, it can affect the weather across the world.”¹⁰⁵¹ This term is used as a metaphor meaning to illustrate that quite insignificant events can have far-reaching consequences, leading to radical changes over time. Butterfly effect is not only an illustration of chaos theory and mathematical topology, but also has an important function for literary plots. Moreover, various TV shows and video games feature the butterfly effect as a central plot point, displaying “what if” moments and large-scale effects. Seemingly simple decisions and quotidian encounters are able to modify the story in a unique way.

Traveling in the past reminds Humbert’s longing for childhood: “white hair turn Irish-black, wrinkles vanish; all, everything fly back to seed, flee death, rush down to their beginnings...”¹⁰⁵² As the Tyrannosaurus is coming out of the forest, the hunter is suddenly unable to move as if he were enchanted: “Eckels seemed to be numb. He looked at his feet as if trying to make them move. He gave a grunt of helplessness.”¹⁰⁵³ Instead of enjoyment, he panics and runs amok. Similar to Humbert, the hunter overestimates himself while underestimating his prey.

The butterfly is green and gold, reminding of the prevalent colors in Botticelli’s *Venus*, to whom *Lolita* was repeatedly compared. A butterfly may symbolize beauty recklessly destroyed by an adventurous and selfish hunter. Additionally, it may symbolize freedom, for after Eckels kills it, the election’s outcome radically changes, and the politician named Deutscher, whose name and dictatorial tendencies allude to Nazi Germany, wins the election, defeating Keith, who represents democracy. Similarly, in *Lolita*, as mentioned earlier, Humbert compares himself to Hitler, describing himself as a brunet with black and thick eyebrows and “an almost Hitlerian cowlick on his pale blow.”¹⁰⁵⁴ In both cases, there is a juxtaposition of dictatorships and beauty, of tyranny and art. Art can be a powerful weapon; therefore, numerous dictators burnt books they considered dangerous. Similar to

¹⁰⁵¹ Hoffman, p.239.

¹⁰⁵² Bradbury, p.72.

¹⁰⁵³ Bradbury, p.78.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Nabokov, p.188.

Lolita, in “A Sound of Thunder,” Bradbury uses verbal, dramatic, and situational irony to depict conflicts between the protagonists and their dilemmas. Before the butterfly is killed, Deutscher is characterized as “anti-Christ, anti-human, anti-intellectual,”¹⁰⁵⁵ whereas in the new version of the future, he is portrayed as “an iron man, a man with guts.”¹⁰⁵⁶ The reader understands why the election results have changed, but the speaker does not know the cause.

In Nabokov’s *Lolita*, “a clap of thunder reverberated through the house” after Charlotte dies and Humbert bids farewell to Jean Farlow.¹⁰⁵⁷ This sound creates an effect of a Gothic drama, instilling an unsettling mood of menace and suspense. Moreover, an image of a tempest can be found throughout the novel. First, Humbert’s mother dies “in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) [...]” as he remarks laconically, without showing any emotion.¹⁰⁵⁸ However, at the end of the novel, Humbert finally reveals how much it affected him:

“When my mother, in a livid wet dress, under the tumbling mist (so I vividly imagined her), had run panting ecstatically up that ridge above Moulinet to be felled there by a thunderbolt, I was but an infant, and in retrospect no yearnings of the accepted kind could I ever graft upon any moment of my youth, no matter how savagely psychotherapists heckled me in my later periods of depression.”¹⁰⁵⁹

The image of a storm is repeatedly connected to a sexual act. Humbert’s poetically superstitious aunt, who became an “unpaid governess and housekeeper,” was taken advantage of by his father on “one rainy day” and forgotten after the storm passed by “and the weather cleared.”¹⁰⁶⁰ In “Primal Scene and Misreading in Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” John Ingham maintains that Dolly is associated with wetness, “while lightning and thunder haunt Humbert and Lolita.”¹⁰⁶¹ Thunderstorms, which are linked to the passage into the Otherworld in Greek mythology, scare and intimidate Dolly. Humbert recounts:

¹⁰⁵⁵ Bradbury, p.1.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Bradbury, p.3.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Nabokov, p.104.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Nabokov,p.10.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Nabokov, p.287.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Nabokov, p.10.

¹⁰⁶¹ Ingham, p.31.

‘We spent a grim night in a very foul cabin, under a sonorous amplitude of rain, and with a kind of prehistorically loud thunder incessantly rolling above us. ‘I am not a lady and do not like lightning’ said Lo, whose dread of electric storms gave me some pathetic solace.’¹⁰⁶²

Additionally, it should be noted that "The Lady Who Loved Lightning" is the title of Qulity’s play.

In Bradbury’s short story, the appearance of the monstrous dinosaur is announced by a loud rumble: “A sound of thunder. Out of the mist, one hundred yards away, came Tyrannosaurus Rex.”¹⁰⁶³ This sound foreshadows death and danger. As Tyrannosaurus is dying, the thunder is fading:

“Like a stone idol, like a mountain avalanche, Tyrannosaurus fell. Thundering, it clutched trees, pulled them with it. It wrenched and tore the metal Path. [...] The guns fired. The Monster lashed its armored tail, twitched its snake jaws, and lay still. A fount of blood spurted from its throat. Somewhere inside, a sac of fluids burst. Sickening gushes drenched the hunters. They stood, red and glistening. The thunder faded.”¹⁰⁶⁴

At the end of the story, Eckels is shot by Travis, whereas the sound of thunder is the sound of Travis’s rifle: “He did not move. Eyes shut, he waited, shivering. He heard Travis breathe loud in the room; he heard Travis shift his rifle, click the safety catch, and raise the weapon. There was a sound of thunder.”¹⁰⁶⁵ This passage reminds the reader of Chekhov’s gun mentioned earlier. The rifle loaded at the beginning of the story finally fires, and the killer is killed; in other words, the abuser becomes the victim, paying for his deeds.

