

**Alexei Lalo**

“RULES OF ATTRACTION” IN NABOKOV’S *LOLITA*:  
SEXUAL PORTRAITS OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS  
AND THEIR SLAVIC PEDIGREE

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Nabokov [of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*] is an adult Russian [who liberated himself] from the malicious darkness of his native country’s infantiism, sexual prohibitions and suppressed complexes.

Dmitri Galkovsky. *Бесконечный тупик*  
(Galkovsky 1998, 418).<sup>1</sup>

**V**ladimir Nabokov would probably have remained a “writer for writers,” a bilingual and bicultural author of texts that are addressed to a refined audience of fellow writers, critics and other intellectuals, had he not produced a shocking novel about an illicit, quasi-incestuous love affair between a thirty-six-year-old man and a twelve-year-old girl. The writer was in his mid-fifties by the time the novel was first published in Europe, and he certainly had longed for fame and commercial success. What remains a mystery is why exactly he chose to write a novel about something he was not really comfortable with, a text that would include relatively explicit and lengthy (albeit somewhat prudish and tongue-tied) descriptions of

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Russian are mine.

sexual intercourse between a grown male and an adolescent female, even though he made sure it was the voice of the abhorrent protagonist, not of the omniscient author, that described these encounters. But it is quite clear that Nabokov had realized that in order to be a success, his book had to be a shocker that would cause a scandal – just like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a work that the Russian-American writer considered the best novel of the century (Nabokov 1973, 57).

In the early 1950s there was arguably no better choice for a writer with these intentions than to focus on sexuality and eroticism, not so much perhaps on the procreative aspect of it, but, rather, on pleasurable sex or, yet more narrowly, on deviant sexual behavior. Alfred Kinsey’s initial publications in the late forties and growing public concerns about various forms of deviant sexualities (such as sexual predators and pedophiles and their victims) opened up new creative possibilities for literary artists. Psychiatric and medical discussions of sexual activities that took place outside the confines of a spousal bedroom (to use Foucault’s language) provided authors like Nabokov, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and many others with almost infinite imaginative resources. The sexological studies of Havelock Ellis and Kinsey (among others), along with all the excitement these scientific and medical discourses caused in the mass media both in Europe and the United States, secured a solid foundation for literary endeavors exploring and highlighting not so much the moral, psychiatric / psychological, or legal aspects of deviant, aberrant sexual activities as their purely aesthetic, cultural, and philosophic implications.

In other words, the sexual deviant – and not just a treacherous predator or ghostlike pedophile, but also an oversexed female adolescent eager to experiment with her body and sexuality – came to the forefront of the literati’s attention.<sup>2</sup> Nabokov was simply one of the first authors to concentrate on these “new” cultural figures in the ever-changing field of literary production. In addition, his vision was enhanced by his ability to emphasize the intercultural, intercontinental contrast between Western Europe and North America; by making the male a European immigrant and the female an American schoolgirl he was able to enrich the concept of his would-be novel with intercultural overtones. Having moved to the US in 1940, Nabokov needed almost a decade of observations and ruminations before he could embark on his *magnum*

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, the first of Kinsey’s Reports, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, contained several extremely controversial chapters on adolescent and pre-adolescent sexuality both in males and females. Some of the data on their orgasms in Tables 31-34 of the Report was allegedly obtained from several pedophiles interviewed by Kinsey and his staff (Bancroft 1998). One may safely suppose that Nabokov had known about these controversies and that they had fueled his creative imagination before he embarked on writing the novel.

*opus* – the project of simultaneously discovering and imagining his own America via constructing a breathtakingly exciting and powerfully precise sexual metaphor.

Nabokov's oeuvre – and especially *Lolita* – remains at the center of critics' attention today, but as evidenced, for instance, by the recent collection *Approaches to Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, much of the current criticism is focused on making this book palatable to undergraduate students via creating a largely black-and-white canvas of the novel's major characters and events: for instance, of unsavory pedophiles Quilty and Humbert Humbert corrupting Lolita, an ordinary American teenager.<sup>3</sup> I will take a look back at the late 1950s to early 60s when on both sides of the Atlantic such early readers as Lionel Trilling and Polish author Stanislaw Lem pointed toward a much more mosaic, complex portrayal of the male and female characters by Nabokov. I will try to argue that Nabokov consciously chose, for example, to represent a continuum of "pedophilia" building on some deep discrepancies between the characters of Quilty and Humbert (to be discussed in some detail below). By making Lolita's sexual behavior in many ways quite different from her mother Charlotte's, on the other hand, the author aimed to show the complexity of his vision of US womanhood. In Nabokov's novel, Lolita is in fact far from being a voiceless and powerless victim of abusive male "predators," but has a voice and agency of her own that allow her to make conscious decisions about her life and be one of the driving forces of the novel's plot.<sup>4</sup>

Another problem is that the novel's connections to Russia's intellectual and literary history are more often than not discussed separately from its being embedded in the US and West European socio-cultural context of the 1940s and early 50s. In this essay I will make an effort to combine tracing *Lolita*'s Russian pedigree with its value as an American novel. I will consciously not focus on making observations about this novel's rich intertextuality and its position in the history of world literature, concentrating instead on sexual and erotic implications of Nabokov's masterpiece.

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<sup>3</sup> There are some exceptions in the collection, such as the Sarah Herbold essay I quote below, in which Lolita is not presented as a powerless victim with no agency of her own (Kuzmanovich 2008, 138).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Ellen Pifer, writing on *Lolita* for one of the most significant companions to Nabokov's work edited by V. Alexandrov, does not focus on Lolita's own sexual likes and dislikes preferring to present her as a victim of two manipulative pedophiles. The descriptions of "passion-love" of Humbert for Lolita in the novel are, for this critic, "romantic slosh" that Nabokov satirizes and ridicules. As will be clear from what follows, although there is an element of parody and satire in both characters, Nabokov's portrayal of Lolita and Humbert's "illicit love" is hardly reducible to the "parody of romantic themes" operating "on so many levels" in the novel, as Pifer suggests (Alexandrov 1995, 312).