Bradbury is called a writer and a magician, “a humanist, writing about love, memory and magic.”¹⁰⁶⁶ All of the above can be as well applied to Nabokov, who believed in the surreptitious nature of memory and explored its role in a reconstruction of one’s life, stating:

¹⁰⁶² Nabokov, p.222.

¹⁰⁶³ Bradbury, p.6.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Bradbury, p.8.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Bradbury, p.12.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Hoffman, p.242.

“I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.”¹⁰⁶⁷

In *Lolita*, there are a lot of hidden emotions behind the ecstasy of aesthetic bliss, and many readers indeed trip over the artfully interwoven patterns of Nabokov’s narrative.

In *Putney*, Jane recalls how Ralph sexually abused her after taking her for a ride and buying her a strawberry ice cream: “The whole episode lasted maybe a minute. But that is long enough, she thought [...]. After all, you can kill a person in a second; why should it take much longer to complete a sexual assault?” This statement correlates with the term “butterfly effect” mentioned above. It does not take much time to ruin one’s life. On the other hand, the #MeToo movement demonstrates that one tiny tweet can cause a typhoon, breaking the silence that lasted for decades. In *Butterfly Politics: Changing the World for Women* (2017), a noted lawyer and activist Catharine MacKinnon condemns the dynamics of inequality in the system of sexual politics, arguing that seemingly minor amendments to the law can cause massive social and cultural transformations. She states: “Butterfly politics means the right small human intervention in an unstable political system can sooner or later have large complex reverberations.”¹⁰⁶⁸ Furthermore, MacKinnon advocates concrete steps that could have butterfly effect on women’s rights, describing the dynamics of intervention and the collaborative effects of collective recursion.

Durham calls “the Lolita effect” the most enduring social and cultural consequence of Nabokov’s novel, offering a critical view on the media sexualization of girlhood in today’s society. In her book she repeatedly refers to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, calling it a “pro-girl” book, however instantly adding that it is also “pro-media” book.¹⁰⁶⁹ According to Durham, the Lolita effect has a double impact on the contemporary

¹⁰⁶⁷ Boyd, p.52.

¹⁰⁶⁸ MacKinnon, p.1.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Durham, p.14.

understanding of female sexuality: it shapes “the world’s relation to girls, and girl’s psychic relationships to themselves.”¹⁰⁷⁰ Durham states that myths of sexuality are constructed by outside forces that are historically, culturally and regionally specific, whereas the main problem is that girls are not in control of this elaborate and tricky construction. Durham draws a parallel between Humbert Humbert and adult males in general, claiming: “The Lolita effect is an adult male fantasy of girls’ sexuality, just as Lolita was the object of Humbert Humbert’s fantasies.”¹⁰⁷¹ She justifies this overgeneralization, stating that the belief that younger women are more sexual than older women is ingrained in our culture to such an extent that it seems natural instead of constructed.

According to Durham, the name Lolita has become a collective term, a pervasive metaphor, “an everyday allusion, a shorthand cultural reference to a prematurely, even inappropriately, sexual little girl,” who is considered wrong and wicked for provoking sexual thoughts and luring the observers into wickedness, too.¹⁰⁷² In the pop culture, the term “Lolita” is used as an artful fabrication that serves market needs, attracting the consumers: it is framed in “a clever rhetoric of empowerment and choice,” which however does not promote a healthy, progressive and ethical understanding of sexuality.¹⁰⁷³ Durham addresses the issue of power, which is central to Nabokov’s *Lolita* as well as to all its reinterpretations mentioned above. She agrees with other critics that Nabokov’s Lolita is a powerless victim who has no control over her relationship with Humbert, which is abusive and manipulative. However, Durham emphasizes “the care with which Nabokov presents her case, and his emphasis on Humbert’s malfeasance,” which she claims has been overlooked by many readers.¹⁰⁷⁴ She points out that Lolita has become a metaphor for “a child vixen, a knowing coquette with an out-of-control libido, a baby nymphomaniac,” an image incommensurable with the original Lolita.¹⁰⁷⁵ Durham concludes that modern

¹⁰⁷⁰ Durham, p.182.

¹⁰⁷¹ Durham, p.209.

¹⁰⁷² Durham, p.25.

¹⁰⁷³ Durham, p.27.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Durham, p.25.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Durham, p.26.

Lolitas presented by the media are fraudulent fabrications that successfully serve market needs, because they are framed “in a clever rhetoric of empowerment and choice,” which prove to be a mere illusion.¹⁰⁷⁶

Furthermore, Durham criticizes the construction of female sexuality, which sees body displays attracting the male gaze as empowering, because it allegedly “elevates them in the sexual hierarchy.”¹⁰⁷⁷ On the contrary, Durham considers this approach to be disempowering, questioning why boys never display themselves, staying in a “comfortable position of observing and evaluating without themselves being observed or evaluated.”¹⁰⁷⁸ I would argue that in the 21st century boys have become equally concerned with their body image and its impact on the viewer. The research has shown that men are increasingly worried about their body image and associate their attractiveness with increased muscle definition, which results in body dysmorphia and overall self-dissatisfaction. Eating disorders, which were considered to be a female issue, have become a problem amongst the male demographic. This tendency is described in a bestseller book “The Adonis complex: How to Identify, Treat and Prevent Body Obsession in Men and Boys” (Pope et al., 2000) that analyzes the impact supermale images have on countless boys and men who share the feelings of “inadequacy, unattractiveness, and even failure,” because society is telling them, that their bodies define who they are as men.¹⁰⁷⁹ According to Pope, men turn their anxiety inward, because they find it impossible to meet these supermale standards.

It should be mentioned that at the beginning of the 21st century, there was an emergence of books written by men or for men who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. Among them are such prominent novels as Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *The Gospel of Winter* by Brendan Kiely, *Boy Toy* by Barry Lyga, and *Last Night I Sang To The Monster* by Benjamin

¹⁰⁷⁶ Durham, p.27.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Durham, p.79.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Durham, p.80.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Pope, p.7.

Alire Sáenz to name just a few. Thus the issue of sexual abuse obviously does not concern only white cisgender women. In *Writing the Survivor*, Robin Field examines the representations of male rape survivors in American literature of the 20th century, investigating rape myths of men being feminized. He maintains that new portrayals in the 21st century inspire compassion, kindness, and courage. I believe that this could be a fascinating topic of further research.

Concerning the issue of desire, according to the Lolita effect, as elaborated by Durham, good girls “don’t feel desire, but they need to transmit the playful message that they are ‘sluts,’” therefore sending contradictory messages that confuse the receivers and hurt the disoriented senders, who do not acknowledge their own feelings and boundaries.¹⁰⁸⁰ This statement corresponds with Humbert’s description of Dolly, who never experienced any sexual desire, but was “wagging her tiny tail, her whole behind in fact as little bitches do – while some grinning stranger accosted us and began a bright conversation...”¹⁰⁸¹ In this passage, Humbert compares Dolly to a dog, as he had done to Valeria, both dehumanizing her and ridiculing Lolita’s “slut” behavior. Durham asserts that the Lolita effect is both a human right issue and an ethical issue.¹⁰⁸² It is both devastating and liberating – Durham unravels five myths deeply rooted in the Western society.

Two leading literary critics of Nabokov, Vladimir E. Alexandrov and Brian Boyd have applied a metaphysical grid to his works, using a remark made by Vera Nabokov, who asserted that *потусторонность* (meaning “otherworldliness”) was the main theme of her husband’s work. Alexandrov describes Nabokov’s faith “in the apparent existence of a transcendent, non-material, timeless, and beneficent ordering and ordered realm of being that seems to provide for personal immortality, and that affects everything that exists in the mundane world.”¹⁰⁸³

¹⁰⁸⁰ Durham, p.219.

¹⁰⁸¹ Nabokov, p.164.

¹⁰⁸² Durham, p.209.

¹⁰⁸³ Alexandrov, p.5.

The critical perception of Nabokov's *Lolita* has significantly changed since its publication. According to Connolly, the early reviewers tended to be biased and hostile towards Dolly, calling her selfish, vulgar and foul-tempered, whereas later critics were more empathetic and supportive of her, emphasizing her status as a suffering victim.¹⁰⁸⁴ Moreover, Connolly claims that "the evolution in the critical opinion of Dolly roughly matches with developments in Nabokov criticism as a whole," displaying a shift from aesthetic to ethic approach.¹⁰⁸⁵ Quayle specifies that 1980s and 1990s marked a turning point in *Lolita* criticism, as the focus shifted from the formal aspects of the novel to the moral implications of Humbert's behavior and the representation of *Lolita* in the text, or, more accurately, "in the non-representation of *Lolita*."¹⁰⁸⁶ I would suggest that this shift reflects the overall changing public attitude towards women in our society, bringing more awareness of victim-blaming and hostile sexism.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Connolly, pp.53-54.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Connolly, p.54.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Quayle, p. 1.

10. Conclusion

Numerous critics have repeatedly attempted to define and categorize Nabokov's *Lolita*, forcing labels upon it. Instead of trying to classify it, I have opted for choosing two aspects that appear central for a deeper understanding of this novel, namely, the notions of freedom and desire, explored and summarized the most relevant philosophical approaches coupled with psychological theories concerning these notions, examined their possibilities and limitations, and finally, traced their usage and function in the primary text, using the method of close reading. Can we classify *Lolita* as a fairy tale that offers the reader freedoms that reality denies? An antagonism arises here: a fairy tale promises one freedom, whereas lust liquidates it, making one unfree. There is an underlying paradox, which I attempted to deconstruct and analyze. Besides studying the English original of the novel, I have meticulously compared it to its Russian translation composed by Nabokov and could disclose some curious differences in wording that influence the connotation and interpretation of the novel.

Before comparing Nabokov's *Lolita*, a confession written from a male perspective, to its modern reinterpretations written from a feminine perspective, I briefly reviewed the central aspects of the gender theory concerning the notions of freedom and desire in literature. By doing so, I primarily focused on the double function of sexuality in literature: namely, giving the reader an aesthetic pleasure on the one side and drawing attention to the status of women as commodities consumed by men on the other side. In general, consumption is mainly driven by desire, which is highly gendered. Women often become "prey" for men, although sex should ideally be based on freedom and equality. It should be emphasized that sexuality contains power and freedom, whereas the readers may achieve certain liberation through an artistic depiction of desire in literature.

Lolita's character represents a specific construct of female identity within the context of modern consumer culture, defined through her role in the male protagonist's life –

Humbert Humbert, who objectifies and consumes her. Lolita's figure is an emblem of a young woman who plays the role of a mere sexual object within the competing discourses of men, which corresponds to conventional patriarchal aesthetic that celebrates manhood. She exemplifies the women, who are given a voice from a male perspective, shaping a female image in male terms. Humbert is presented as the Subject and the Consumer; whereas Dolly is pictured as the Other and the Commodity consumed by him. She exists solely within his discourse, being molded and defined by the male hero. However, the poststructuralist discourse has allowed women to be a subject that realizes, speaks, and writes her subjectified views, instead of being a desirable object. In *Lolita*, the reader faces the duality of desire and disgust, for Humbert's desire is unilateral. Furthermore, female readers are implicitly excluded from the eternal ecstasy, for the story is narrated by a male character and predominantly addressed at the sympathetic male reader, Bruder. The implied female reader is rather judgmental and indignant, unable to experience desire.

I have argued throughout this work that Nabokov's Dolly does not experience a sexual desire. As a typical teenager, she is initially curious and eager to have a taste of something new, competing with her mother for Humbert's attention. However, after her openness, vulnerability and curiosity are abused, all that she desires is to be saved and loved. Dolly's daily urge to experience and purchase something new reflects her desire to distract herself from a devastating routine. Buying endless souvenirs, she tries to replace the painful, traumatic memories with superficial colorful ones. Dolly's tendency to trust the ads reveals how easy she can be manipulated – a trait used and abused by Humbert for almost three years. Spending money on sweets, entertainment, and clothes, may represent Dolly's effort to gain some agency in her choices, struggling with Humbert's dominance and control. Additionally, it could symbolize Dolly's desire to "make him pay" for his deeds. Besides, her overconsumption of sweets may represent a substitute for the satisfaction she never gains from the sexual intercourse with Humbert.