I fully concur with Lionel Trilling and contemporary critic James Kincaid that the largely satirical metaphor Nabokov created is spearheaded with his laughter at

the peculiar sexual hypocrisy of American life... the perpetual publicity we give to sexuality, the unending invitation made by our popular art and advertising to sexual awareness, competence and competition. To what end is a girl-child taught from her earlier years to consider the brightness and fragrance of her hair, and the shape of her body, and her look of readiness for adventure? (Trilling 2000, 364)

Kincaid, writing in late 2008, echoes Trilling:

John Hollander, in *Partisan Review*, wrote, "*Lolita* ... flames with a tremendous perversity." Possibly, but there's no doubt that the American public does. We have, for the past 200 or so years, progressively eroticized, put at the very heart of our constructions of the desirable, the young body, the innocent, the unspoiled. Rather than facing this head-on, we have manufactured a variety of scapegoats: day-care center operators, Roman Catholic priests, kiddie-porn rings, Internet predators. Meanwhile, we go right along, parading before us all the JonBenet Ramseys we can find: Shirley Temple, Deanna Durbin, Patty McCormick, Brooke Shields, Drew Barrymore, the Olsen twins (Kincaid 2008).

In other words, the novel can indeed be read as a satirical jab at the "sexual hypocrisy" of the US society, especially with regard to (pre)pubescent girls, but Trilling suggests that at the same time Nabokov's main purpose was to write a "story about love" (Trilling 2000, 364). Humbert's "passion-love" (to use Trilling's key term) for *Lolita* is, in addition, a Euro-American affair as the novel's plot is built around the relationship between a West European intellectual and an American teenager.

Nabokov was born and raised in Russia during the Silver Age. Much of his career was spent in and closely linked to the émigré world of Paris and Berlin between the two world wars. Prior to moving to the US, he wrote almost exclusively in Russian. It is therefore imperative to summarize possible Russian sources and forerunners of the novel. Establishing this continuity will enable me to argue that *Lolita* is in many ways an apogee in the development of post-Silver Age / modern literary discourses of sex and eroticism. At the same time, these lines of continuity may also be instrumental in understanding the limits and the pitfalls of Nabokov's erotic imagination, i.e., to what extent those could be defined by his "Russianness." Although the

writer famously claimed that the novel is the “record of [his] love affair with the English language” (Nabokov 1970, 16), it is important to see that it was also to a certain extent an outcome of his love-hate relationship with Russia’s intellectual and literary history.<sup>5</sup>

Nabokov was working on a translation of Aleksandr Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* as he was finishing *Lolita*. The key lines from the novel in verse – *Любви все возрасты покорны; ... / Но в возраст поздний и бесплодный, / На повороте наших лет, / Печален страсти мертвой след...* // “All ages are resigned to love... // But in later, more fruitless life, / As we enter the middle age, / The languid passion’s footprint is sad...” – in many ways defined the way Pushkin’s tradition evolved in the history of Russian literature (Pushkin 201). One recalls Pushkin’s Tsar Dadon of the tale *The Golden Cockerel* (1834), whose passionate love for the Tsarina of Shemakha ruined his friendship with the Castrate and brought about his violent murder by the ruthless Cockerel. Dostoevsky may have had this stanza in mind when he was creating Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, his most memorable libertine, who pursued Grushen’ka, a voluptuous young woman, and ended his life as a victim of this “deathly passion.”<sup>6</sup> In the Silver Age, these Pushkin lines were first detected and elaborated by Fyodor Sologub in his detailed portrayal of the illicit love affair between a young woman Lyudmilochka and pubescent gymnasium student Sasha Pylnikov in *The Petty Demon* (1907). Shortly thereafter Pushkin’s observation was echoed by Aleksandr Kuprin in his *Sulamith: A Prose Poem of Antiquity* (1908), where a biblical allegory is used to present a doomed love affair between a middle-aged man and

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<sup>5</sup> Nabokov himself was always quite straightforward about recognizing his Silver Age roots; in a letter to Edmund Wilson he states: “The decline of Russian literature in 1905-1917 is a Soviet invention. Blok, Bely, Bunin and others wrote their best stuff in those days. And never was poetry so popular – not even in Pushkin’s days. I am a product of this period, I was bred in that atmosphere” (Nabokov 1980, 220).

Simon Karlinsky (the editor of the volume) confirms that “Nabokov’s English prose, for all its tremendous originality and undoubted individuality, frequently draws on some of the significant procedures of Russian symbolists and post-Symbolist poetry” (Nabokov 1980, 21).

<sup>6</sup> Stanislaw Lem in his 1962 review of *Lolita* also discusses Dostoevsky’s Svidrigaylov and Stavrogin as possible predecessors of Humbert. However, he stops short of equating the pedophilic deeds of both characters with H.H.’s passion-love for Lolita. Indeed, it is hard to compare Nabokov’s ubiquitous gloomy irony with Dostoevsky’s moralistic slant toward sexual abuse of a minor as a sin and crime equivalent to murder or even worse than that, as it involves Stavrogin’s sexual pleasure, making his crime even more irredeemable in Dostoevsky’s eyes (Lem 1962).

Julian Connolly in his recent *A Reader’s Guide to Nabokov’s “Lolita”* argues that the character of H.H. harks back to the narrators of *Notes from the Underground* and “The Meek One” (incorrectly translated as “The Gentle Creature”). I think Connolly’s attempt to position Dostoevsky as a Nabokov predecessor of sorts is unsuccessful and can only reiterate that it is impossible to see any resemblance between H.H.’s (and his author’s) ubiquitous ironic tone and Dostoevsky’s moralizing. In addition, although Connolly ambitiously entitles his subchapter “The Precursors of Lolita,” he simply ignores any of Russia’s Silver Age roots of the novel discussed in this essay. Indeed, Nabokov may have been influenced by certain works of Dostoevsky, but only through the prism of Sologub, Rozanov, Kuprin, Ivanov and other Silver Age authors highlighted by me here (Connolly 9-28).

a 13-year-old girl, albeit in an exoticized setting of ancient Israel. Finally, in Nabokov's novel a man in his mid-thirties does realize the deadliness of "passion's footprint" as his "sad" infatuation with a teenage girl culminates in (self)destruction and death. Humbert's predicament constitutes an evident breakaway from the reasoning of Tolstoy or Ivan Bunin, both of whom claimed the supremacy of "pure spirituality" over sexuality and corporeality, but arguably could be linked to one of the most memorable plot lines of *The Decay of the Atom* published in 1938 by the Russian poet and critic Georgii Ivanov (1894-1958).

In Ivanov's "poem in prose" there is a plotline of a "[government] minister who signed the Treaty of Versailles" and who fell in love with a young girl and eventually went to jail on corruption charges caused by this adulterous affair (perhaps this was Ivanov's distorted, largely fictional account of Britain's ex-prime minister Lloyd George's extramarital liaison with Frances Stevenson, his secretary, in 1913). The narrator compares this man's fall from grace with an "experienced and old" rat that was careless enough to eat the poison and die:

How could the minister... in his old age be caught stealing because of a little girl? ... A little girl [appears] all of a sudden, her stockings, knees, soft warm breath, a soft pink vagina – and the Treaty of Versailles and all his regalia are gone. The defamed old man is dying in his prison bed (Ivanov 1992, 268).