As for Humbert, the weight of his unfulfilled desires makes him flee into the realm of imagination. He is no less dependent on the sensual and aesthetical consumption of his captive nymphet than she is on the consumption of sweets, goods, and entertainment. Pursuing his own desires, Humbert wholly disregards Dolly's desires, encroaching on her freedom. He is torn between at least three entities residing within his psyche: firstly, there is the inner moralist that tries to be good; secondly, there is the inner sensualist that egoistically pursues his desires; and finally, the inner child therapist that strives to justify his deeds. Humbert's inner moralist holds him back for over three decades, fearing exposure and punishment, making him suffer from an internal struggle between his desire and common sense. Humbert is afraid and ashamed of his desires, being strangled by taboos. Yet after his encounter with Lolita, he rebels against the norm and consequently silences the voice of this inner entity. Secondly, Humbert's inner sensualist is dragged around and governed by his desires. He tries in vain to regulate his desires to become free from suffering. I object to the critics condemning Nabokov for depraving his characters of free will, making them act like puppets. Instead, I argue that such a portrayal of people haunted by their desires is quite realistic, which I justify, relying on philosophical works and psychological research. Finally, Humbert's inner child therapist desperately battles the consequences of long-lasting repression, trying to persuade himself, Lolita, and the reader that his desires do not deviate from the traditional norm.

Humbert is trying to keep Dolly distracted by employing pop culture and cheap thrills. However, he cannot make Dolly happy in the long run while holding her captive. She finds distraction in movies, musicals, and magazines rather than in classical literature and nature because she shows some common symptoms of depression, which render her unable to enjoy nature and contemplative reading. Dolly employs common coping strategies that create a temporary illusion of doing something pleasant or meaningful to distract oneself and appease oppressive thoughts.

I strongly object to the quite popular view that *Lolita* is a love story. Love is based on intimacy, passion, and commitment. The triangular theory of love holds that these three components are essential for a balanced and long-lasting relationship. However, Humbert acknowledges that access to Dolly's heart and her inner world remains barred to him. There is plenty of passion on his behalf in his relationship with Dolly but no intimacy or mutual commitment. I argue that instead of love, in *Lolita*, we observe limerence, a state of intense desire and unfulfilled longing that includes obsessive thoughts and fantasies about the object of desire. Contrary to love, limerence is often nonreciprocal and does not involve concern for the other person's welfare and feelings. Even after possessing Lolita, Humbert keeps fantasizing about other girls, measuring them on his desirability scale, which correlates with Lacanian theory of desire that postulates that we are eternally stretching forth towards the *desire for something else*. Thus, satisfaction can never be achieved. Furthermore, desire should meet resistance to create an intense story. In *Lolita*, the main obstacle is Dolly's lack of desire. Her womb represents simultaneously the object of desire and the obstacle, which results in a paradox, an unavoidable dramatic dead-end. Venus by Botticelli is another recurrent and paradoxical motive in *Lolita*. It displays a nude female figure with an anatomically improbable body and an impossible pose, which emphasizes the contradiction between fantasy and reality in the unreliable representation of the female protagonist.

Furthermore, I elaborated on what freedom means for Humbert. He claims to be a fatalist, presenting himself as a puppet on a string manipulated by McFatum. This viewpoint frees him from the responsibility for his actions, therefore, endowing him with freedom from culpability. Besides that, Humbert imagines himself as a revolutionary thinker, willing to create his own world, "umber and black Humberland," a wonderland beyond any laws. He criticizes modern society for repressing one's freedom, inflicting numerous rules on its members. Humbert's views correlate with Rousseau's, who claims that once the state of innocence is disrupted by society, we are doomed to move away from virtue towards vice and from bliss toward misery. Obviously, Humbert is unable to overcome the paradox of

freedom, described by Nietzsche, for he is unable to assume responsibility for self-created values by living in accordance with them. Humbert confuses liberation with lust. He is craving an “abstract freedom” – freedom to do anything one desires without any restrictions, disregarding its consequences for others, a selfish and destructive ambition resulting in solipsism. To him, freedom means liberty to steal others’ freedom or even life. This attitude correlates with the libertine ideology that rejects moral boundaries, advocating life “at liberty” from constraint and external conditioning.

Humbert continuously imagines Dolly being his slave. Moreover, he is longing for freedom from conventional rules, such as etiquette that prescribes accepted social behaviors. Finally, he is relishing the freedom of insanity, which seems quite practical because punishment cannot be imposed on those individuals who cannot be considered fully accountable for their crimes.

Can desire lead to freedom? It can, as long as the seducer, like Humbert, renounces the object of his desire. Humbert’s attempt to become free from any and all rules or regulations manifests his mobile desire disguised under the mask of freedom. However, instead of liberation, it suffocates and enslaves the craving person. Additionally, jealousy combined with forbidden desire annihilates the sense of freedom and adds even more pain to an already painful experience. A powerful fear of losing both a desirable object and freedom is gradually driving Humbert insane. Further, I examine the notions of positive and negative freedom, applying them to Humbert’s character development in *Lolita*. In negative freedom, the individual is in the service of the will. In contrast, in positive freedom, he frees himself from the servitude of the will, recognizing the object in a non-egoistic manner. I assert that Humbert had been in the service of his desire all his life till the final encounter with grown-up Lolita when his freedom becomes positive. All in all, Humbert never ceases to enjoy his artistic freedom, carefully composing the complex narrative.

Nabokov dispels the myth that a sexual offender is necessarily a thoroughly disgusting character who may be easily identified. Instead of a clichéd villain, the reader faces a charming and handsome man. The appearance of *normality* of sexual abusers is still misjudged and misread in our society. Humbert does his best to appear decent and successful, hiding his emotional disorder and troubled mind from the public. Dolly gradually gains an ability to mask as a trauma response, hiding from everyone who she really is. Not only she hides her “secret garden” from Humbert, but also she never discloses any details about her traumatic past to her husband. She repeatedly expresses a persistent mistrust that anyone would ever believe her. Coming back to the question of final liberation, I would conclude that Humbert is inwardly liberated by the end of the novel despite being imprisoned: he gains liberation through his confession and Dolly’s absolution. It remains unclear whether Dolly experiences sexual liberation in her marriage, compared to a forced intercourse with Humbert or Quilty, or stays frigid forever. Real sexual liberation means being free from the commercially motivated construction of sex that defines female and male sexuality. We need to accept the variety of human desire, allowing ourselves the freedom to figure out what we desire instead of imitating whatever popular culture forces upon us as sexy.

Having examined whether *Lolita* is an “anti-polyphonic” novel, I would conclude that there is a “hidden dialogue” or “hidden polemic” in Bakhtin’s terms, for Lolita’s voice reaches neither Humbert nor the readers. What we read is not a monologue but a dialogue with omitted utterances of the interlocutor, a biased summary of her utterances with multiple gaps to fill in. The second person is invisibly present; there is a deep trace of the unsaid words. Additionally, having explored how Dolly’s role as an objectified Other influences her voicelessness, I would claim that her voice is unremittingly strangled by Humbert’s narration. I agree with Durham that Dolly’s voicelessness is linked with an undeveloped understanding of her own sexuality, for she is unable to make her needs known without finding her sexual voice. Postmodern feminists claim that women’s voices are frequently alienated from the mainstream discourse in the patriarchal society. All in all, women often remain in a state of

aphasia, being subordinate to men. However, what makes Dolly develop into an independent woman is the one word she can finally say at the end of their last encounter, seeing her oppressor: namely, “**No.**”

The relationship of Humbert and Dolly is reminiscent of the master-slave dialectic, a concept developed by Hegel. Dolly, as a slave, is dependent on her master, resenting this dependency. Her strongest desire is to break free from these chains, and gain autonomy, aspiring a dynamic existence. Humbert, as a master, depends on his slave, too, for it is his ownership only that makes him a master. His aim is to retain possession of the slave, keeping his existence static.

Humbert fits in multiple categories depicted by Greene in *The Art of Seduction*, which goes in line with the multiple personalities he exhibits throughout the novel. First, he is The Dandy – an ambiguous and handsome character that defies societal values and lives out a commonly repressed desire for freedom. Secondly, Humbert the Humble falls into the category of The Natural, creating the reader’s sympathy by being vulnerable. Furthermore, Jean-Jacque Humbert’s personality correlates with the seductive type called The Charismatic, who tries to heighten their charisma with fiery oratory. Charismatics seduce by creating contradictions within their personalities, being simultaneously cruel and kind, powerful and vulnerable, which is the exact dichotomy embodied by Humbert. Finally, Humbert bears a striking resemblance to The Rake type, who has a powerful magnificent voice, hypnotizes the listeners, and speaks a poetic language. I scrutinize the steps of the seductive process, followed by Humbert, who manipulates Dolly, using a range of classical tactics. As presented by Humbert, Dolly’s image correlates with a seductive feminine type called The Siren that symbolizes freedom. She is a dangerous mirage that lures men, embodying their fantasies. Nevertheless, I demonstrate that Dolly cannot be called a seductress, as opposed to a widespread critical view, for Humbert deliberately presents himself as a helpless victim of destiny and desire, a common ruse of sex offenders who tend to claim that they were seduced the victims.

Although Nabokov had harshly criticized Dostoevsky's works, I could find numerous direct and indirect allusions between *Lolita* and *Crime and Punishment*. I drew parallels and examined these two novels' intertextual references, comparing Humbert to Raskolnikov and Dolly to Sonia. I would argue that Dostoevsky's influence on Nabokov is striking, which could partly explain the presence of misogyny and mansplaining in these two novels. Moreover, I have to disagree with critics who assail Nabokov for his "nerusskost" (meaning "non-Russianness,") demonstrating that *Lolita*, in some aspects, exhibits the rhetoric of his native tradition. In both novels, the reader's aesthetic pleasure is interwoven with a shiver of disgust and an unhealthy interest in the crime details. Similar to Raskolnikov, Humbert is a proud and contemptuous character who considers himself superior to others, having outstanding intellectual capacities, and therefore feeling entitled to a different set of rules than the rest of the humanity. Both Raskolnikov and Humbert treat others as tools, utilizing them to attain their own objectives. They transgress the law but find themselves unable to live with the burden of guilt. However, it remains unclear whether they wholeheartedly repent their sins.

Both Sonia and Dolly unify the dichotomy of a fallen woman versus a pure little girl, being simultaneously sinners and saints. They are placed by McFatum in a highly abusive environment, being subjected to unwanted sexual intercourse. The aspirations of female characters and their role models in these novels are extremely modest compared to the males' ones: they just wish normal life without sexual abuse. I adopt Virginia Woolf's view about women's function as looking glasses, reflecting and enlarging men's figures. Further, I state that both Sonia and Dolly serve as looking glasses, functioning in the relationship with the protagonists as a powerless and nonscholarly Other, making Raskolnikov and Humbert look more powerful and intellectual. Throughout the novels, Sonia and Dolly remain undeveloped and muted, being inextricably linked to the male protagonists. In addition, I would assert that Sonia falls into the category of a powerful heroic woman who is opposed to a spiritually weaker man, as defined by Lotman. Similarly, *Lolita* demonstrates a

strong spirit, which Humbert does not succeed in breaking. They both gradually acquire their force and wisdom while finding their voices.