Despite the fact that Ivanov's minister is unable to resist the fatal attraction and ends up destroying his life and career, the writer is far from blaming him for that. Rather, he purports to show how sexuality works, how firm its grip is on a person's thoughts and actions. In "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," Nabokov claims that

the first little throb of *Lolita* went through me in late 1939 or early 1940, in Paris, at a time when I was laid up with a severe attack of intercostal neuralgia... The initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: the sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage (Nabokov 1970, 311).

Interestingly, when Ivanov's book was initially published in 1938, it was attacked by V. Sirin a.k.a. Vladimir Nabokov and Vladislav Khodasevich who had had an ongoing "war of camps" with Ivanov and his colleague Georgii Adamovich. Nabokov was especially upset with Ivanov's "banal descriptions of urinals that can embarrass only the most inexperienced readers"

(Nikolyukin 1999, 42). It is quite symptomatic that Nabokov picked “urinals” out of so many “unsavory” images of *The Decay of the Atom* for his denunciation of the book: this author seems to have been really ill-at-ease with all representations of the physiology of human excretions.<sup>7</sup> It is hard to believe Sirin that by recurrent references to urinals, Ivanov really wanted to “embarrass” his inexperienced but impressionable readership. Quite the opposite, he clearly wanted to show that for a modern writer there should be no taboo themes and that everything in life – without any limitations – can be expressed via a literary medium.

I would argue that, although Nabokov a.k.a. Sirin had wrathfully dismissed Ivanov’s long poem in prose, he seems to have taken off right where Ivanov had stopped: he decided to have the “minister” paint the picture of the bars of his “prison cell.”<sup>8</sup> The minister’s avatar is now Humbert Humbert writing his memoir while in jail awaiting his trial. The cage bars he is sketching may stand for his own “aberrant” sexuality, or, to be exact, his “vandalized love-map” that has him constantly trying to recreate his unconsummated, but extremely passionate “child love” for Annabel Leigh when they were both twelve. Nabokov was hardly concerned with a moral-legal perspective on sexual deviance but, rather, with aesthetic and cultural implications of representing it in a literary medium. This implies that one will gain little or nothing by labeling Humbert a “pedophile,” “pornographer,” “sex predator” or “incestuous rapist.” Rather, it is much more instructive to see what exactly his predicament was, why he acted the way he did and what conclusions about human sexuality, love and affection can be drawn from his experience. The task of gaining a deeper understanding of sexual love through the eyes of the “deviant,” the “pervert,” is aptly formulated by Stanislaw Lem:

The perennial problem of human nature susceptible to sin, the problem of a contingent line of prohibitions violated by outstanding personalities or unchanged throughout history, the line that maybe even the Neanderthal man started thinking of; this problem is

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, why didn’t Nabokov single out the dead rat afloat in the garbage can or lengthy descriptions of suicides’ corpses or multiple rape fantasies of the narrator as examples of “embarrassing” and disgusting elements of the book? (Ivanov 1992, 257, 260, 262) The answer seems to be simple: although he clearly was at ease with explicit depictions of violence and eroticism, this author was rather prudish about representing the corporeal and physiological functions, both in his own work and in the work of others. In his lectures on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for example, he would criticize Joyce for relishing the scenes of Bloom’s defecation arguing those were redundant and unnecessary for the book he called the leading masterpiece of the century (Nabokov 1970, lii-liii).

<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, Aleksandr Dolinin, a Nabokov scholar, believes that the novella «Волшебник» / “The Enchanter”, one of the early drafts of *Lolita* written in 1939, was largely a response to the “challenge” of Ivanov’s *Atom Decay*, as the former argues that Ivanov’s “world’s hideousness” can be transformed by “harmonious art.” Dolinin also notes some direct intertextual echoing between the two texts (Dolinin 2004, 156-158).

concentrated inside the so-called pervert in a special way, very concretely and with the highest tension. It is here that we start to realize that the “pervert” is simply a magnifying glass, that the problem is not to study the perversion but in the choice of artistic means, which would enable to ultimately have a new (and this is the most difficult thing in literature) feeling, new experience of the problem of sex and love (Lem 1962).

This task of better understanding eroticism and sexuality as Nabokov saw them via Humbert the “pervert” is made easier for us by the author’s focusing on the nature of his character’s “perversion” with a great amount of detail. Nonetheless, as I will try to show, the book is entitled *Lolita*; and she (the *nymphet*) is indeed the central character of the novel. After all, it is Lolita’s sexual energy and ability to act and make decisions that in many ways drives the plot of the novel. Finally, any discussion of the sexual and corporeal in the novel would be incomplete without focusing on Charlotte and Quilty, the two characters without whom it would be impossible to fully understand Lolita and Humbert respectively.

Regarding the contours of the criticism of the representations of sex and eroticism in *Lolita* – as it has developed from the initial input of such figures as Lionel Trilling and Stanislaw Lem until today – I share the observations of James Kincaid:

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, published in America 50 years ago, has engendered the most embarrassed, looking-sideways-for-the-exit, highfalutin, and obscurantist talk of any book ever written — any. Only a handful of critics have been forthright, most famously, Lionel Trilling: "*Lolita* is about love. Perhaps I shall be better understood if I put the statement in this form: *Lolita* is not about sex, but about love"....

Somehow, not all commentators and readers have lined up behind Trilling on this point, many finding themselves agreeing... that the novel is clearly about pedophilia, rape, and the destruction of innocence by a vile, if fancy-talking, Humbert of a monster (Kincaid 2008).

What I propose doing here is close to what Kincaid suggests: going back to Trilling’s thesis, I will try to complement it with Lem’s sensitivity concerning the role of Humbert’s deviance as Nabokov clearly makes it central to his modern novel about love. But, unlike Trilling and Kincaid, I will not shy away from sex (including deviant sexuality) and sexual attraction as a major theme of the novel, which is indeed inseparable from what Trilling has termed “passion-love.”

To facilitate my task of describing how the “rules of attraction” function in the novel and in what ways some of its characters (despite their North American / West European “pedigree”) evolved from their forerunners in Russia’s Silver Age and even early Soviet literature, I will explore what can be called their “sexual portraits” in pairs as these “couples,” or pair-bonds, are formed (or fail to form) throughout the course of the novel. This seems to be the most effective approach to studying what John Money has termed the respective “lovemaps”<sup>9</sup> of each central character (via their love interests or pair-bonds each of them has attempted to create with a matching partner).