Subsequently, I chose to analyze Duras's novel *The Lover* dubbed as anti-*Lolita* by some critics. I investigated whether Duras's protagonist is able to achieve liberation, following her desire. *Lolita* and *The Lover* are confessions that reveal intimate and hidden details of one's private life, functioning as a mirror for self-reflection. In both novels, the image of water symbolizes a transition into adulthood. Nabokov's and Duras's female protagonists deviate from the norm of respectable femininity, being penalized for being aberrant from social and moral conventions. They experience a fundamental emptiness and boredom, sensing that their desires cannot be satisfied. I drew a parallel between Lacan's theories that consider feminine desire intrinsically ambiguous due to its polymorphous structure and the demeanor of female protagonists of *Lolita* and *The Lover* who demonstrate hysteria, bisexuality, and frigidity as a trauma response. I support Durham's standpoint, which regards the power relationship between the female body and the male attention it attracts, stating that the girls are made to believe that attracting the male gaze is a demonstration of female power.

Furthermore, this work has examined four derivational versions of Nabokov's *Lolita* in an attempt to understand what changes were made and why they were made. The central question is: can women, traditionally the objects of desire, become the subjects of their own narration? They can, though this sort of freedom involves challenging a literary tradition rather than achieving existential equanimity. Men renounce; women rewrite. *Lo's Diary* by Pia Pera is a controversial parody of questionable quality of Nabokov's *Lolita*. The original story is rewritten from a female perspective, based on the diaries of a twelve-year-old Dolores. However, in the foreword, we learn that the publisher has to thoroughly edit a poorly written and disorganized story that seems too emotional and full of gaps, which implies that Dolly's female confession is unreliable, inferior, and should be once again filtered through a male gaze. Still, she states that writing has a therapeutic, liberating effect on her, easing

stress and trauma. Exploring her innermost thoughts and feelings without inhibition could help Dolly break free from the endless mental cycling and aid healing.

The image of a genie in *The Thousand and One Nights* that appears in *Lo's Diary* symbolizes a destructive force and a fatal impact of a misguided desire. Moreover, it correlates with the story of Scheherazade mentioned by Azar Nafisi, who assigns her students to read it before teaching *Lolita* in Tehran, stating that this story similarly deals with finding one's voice in the face of oppression. Altogether Pera provides a deeper insight into Lo's passion and desires, which remained undisclosed in Nabokov's novel. She wishes to be noticed and admired, resenting her cold and selfish mother, who makes fun of her feelings. The reader senses Dolly's resentment and anger, which result in competitiveness and desire to prove her worth. It is worth mentioning that a daughter-mother relationship serves as the source for the development of gender and sexual identity. Imitating Nabokov's original, Pera incorporates multiple allusions to fairytales into the narration. For instance, there is an allusion to *Snow White*, where the Evil Queen attempts to kill her stepdaughter, which suggests that Dolly feels like a stepdaughter, instead of a biological daughter, missing warmth, support and care.

In both novels, Humbert gives Dolly *The Little Mermaid*, a fairytale about a desire for love and an immortal soul during their first road trip. Both Lolita and Ariel are presented as archetypal temptresses that take a romantic interest in inappropriate partners – Ariel in a human and Lolita in her stepfather. Both Ariel and Lolita surrender their voices, having no viable alternative. Pera's Lo bitterly remarks that she has already read the story of the little mermaid, concluding that a woman should never save a man, which suggests her mistrust in men and her reluctance to sacrifice herself for the sake of love as Dostoevsky's Sonia.

Freedom is another major theme in Pera's novel. Lo alludes to the unalienable rights pronounced by the Constitution, namely, Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness, as she gets angry at Humbert for being a coward who is constantly afraid of his

desires. Furthermore, she sees her mother as an oppressive force that hinders her liberty and happiness, fantasizing about her death, as Humbert does in the original novel. Lo detests her life under her mother's tyranny, hoping that Humbert could liberate her, wishing adventures and freedom instead of rules and routine. Lo uses the pronoun "we" when speaking of women, evoking internalized prescriptive beliefs about gender roles. She attempts to play the role of a woman as communicated by her mother and the media, being influenced by the rules and rituals of the previous generations.

Kate Elisabeth Russell's novel *My Dark Vanessa* depicts a manipulative relationship between a 42-year-old English teacher Jacob Strane and his 15-year-old student Vanessa Wye. Like Humbert, Vanessa is a classic unreliable narrator, blinded by her feelings and misclassifying her relationship. *My Dark Vanessa* is often compared to *Lolita* and contains direct allusion to Nabokov's novel. Similar to Humbert, Strane is progressively isolating Vanessa from her peers, for secrecy segregates the secret-keeper from others. Moreover, he ascribes her "magic power," presenting himself as a helpless victim of her spell, unable to resist a dangerous desire. Both Humbert and Strane are highly attractive and educated men and eloquent speakers. As Strane gives Vanessa a copy of Nabokov's *Lolita*, she is amazed by the power of Humbert's feelings towards Dolly, pitying his loss of control and the alienation from the world that demonizes him. She gradually starts projecting these feelings on Strane, imagining being adored and worshiped. As a result, for many years Vanessa perceives *Lolita* as a romance, overlooking oppressive details.

Furthermore, Strane, like Humbert, intimidates Vanessa by picturing the dramatic consequences of his exposure. Finally, both Humbert and Strane treat their nymphets as their own creations and gifts of destiny. As a reaction to the traumatic experience, Vanessa frequently experiences depersonalization, feeling disconnected from herself, which is a common coping mechanism. Vanessa gradually becomes mute, feeling objectified. The detailed description of a post-traumatic experience is typical of 21st-century novels that explore the nuances of abuse and manipulation, drawing attention

to the unsettling concordance between trauma and libidinal fantasy. All in all, neither *Lolita* nor *Vanessa* were able to process the traumatic experience in their teenage years because they were not aware of the limits of parental or romantic love.

Putney is the novel written by Sofka Zinovieff, which was labeled as “a *Lolita* for the age of #MeToo” by numerous critics. This novel is about the ambiguous notion of consent, abuse of power, and overstepping boundaries. The protagonist’s name, Daphne, signifies a naiad, a variety of female nymph who, according to the legend, was transformed into a tree, which correlates with the term “nymphet” coined by Nabokov. In addition, being immobile and intangible symbolizes the traumatic aftermath of sexual abuse. As in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, the notions of heaven and hell are interchanged and interwoven. Similar to *Vanessa*, it takes Daphne around twenty years to rethink and reevaluate the past.