### **Charlotte-Quilty, Charlotte-Humbert**

One of the seldom-noted sources of *Lolita* is Ilya Ilf and Yevgeni Petrov’s famous Ostap Bender dilogy, *Twelve Chairs* (1928) and *The Golden Calf* (1931). While Nabokov rejected the Soviet tradition as a whole, he did repeatedly single out several authors for praise, including Olesha, Zoshchenko, and the two satirists from Odessa, Ilf and Petrov. When asked in a 1965 interview if there were any writers of the Soviet period he admired, he responded:

There were a few writers who discovered that if they chose certain plots and certain characters they could get away with it in the political sense, in other words, they wouldn’t be told what to write and how to finish the novel. Ilf and Petrov, two wonderfully gifted writers, decided that if they had a rascal adventurer as protagonist, whatever they wrote about his adventures could not be criticized from a political point of view since a perfect rascal or a madman or a delinquent... any picaresque character... could not be accused of either being a bad Communist or not being a good Communist (Nabokov 1973, 87).<sup>10</sup>

Among other things, a similar design appears to have been used by Nabokov as he had clearly intended to walk a thin line between creating a sensational, commercially successful book he would be remembered for and not causing too much public outrage, especially in puritanical, sexually hypocritical America. In addition, he had to be cautious not to fall into the trap of the cheap sensationalism and vulgarity of lowbrow “pulp fiction.” One convention of the bestseller

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<sup>9</sup> Lovemap, according to John Money, is “a developmental representation or template in the mind and in the brain depicting the idealized lover and the idealized program of sexueroetic activity projected in imagery or actually engaged in with that lover” (Money 1986, 291).

<sup>10</sup> In a letter to Wilson dated October 30, 1945, Nabokov shows his admiration for these authors: “The [Konstantin] Simonov book [*Days and Nights*] is neither better nor much worse than the trash published in Russia during the last 26 years (always excepting Olesha, Pasternak, and Ilf-Petrov)” (Nabokov 1986, 157). Incidentally, this may have been the time when he conceived of the idea of *Lolita*.

genre, for example, is a happy ending, which Nabokov was certainly unwilling to provide, feeling that he needed to shroud the dramatic finale of *Lolita* in a cloud of ambiguity and “black humor.” Several of these authorial strategies had been successfully dealt with and tested by Ilf and Petrov, whose novels enjoyed immense popularity in the Soviet Union (especially with younger readers) in spite of being blasphemously critical of the Soviet regime.

There are numerous allusions to Ilf and Petrov’s novels in the text of *Lolita*. For example, Humbert’s way of addressing the “Gentlemen and Gentlewomen of the Jury” is clearly borrowed from *The Golden Calf*, in which the protagonist Ostap uses exactly the same way of addressing the imaginary audience as he blackmails an underground Soviet millionaire into sharing one of his millions with the Ostap-led gang of adventurers. Besides, the overall tone of playfulness and “black humor” of Humbert’s confessions may have been prompted by Ilf and Petrov’s venomous irony toward nearly everything in the Soviet socio-cultural landscape. Most strikingly, as Lem notes, Humbert’s laughter is aimed at something no one else before him was able to ridicule so effortlessly – his own lust and concupiscence.<sup>11</sup> Bender is similarly ironic about his own sexual impulses in both novels. But it seems to me that the most conspicuous parallel between *Lolita* and *Twelve Chairs* is the fact that the character of the widow Haze is, perhaps, modeled in part upon that of the widow Gritsatsuyeva.

Ostap Bender’s idea of marrying the widow to get hold of her several chairs, inside which the diamonds may have been hidden, is similar to Humbert’s cold-blooded consent to wed the “Haze woman” hoping that the minor inconvenience of a convenience marriage would allow him to be closer to the object of his passion, Charlotte’s longed-for daughter. Resemblances between Gritsatsuyeva and Charlotte are numerous. Both women can be qualified as *знойная женщина, мечта поэта* / “a passionate woman, a poet’s dream” (Ilf & Petrov 1928, 181); they look

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<sup>11</sup> Lem thinks that this ubiquitous irony is what differs Nabokov from Dostoevsky. His example of the lustful that Nabokov’s H.H. turns into the ludicrous is his daydreams about leaving the school in Beardsley with Lolita, crossing the Mexican border and “lying low” with her for several years before he could legally marry her. He is concerned that her “nymphage” would then end as she comes of age but quickly finds the solution:

With patience and luck I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the second, who would be eight or nine around 1960, when I would still be *dans la force de l’âge...a vieillard encore vert...* bizarre, tender, salivating Dr. Humbert, practicing on supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad (Nabokov 1970, 173-174).

Lem emphasizes the fact that the filthiness and cynicism of these dreams borders on the comical and humorous, allowing Humbert to get away with his “priapic super-optimism” (Lem 1962).

similar (corpulent, large-breasted: Charlotte is memorably “of the noble nipple and massive thigh,” while Mme Gritsatsuyeva’s bosom is likened to a pair of “watermelons”) and are of the same age (thirty-five). Both adore their equally indifferent and treacherous husbands and insist on addressing them formally: Comrade Bender and Mr. Humbert respectively (Nabokov 1970, 76, 75).<sup>12</sup>

Having discussed one of Charlotte’s possible prototypes, I will now turn to the way her sexuality is portrayed in the novel. Charlotte’s affection for H.H. may have been preceded by her flirtatious affair with Quilty, a celebrity playwright who had visited Ramsdale two or three years prior to H.H.’s arrival and fondled Lolita in his lap during a matinee. These events are highlighted in Stanley Kubrick’s movie, with the screenplay written by Nabokov himself, but in the novel’s text it is Lolita who confirms Humbert’s suspicion of Quilty’s being her mother’s “friend”:

Well, did I know that [Quilty] had known her mother [Lolita asked]? That he was practically an old friend? That he had visited with his uncle... and spoken at Mother’s club, and had tugged and pulled her, Dolly, by her bare arm onto his lap in front of everybody, and kissed her face, and she was ten and furious with him? (Nabokov 1970, 272)

Earlier, just as Lolita runs away with her secret lover, Humbert supposes that Quilty could have had an affair with Charlotte:

The gruesome ‘Harold Haze, Tombstone, Arizona’... implied a familiarity with the girl’s past that in nightmare fashion suggested for a moment that my quarry was an old friend of the family, maybe an old flame of Charlotte’s (Nabokov 1970, 251).

Finally, Quilty himself teasingly confides to Humbert: “I knew your dear wife slightly” (Nabokov 1970, 302). In other words, Charlotte and Lolita, the mother and daughter, are ultimate rivals; they are both interested in the same two men, and their respective attractions to them seem to fuel and inflame each other. We know that Lolita liked H.H. initially because he resembled Quilty, whose picture from a cigarette ad she had posted above her bed, although H.H. himself thinks the “resemblance was slight” (Nabokov 1970, 43, 69). It looks quite plausible that

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<sup>12</sup> I think one of the main reasons behind Nabokov’s use of Ilf and Petrov was his intention to create a humorous effect, to write a really hilarious, entertaining book. Charlotte is, of course, one of the most obvious comical characters of the novel, as is Mme Gritsatsuyeva in *Twelve Chairs*.

Charlotte developed her own crush on Humbert for the same reason; after all, Nabokov repeatedly makes a satirical comment about popular culture's domination over Americans' tastes and manners; both men look like "Hollywood-type" males.

It is very important for Nabokov to show that despite their deceptive mutual animosity, the mother and daughter are deeply connected to each other through this sort of continuity of their respective attractions (although their lovemaps are clearly different as Lolita is attracted to men three times her age, Quilty and, for a little while, H.H. while there is little or nothing irregular about Charlotte's sexual tastes). It is observable in the initial episodes as Humbert the narrator explicitly refers to the two women as "rivals"; Charlotte insists that her daughter is "unwanted" by H.H.; finally, Humbert complains to his readers that the "Haze woman... was more afraid of Lo's deriving some pleasure from me than of my enjoying Lo" (Nabokov 1970, 48, 51, 56).

The last comment by H.H. is crucial for understanding the fact that sexual pleasure is at the center of all power-related interactions in the novel. But only Charlotte, a religious, righteous woman, seems to derive pleasure from "normal" sexual intercourse with someone roughly her age. All the other characters seem to have developed all sorts of paraphilias: Quilty is clearly a pedophile, an amateurish pornographer, and a group sex / orgy enthusiast; H.H. is secretly attracted to Annabel look-alikes, i.e., "nymphets" of about twelve years-old; Lolita, a "precocious pet," likes grown men in their mid to late thirties; even Harold Haze, Charlotte's deceased husband, was into some strange sexual practices that amuse H.H. as Charlotte *confesses* to him about them. In other words, yet another trait that makes the Charlotte character boring and commonplace is her normalcy / healthiness: "her autobiography was as devoid of interests as her autopsy would have been. I never saw a healthier woman than she, despite thinning diets" (Nabokov 1970, 80).

But it is a proclivity for the just mentioned confession about one's sexual pleasures and idiosyncrasies that Humbert and Charlotte appear to have in common. Ever since the Middle Ages, at least, "Western man has become a confessing animal," Foucault argues (Foucault 1990, 59). Just as H.H.'s account of his passion-love for Lolita is subtitled *The Confession of a White Widowed Male*, Charlotte is obsessed with confessing about her sexual experience and forcing her ungodly partner into confessing about his (this is arguably one of the most entertaining, wildly humorous passages of the novel):

I never thought that she would be so crazily jealous of anything in my life that had not been she. She showed a fierce insatiable curiosity for my past... I had to invent... a long series of mistresses for Charlotte's morbid delectation... Never in my life I confessed so much or received so many confessions (Nabokov 1970, 79-80).

For Humbert, writing a memoir about his infatuation with a twelve-year-old girl is a secular confession aimed at the aesthetic/philosophic task of "fixing once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (Nabokov 1970, 134). He also wants, as Foucault would say, "to articulate [his] sexual peculiarity, no matter how extreme" (Foucault 1990, 61). For Charlotte, confession is a religious discursive practice that she is forced to engage in by her Catholic faith and, in turn, she forces others to engage in it. One of the main conflicts of the novel is, therefore, brought about by this collision of American pre-modern religiosity/spirituality personified by Charlotte and the modernized European discourse of the body, bodily needs and functions (including sexual aberrations) personified by Humbert. This is precisely where the novel's satirical, anti-American undercurrents merge with its sexual and erotic themes.

However, Humbert, with his "old-world reticence," (in Charlotte's apt phrase; Nabokov 1970, 68) is shocked by Charlotte's pleonastic confessions because he is in fact reticent about sexual matters and because he is a sexual hypocrite, as I will try to show in what follows. Lem tellingly calls Humbert a sexual "Pharisee," a "low-rank sex criminal" (Lem, web resource). But, after all, this pre-modern element of reticence, H.H.'s "dark romantic European way," is precisely what must have made him attractive to Charlotte, a quintessential US woman.

In other words, Humbert, despite all of Nabokov's ambivalence in portraying him, is a European modern man, the nature of whose confessions ("of a white widowed male") is much more of a sexological discourse than Charlotte's anachronistic attempts to recreate purely spiritual confession mechanisms of her religious faith being in a pair-bond with a partner who will not appreciate it. This is certainly the tragedy of this female character's fate, but also Nabokov's darkly ironic comment on American womanhood.

### **Humbert-Annabel, Humbert-Lolita**

It is well-known from the Nabokov-Wilson correspondence (aptly commented upon by Simon Karlinsky) that in 1948 Edmund Wilson sent Nabokov a copy of Havelock Ellis's

collected writings.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear whether Nabokov read the whole book, but he paid special attention to “Confession sexuelle d’un Russe du Sud, ne vers 1870...” (1912) written by an anonymous author in French (the pseudonymous Victor), which Ellis included as an appendix (Nabokov 1980, 201-202).<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting that Victor, this Ukrainian author of yet another sexual confession involved in the conception of *Lolita*, sounds really desperate about his utter inability to control his sexual urges toward young girls of eleven to fifteen years old. Just like H.H., whose unbridled, precocious passion for Annabel seems to have forever “vandalized” his lovemap, the Ukrainian reveals that at the age of twelve he was seduced by several (!) young girls of his age (in addition to several older women). Just as in Humbert’s account of his first intercourse with Lolita, the author complains of being seduced by teenage girls when he was past thirty years old; as a matter of fact, the girls turned out to be more experienced sexually than he was, and it was their continuing availability that led to his loss of control over his sex impulses. However, the narrator’s paraphilia was more pathological than Humbert’s: for instance, he was in the habit of “exhibiting himself to [young girls] at outdoor urinals” (Nabokov 1980, 201-202).<sup>15</sup>

It is much less important for me here to focus on to what extent Nabokov borrowed from this confession appended to Ellis’s book or why Wilson, his supplier of erotic and sexological

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), nicknamed the “English Freud,” was a psychologist, sexologist and literary critic, famous now mainly for his pioneering work on autoerotism, homosexuality, etc. In his university textbook *Psychology of Sex* (1933) (that Nabokov was obviously also familiar with), Ellis defines two types of pedophiles: mentally disabled people and refined intellectuals (Galinskaya 2005). Nabokov arguably combined the two types into one imaginary character: H.H. is both a sophisticated scholar and a patient of psycho-neurological clinics throughout his life (including his last days). As Humbert himself points out, “you have to be an artist *and* a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy” to discern a nymphet among other adolescent girls (Nabokov 1970, 17. Italics added.)