Analogously to Humbert, Ralph often contemplates the notions of freedom and desire, sounding as Rousseau, who claimed that we are everywhere in chains, being slaves of our desires. Moreover, Ralph claims to be powerless facing the spell of a nymphet, therefore denying any responsibility for his actions. Overall, as Humbert, Ralph perceives himself as a superior human being, comparing himself to a demigod Odysseus.

The turning point in Daphne’s perception of the past occurs when her daughter Libby turns thirteen, and Daphne realizes that a teenage curiosity and longing for freedom may be abused by malevolent adults in many different ways. Ultimately, she recognizes that her exotic and free life has its drawbacks. The switch in perspective happens when Daphne and Libby move to the flat on the other side of the bridge, where Daphne regularly observes through binoculars the old house where she spent her childhood. Thus being a teenager’s mother, she changes her viewpoint, inspecting the past from a safe distance.

Being Lolita by Alisson Wood was described by literary critics as a powerful memoir of passion and manipulation. A seventeen-year-old Alisson is groomed and lured into an abusive relationship by her handsome and charismatic English teacher Mr. North, who is twenty-six. Mr. North is obsessed with Nabokov's *Lolita* and identifies himself with Humbert. He makes Alisson perform the role of an idealized and silent 'nymphet.' Ultimately, the perspective changes as Alisson becomes a professor, almost twenty years later, so that the story begins at one chalkboard and ends at another one, where she stands as a teacher, having found her own voice.

Wood weaves in literary and historical allusions into her story, wishing to attain a comparable awareness of language Nabokov brought to *Lolita*. I would call it an ambitious aspiration that was not quite accomplished. Still, Wood's writing is imaginative and symbolic, making her story subtle and reflective. In addition, in *Being Lolita*, Wood incorporates a cursory study of Nabokov's *Lolita*, exploring the context and the allusions used in the original novel. However, the offered sketchy overview lacks depth and consistency. By giving his own copy of Nabokov's *Lolita* to Alisson, Mr. North makes her adopt his perspective through reading his notes containing his interpretation of the novel. To attract the teacher's attention, Alisson tries to imitate Dolly's behavior, described as seductive by Humbert. Identifying with *Lolita*, Alisson feels an overall negative impact on her life, being stuck in an unhealthy pattern, which she gradually perceives and overcomes with the help of therapy, learning to make different choices.

What does she desire? Alisson openly talks about her wish to be noticed and appreciated; however, she cannot experience sexual pleasure with her teacher, for she is always in pain during intercourse. Unlike Alisson's teacher, Humbert rapidly detects Dolly's lack of desire, calling her "My Frigid Princess." Alisson is intimidated, fearing something is wrong with her, questioning her sexuality. It takes many years till Alisson comes to terms with the reality of their relationship, realizing that it was rather an act of abuse than a romance. Not until her female professor in

college elucidates Nabokov's *Lolita* in a different light, Alisson gains a different perspective on her own story.

Similarly to Humbert, Alisson's teacher renames her, first calling her Alice, referring to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Then Mr. North names her Dinah, as Alice's little pet kitten, Alice's invisible companion. The cat is not physically present, but Alice sometimes talks to her. Dinah functions as Schrödinger's cat, isolated and unseen, as long as nobody opens the sealed box. The described situation bears a remarkable resemblance to Alisson's state: her story is kept secret, hidden in a box under her bed until she decides to publish her memoir.

A victim of sexual abuse is compared to Pandora, who opened the forbidden box, misapprehending the disastrous consequences. Alisson identifies with Pandora, projecting her emotions on the mythological heroine. She assumes that Pandora was scared, ashamed, feeling alone, and blaming herself for the disaster, which are typical sentiments of victims of sexual abuse.

By examining the specific historical traces found in each version due to the increasing awareness of the impact of sexual abuse, represented by the #MeToo movement, I assert that the themes of freedom and desire are presented in a radically different light in the works of the late 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. This study provides a possible framework for a literary analysis of further derivational novels of *Lolita*. First and foremost, I would suggest exploring *Excavation* by Wendy C. Ortiz (2014) that provoked a turbulent debate about whether Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* is an imitation of Ortiz's novel. Numerous critics and Ortiz herself poured scorn on Russell, claiming that she received a tremendous promotion and a seven-figures-deal because she is a white, straight, cisgender woman. On the contrary, Ortiz is of Mexican descent and comes out as a lesbian the novel's end. Furthermore, Ortiz mentions that editors did not believe there was a market for audiences wanting to deal with the real trauma of a girl of color.

I would maintain that Vanessa and Alisson correspond to the image of a liberated woman described by Wolff. Both of them are characterized by their accomplishments, being educated women. They pursue a teaching career, seeking to enlighten and empower their students. Being childless, they are instilled with a sense of purpose, helping others on the way to their healing. On the contrary, Daphne's sense of purpose was destroyed by trauma for many decades of her life. Daphne and Lo have opted for having children instead of getting a higher education, conforming to the dichotomous image of a career woman versus a stay-at-home-mom that still exists in our society.

All three novels published in the 21st century, *My Dark Vanessa*, *Putney*, *Being Lolita*, are similarly built: a grown-up woman reviews and reassesses her past experience, coming to a deeper understanding of past events while healing her trauma. These novels explore how survivors process their disturbing memories, learning to understand and manage their emotions. The exposition of this sensitive issue goes in line with the modern tendency to explore the role of the unconscious in traumatic memory, illuminating the link between abuse, trauma, and libidinal fantasy. The structure of the novels is quite typical of the trauma narrative: after much emotional pain and self-destructive behavior, a protagonist finds comfort and confidence by telling the story in a moment of emotional catharsis. Through an exploration of language and literary imagery I could offer different angles of interpretation. All of the above novels received an overall positive critical response, which reflects a shift in the critical perception of narratives that aspire to liberate and empower their female protagonists.