<sup>14</sup> In addition, as Metcalf points out, Nabokov must have singled out Havelock Ellis of all psychiatrists because for the latter the “individuality of each case [was] respected and catalogued in the same way that butterflies are carefully classified” (Metcalf 2005). Nabokov was, of course, a serious lepidopterist. Dmitri, the writer’s son, also confirms the importance of this text for Nabokov’s design of *Lolita* and the creation of the male protagonist but warns against overrating the Ellis connection, the reason being that the above-mentioned novella *Волшебник / The Enchanter* had been written in 1939, about nine years before Nabokov became familiar with Ellis’s work. The novella, according to D. Nabokov, “does contain what might be called the ‘central theme’ (if little else) of *Lolita*” (Nabokov 1986, 126).

<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, Havelock Ellis himself apparently was a *urophile*; he enjoyed seeing women urinate (he called this paraphilia “undinism,” but now it is known as *urolognia*). It is possible that Nabokov has omitted both the Ukrainian’s strange case of exhibitionism and Ellis’s *urolognia* simply because he was disgusted by the descriptions of “sex organs” and bodily functions (including urination and defecation) in the twentieth century novel he liked most of all, Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Nabokov 1970, lii-liiii). I wrote above about Nabokov’s attack on Georgii Ivanov’s groundbreaking *Atom Decay*, which was also connected to the latter’s “obsession with latrines” and “indecenties” related to sexuality. In other words, despite Nabokov’s strong interest in eroticism and sexual behavior, he might have been rather prudishly intolerant of any deviations from the “norm” (including homosexuality) and of the physical and physiological side of sexual intercourse itself.

texts, ended up disliking *Lolita* so much (both questions have been explored by Karlinsky). I am much more interested in this link to Havelock Ellis as yet another bit of evidence (in addition to the above-mentioned Kinsey connection) for the novel's contextualization in the sexological discourses of his times. It is difficult to imagine that *Lolita* would have been possible without these provocative hypotheses about the nature of pedophilia, adolescent sexuality, the phenomenon of precocity in sexual development of young children, etc. Nabokov was undoubtedly delighted by the chance to explore, for instance, the bizarre continuity of this precocity as Humbert the passionate lover of Annabel metamorphoses into a sexual Pharisee who ruthlessly pursues the pubescent Lolita, but eventually comes full circle back to where he started: he is desperately in love with the seventeen-year-old pregnant Dolly Schiller and seems therefore fully redeemed. The Ukrainian landowner's "lascivious report" (as Nabokov refers to the Ukrainian's confession in his memoir *Drugie berega*) is therefore extremely helpful in clarifying H.H.'s sexual predicament.

Secondly, treating the anonymous Ukrainian landowner's text as a precursor of *Lolita* sheds light on Humbert's being a "wolf in sheep's clothing": his East Slavic pedigree becomes more and more conspicuous underneath his vaunted Europeaness.<sup>16</sup> Not only is he a new Ostap Bender endowed with an invincible sense of humor and dark irony (undoubtedly Russian in his incorrigible *глумление* and *юродствование*: as Lem has noticed, he even mocks his own lust); he is also in part an heir to the unfortunate Ukrainian's multiple sexual disorders. As I will suppose in what follows, H.H.'s sexual hypocrisy, his pharisaic and egotistic urge for comfort and convenience in matters of sexual love and attraction, and his nasty tendency to blackmail his own sex partner, make him akin not only to Liudmilochka Rutilova who indulges in complex sexual games with a pubescent boy,<sup>17</sup> but also to Peredonov of Fyodor Sologub's *The Petty Demon*.

Throughout the course of the novel the readers learn quite a lot about Humbert's sexual idiosyncrasies. The defining moment of his pubescence was an unusually intense erotic

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<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, the unnamed protagonist of *The Enchanter*, a key predecessor of *Lolita*, was a Central European.

<sup>17</sup> This insightful parallel between Sologub and Nabokov is briefly made by Viktor Yerofeyev in his introduction to the first Soviet/Russian publication of *Lolita* (Nabokov 1989, 8). Connections between the two authors are also discussed by Yuri Leving in his essay "Rumble of Non-existence (V. Nabokov and F. Sologub)" (*V. V. Nabokov: Pro et contra*, Vol. 2 (2001), St. Petersburg, Russian Christian State Institute, pp. 499-519).

relationship with Annabel, his coeval, whose image was to shape his lovemap<sup>18</sup> and to be forever imprinted upon his mind: “We loved each other with a premature love, marked by a fierceness that so often destroys adult lives” (Nabokov 1970, 18). Their mutual passion was indeed an agony for both of them, but coming from educated, upper middle class families they could not “mate as slum children would have so easily found an opportunity to do.” Their desire remained unconsummated, and it undoubtedly traumatized Humbert for the rest of his life. Contrary to his opinion, there is nothing “magic or fateful” about the fact that “Lolita began with Annabel.” As a matter of fact, the two girls were of the same age (twelve) and looked strikingly alike. The power of his attraction to Annabel was such that he kept looking for her reincarnation throughout his life, while her unattainable image kept haunting and tormenting him (Nabokov 1970, 12).

Nabokov presents Annabel and Humbert’s adolescent love in a very erotic way; maybe the most erotic passage of the book is when both partners exchange manual stimulation of each other’s genitals (Nabokov 1970, 14-15). The author clearly wants his readers to see that Western cultures have a conspicuous double standard about the age difference between the partners. Although the two situations are of course vastly different, it is perfectly feasible to represent intercourse between people of the same age, even if they are teenagers, but it is much harder to find a way to describe consensual intercourse between a thirty-six-year-old man and a twelve-year-old adolescent; this is exactly why the narrator’s descriptions of sexual acts become progressively reticent and laconic as the plot unravels (contrary to the genre of pornography, one of the conventions of which is the proliferation of arousing verbal or visual imagery). It is also interesting that the H.H.-Annabel sessions of petting are repeatedly interrupted by strangers and relatives alike, all of which points to the fact that, in John Money’s terms, adults could not be cooperative in allowing the two children more freedom in their “sexuoerotic rehearsal play” (Money 1986, 24-25). According to Money, this lack (along with severe punishment adults often inflict on children when they catch them playing proto-sexual games) later may lead to the vandalization of lovemaps and to paraphilias. Shortly thereafter Annabel dies of typhus, and Humbert is thus prevented from establishing a lasting pair-bond with her. Instead, he becomes a paraphile who is attracted to Lolita-like girls and for whom there are “two sexes, neither of which is [his],” adult and teenage women (Nabokov 1970, 18).