Altogether the critical perception of Nabokov's *Lolita* has significantly changed since its publication. The early reviewers tended to be biased towards Dolly, calling her selfish and vulgar, whereas later critics were more empathetic and supportive of her, emphasizing her status as a suffering victim. I would suggest that this shift reflects the overall changing public attitude towards women in our society, bringing more awareness of victim-blaming and hostile sexism.

The #MeToo movement has generated a new genre of writing in the form of memoirs, viral personal essays, and fiction, which shaped both the perception and the production of literary works written in the 21st century that abord the topic of sexual abuse. #MeToo gave many women freedom of expression, making their voices heard. Furthermore, confessional works bear a strong resemblance to the personal experiences shared in the context of the #MeToo movement, reflecting the modern tendency of self-awareness and introspection. This movement represents an attempt to redefine sexual harassment in the millennial age of social media, creating a strong bond of intergenerational feminism. For readers, these stories create a unique space to explore the feelings of shame and guilt, joining a virtual communal realm of other, mostly female, readers who share the depicted experiences. I agree with Rakhimova-Sommers, who asserts that the #MeToo movement has incited the reassessment of the ways controversial works, such as Nabokov's *Lolita*, should be taught. She warns that while analyzing *Lolita*, we should examine both the context that generated it, and the context in which it is read. Dwyer points out that the main difficulty of teaching Nabokov is a clash of historical and national sensibilities. Taking Dwyer's claim one step further, I would add that many Russian critics still consider Nabokov primarily a Russian writer, viewing his works through the prism of contemporary Russian culture, which should also be taken into account.

Further, I analyzed the metaphysical background of Nabokov's *Lolita*, drawing parallels with Ray Bradbury's short story "A Sound of Thunder," aiming to demonstrate in which way "the Lolita effect" is similar to "the butterfly effect." The fact that one's destiny could be fundamentally and irrevocably changed by seemingly a minor event is called "the butterfly effect." Similarly, "the Lolita effect" illustrates that the destruction of a single life or a single childhood is a crime of cosmic dimension. Both Humbert and Eckels prefer not to see themselves as autonomous agents that preside over their destinies but as toys in the hands of the Divine Power, although they do make autarkic decisions that change their and others' lives. Similarly to Humbert, the hunter overestimates himself, while underestimating his

prey. The downtrodden butterfly is green and gold, reminding of the prevalent colors in Botticelli's *Venus*, to whom Lolita was repeatedly compared. A butterfly symbolizes beauty recklessly destroyed by an egoistic hunter. Additionally, it symbolizes freedom, for after Eckels kills it, the outcome of the election radically changes, and a dictator wins the election, defeating a democrat. In both cases, there is a juxtaposition of dictatorships and beauty, of tyranny and art.

Durham asserts that "the Lolita effect" is a myth of sexuality that represents the enduring social and cultural consequence of Nabokov's novel, which has radically changed the contemporary understanding of female sexuality, shaping both the common perception of girls and girls' perception of themselves. "The Lolita effect" is an adult male escapist fantasy of girls' sexuality, just as Lolita was the object of Humbert's fantasies.

Finally, I would like to come back to the question of whether there is an emergence of a "better generation in a safer world," ironically mentioned by John Ray in the foreword to *Lolita*. Literary critics frequently remarked that Ray's declaration that Nabokov's *Lolita* has some "social significance" is deliberately comic because it indicates that Nabokov ridicules the moralists' viewpoint. *Lolita* is not a morally didactic novel, and the foreword was often viewed as the author's attempt to justify the right of an aesthetically beautiful novel to be published despite its sordid and scandalous subject. As pointed out in the introduction, we should read and reread literary works with great attention, looking for subtle meanings on different levels that may emerge after the second or even the fifth reading. A classic example, demonstrating a change in perspective, is the response to *Lolita* by Janeway, who reviewed the novel for the *New York Times*. She writes: "The first time I read *Lolita* I thought it was one of the funniest books I'd ever come on... The second time I read it, uncut, I thought it was one of the saddest."¹⁰⁸⁷ I agree with the critics who maintain that Nabokov's commentary on *Lolita* is as essential to the fiction as John

¹⁰⁸⁷ Tweedie, p.158.

Ray's fictional foreword.¹⁰⁸⁸ I believe that the reading and rereading of *Lolita* in the 21st century is very different from its reception in the 20th century. It remains unclear, whether it was Nabokov's intention or pretension, this novel serves not only as an aesthetically stimulating piece but also as a tool for a better understanding of psychologically difficult situations. Additionally, I presume that the implied audience and herewith its assumed reaction have changed over the years. The modern reader is more critical and aware of the manipulations made by an unreliable narrator acting as an enchanter. Finally, the representation of trauma in modern literature indirectly reveals the socio-historical change regarding the concept of trauma since the publication of Nabokov's *Lolita*. There is a clear contrast between Nabokov's aesthetic choice of reticence in *Lolita* and an unfiltered and detailed description of sexual abuse in hypertexts. However, there are some similarities between Nabokov's *Lolita* and derivational novels: through the protagonists' emotional and psychological development, the novels embrace the ways in which narrative can be used as a means of falsification, interpretation and processing of trauma. All of the novels explore the perils and consequences of remembering the past in a way that falsifies it. In "The Representation of Trauma in Narrative," Natasha Rogers maintains that the attempt to narrativize trauma not only raises awareness of the abuse in our society but also can become the means to achieve healing for those who have suffered a traumatic experience by constructing meaning out of a seemingly overwhelming event.

The main purpose of this study has been to illuminate the core aspects of Nabokov's *Lolita* that make it timeless and significant, highlighting other authors' reasons behind the need to reinvent and retell it to the emerging generations again and again. Each author has introduced specific changes to the plot and the characters to adapt the story to their unique experience and perception, reaching specific rhetorical decisions that fulfill a specific need. Indeed, I would argue that Nabokov's *Lolita* deserves this special attention in the modern world.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Kaufmann in Tweedie, p.151.

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