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<sup>18</sup> This is a thoroughly explored allusion (e.g., by Appel) to Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee” (1849). Nabokov admired Poe; there are more than twenty allusions to his work throughout *Lolita* (Nabokov 1970, 328-334).

But here we need to go back to the argument that Nabokov was interested in presenting his readers with a “continuum of pedophilia,” rather than just diagnosing his protagonist with it. Is Humbert really a sex predator and a pedophile? We know that prior to meeting Lolita he has never had sex with underage girls. Before he reached his mid-thirties he was not even sure of the nature of his paraphilia: “In my twenties and early thirties, I did not understand my throes quite so clearly. While my body knew what it craved for, my mind rejected my body’s every plea” (Nabokov 1970, 18). Monique, the French prostitute he asks to role-play a nymphet, is in fact eighteen years of age. Valeria, his wife, was in her late twenties, but happened to look like a “little girl.” Despite his attractiveness to women, he was “dreadfully stupid in matters of sex” (Nabokov 1970, 22, 25).

Then, finally, nearly twenty-five years after the Annabel affair, he sees Lolita and experiences the “flash of passionate recognition.” Indeed, it was “the same child – the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair.” Even a “tiny mole on her side” is the same (Nabokov 1970, 39). In addition, Lolita “smelt almost exactly like” Annabel, a “torrid odor that at once set my manhood astir” (Nabokov 1970, 42). In other words, Nabokov is careful to convince us of a striking resemblance between the two twelve-year-olds in the way they looked, walked, smelled, talked, etc. This doubling is extremely important as it may prove (and both Lem and Trilling might agree with this) that there is much more of a monomaniac (akin to Melville’s Captain Ahab) than a pedophile/hebephile in H.H.: “... *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer’s ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is – Lolita” (Nabokov 1970, 45).

What happens in the following month and a half cannot be ignored: Lolita also develops an affection for Humbert, and her attraction is far from being asexual or non-erotic. First of all, he looks like a man from the ad she has posted in her room. Second, to her, H.H. looks similar to Quilty whom she remembers very well from the club meeting two or three years ago when the latter had her in his lap and touched her inappropriately. Does the author want his readers to believe Humbert that when he surreptitiously reached an orgasm with Lolita fidgeting in his lap, the child really “had noticed nothing?” (Nabokov 1970, 43, 61). H.H. has no way of knowing this for sure, but some readers will certainly speculate that this oversexed and precocious girl must have, in fact, taken note of what was going on and what the “shy, studious gentleman” was trying to achieve. Although H.H. tries to present himself as almost a caring adult concerned with

the child's innocence, it is conspicuous that the opposite may be true, and Stanislaw Lem is absolutely right: H.H. is a Pharisee and an ultimate conformist; it is much more important for him to make sure everybody is happy, "alive, unraped," while his own conservative, at times almost Victorian, moral principles are not disturbed either (Nabokov 1970, 64, 66). His hypocrisy and conformism bordering on the grotesque are best revealed in the following ludicrous address to the "gentlemen of the jury":

The majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessarily coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behavior, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon them. We are not sex fiends. We do not rape as soldiers do. We are unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen, sufficiently well-integrated to control our urge in the presence of adults, but ready to give years and years of life for one chance to touch a nymphet (Nabokov 1970, 87-88).

What we observe here is H.H.'s failure to hide his nature as a sexual hypocrite behind his trademark Russian *глумление* / "scoffing of an opponent" as he also misinterprets his own sexuality: it is not *a* nymphet that he has been wanting to possess, but *the* one who would very closely resemble Annabel (in any event, the readers are unaware of any serious attempts of his to "touch" one prior to meeting Lolita). Besides, he shows a lack of experience and inexplicable squeamishness about genital intercourse: how can a sexual relationship be simultaneously physical and not coital? *Lolita* is definitely a very funny book, in which a standup comedian's punch line is always crucial for Nabokov, but it is doubtful that he wanted his protagonist and narrator to sound so completely illogical and unconvincing. As has been noted above, this passage may be one of the textual indicators of Nabokov's own uneasiness about functions of the human body, including those pertaining to sexuality.

As Humbert begins traveling with Lolita, several important things become apparent. First, Lolita is "sort of fond of" him as she puts it herself "with a sort of sigh" and "sort of" moves closer to him in the car (Nabokov 1970, 115). Second, Humbert learns that she has been deflowered by the boy Charlie in the camp, where she may also have had some lesbian experience. Third, it is clear that despite being just a teenager, she is as sexually experienced as the thirty-six-year-old H.H. (or more so), and she considers, as Humbert puts it in his haughty,

quasi-Victorian jargon, all “caresses except kisses on the mouth or the stark act of love either ‘romantic slosh’ or ‘abnormal’” (Nabokov 1970, 133). It is certainly ludicrous of Humbert to start moralizing about “modern co-education” and “campfires” having depraved his beloved, but the readers should not forget that he is passionately in love with her and is deeply shocked by his discovery that she is not as innocent as his Annabel was. Indeed, what H.H. (and quite possibly his creator as well) sees as depravity and deviance may be largely considered as part of more or less common development of adolescent sexuality. But we should also bear in mind that only a small minority of female children in the US lose their virginity at the age of twelve, in the 1950s or today.<sup>19</sup> Eric Goldman’s suggestion that Lolita is a perfectly normal child, whom the sexual aggressor and exploiter Humbert pathologizes, seems rather debatable as the critic does not seem to account for the fact that at the beginning Lolita was sexually interested in Humbert also and that she had already had her first intercourse by that time.<sup>20</sup> When Goldman argues that “Humbert’s mythical framework presents Lolita as a sexual deviant who perverts a supposedly ‘innocent’ pedophile,” he does not take into consideration Humbert’s irony about American youth culture (Goldman 2004, 101).

It is also quite entertaining to analyze their short dialogue as Lolita prepares to manually stimulate Humbert’s penis. She asks him if he has “ever done it as a kid,” and we are left to wonder if she means masturbation or stimulation of another boy’s penis. Nabokov was known to be rather intolerant of homosexuality, and one would assume that she means children’s homoerotic rehearsal play (I referred to this term from John Money above). Humbert’s blunt answer (“‘Never,’ I answered quite truthfully.”) reveals his uneasiness with homosexuality and/or onanism in particular and carnality issues in general. Not surprisingly, this tongue-tied

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<sup>19</sup> According to the Kinsey Institute, even in the early twenty first century only about 26% of females have had genital sex by the age of fifteen. One can speculate that in the 1940s and 50s the age at first intercourse was considerably lower. Lolita, however, is only twelve and a half when she has genital sex with Charlie; she obviously has had some oral sex experience as well (The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction. <http://www.iub.edu/~kinsey/resources/FAQ.html> Retrieved 05/15/2009).

<sup>20</sup> Goldman suggests that “it is the Kinseyan moments in the novel (those few in which Lolita’s sexual activity is seen in the context of her peers) that expose the distorting effects of Humbert’s mythologizing of Lolita—moments in which the muted suggestion that Lolita is in fact ‘normal’ despite her sexual experiments with her peers makes Humbert Humbert’s exploitation of her even more repulsive” (Goldman 102). I concur with Goldman that H.H.’s treatment of Lolita is indeed often repulsive, but for a different reason: being a conformist and a hypocrite, he fails to respect her as a woman and as a partner displaying a largely condescending, patronizing attitude to her. His “terrorizing” and blackmailing the child, as well as egotistically enjoying her sexually having stigmatized her as “My Frigid Princess,” have ruined their relationship. As noted above, I think it is a mistake to classify Lolita as a “normal child”; she is, in fact, oversexed and precocious for a US twelve-year-old of the late 1940s. However, I would also stop short of presenting her as a deviant or “juvenile delinquent” (as she defines herself jokingly).

presentation of their first sexual scene is followed by Humbert's (and arguably Nabokov's) assertion that he is "not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all. Anybody can imagine these elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (Nabokov 1970, 133-134). It is somewhat unclear how Humbert is going to "fix" this magic if he discards the sexual as "animality." Again, how can a relationship between a man and a woman be "physical" but "not coital"? Are not nymphets first and foremost about sex appeal, attraction, and eroticism? How can one separate the "so-called sex" from a purely esthetic enjoyment of nymphets? In fact, the following morning Lolita and H.H., a "waif" and a "foul-smelling adult," had "strenuous intercourse three times" (Nabokov 1970, 140). Lusting for Lolita and having a lot of intercourse with her while at the same time denying that he is concerned with "so-called sex" reveal the essence of Humbert the Pharisee's sexual hypocrisy.

But the most interesting thing happens after that morning filled with Lolita's stories about the summer camp and their "strenuous intercourse": the heroine becomes suddenly very upset; she makes sad jokes about having been raped, half-jokingly threatens to call the cops, insults Humbert in all kinds of ways. What has happened? An almost Kafkaesque metamorphosis? Everything seemed so fine, Lolita initiated the intercourse herself and now she is so distressed. Arguably, what happened was that she detected Humbert's hypocrisy when she told him about her intercourse with Charlie and realized that he is actually an egotist, a conformist and a Pharisee.<sup>21</sup> This is the precise moment when her budding affection for him is being destroyed, and it is Humbert, the ultimate loser, who appears to have self-destructed. He did have a chance to win Lolita's love by being more sensitive to her feelings and her sexuality, but he did not take the opportunity and ultimately lost her to Quilty, who was so much more successful than he was as a writer, intellectual – and, ultimately, as a lover too. If we assume that Humbert has implicit Eastern Slavic roots (as Victor, Havelock Ellis's Ukrainian landowner, is certainly one of his prototypes), then Quilty could stand for a quintessential North American intellectual, his more successful counterpart. Knowing Nabokov's biography, one might surmise that he has implied a certain amount of self-irony in this vision.

That Humbert's monomaniacal passion, or passion-love, for Lolita (as an avatar of Annabel) is by far superior to his pedophilic urges is affirmed powerfully by his visit with the

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<sup>21</sup> Another thing that happens in the morning is that she sees Quilty in the hotel lobby, so this meeting may have aggravated the situation as well (Nabokov 1970, 138-139).

Schiller family toward the end of the novel.<sup>22</sup> Lem comments on this scene most aptly in his review of *Lolita*:

Lolita [finally] ceases being one of the many and becomes the only and irreplaceable, the invaluable one... even in her deformity, overripening, and decay.... The mechanism of lust is destroyed during this brief moment.... As the reader witnesses a synthesis of the “nymphetic” object of lust with the object of love, a subjectivization of the object of love, [this phenomenon] becomes alien to the gloomy world of the Dostoevsky characters [Lem means such characters as Stavrogin and Svidrigaylov – A.L.]; it is Nabokov’s property and a distinctive feature of his novel (Lem 1962).

While I concur with Lem that Nabokov’s H.H. does break away from Dostoevsky’s villains at this moment, he clearly has been constructing this character in dialogue with Dostoevsky, Kuprin, Sologub, Ilf and Petrov, Georgii Ivanov and other Russian authors, many of whom he has wrathfully denounced in his numerous interviews and memoirs.

As H.H. repents and manages to win the sympathy of most readers via the acceptance of his guilt for ruining Lolita’s life, one is reminded of Nabokov’s image of the ape sketching the bars of its own cage. In Humbert’s case, as we have seen, these cage bars consist of both his paraphiliac sexuality (hebephilia) and his monomaniacal passion for Annabel. But as Nabokov engages us in a creative exercise of imagining the bars of Humbert’s sexual predicament, we may learn inadvertently about the author’s own contradictions and limitations in representing the sexual, the corporal and the erotic. This glimpse into Nabokov’s own strategy and ideology of the sexual, the fleshly and the bodily can enable one to contextualize his most famous novel within both the main tradition of classic Russian literature restricting sexuality to ellipses, omissions and grotesqueries (which starts with Gogol and culminates in the work of such Silver Age authors as Bely, Blok or Bunin) and an alternative line of succession allowing for a more open sexual and erotic discourse (started by Pushkin and developed by Kuzmin, Sologub, Kuprin, Georgii Ivanov, and, last but not least, Nabokov himself).

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<sup>22</sup> Trilling expresses this superiority quite well: “Psychiatry and the world may join in giving scientific or ugly names to Humbert’s sexual idiosyncrasy; the novel treats of it as a condition of love like another” (Trilling 2000, 363).

## **Lolita-Quilty, Lolita-Humbert**

Lolita is in many ways a much more enigmatic and provocative character than H.H., the reason being that female adolescent sexuality was in the 1950s, and remains to this day, a largely unexplored territory. Nabokov certainly understood this and did not want to provide his readers with any readymade answers or suggestions. However, as noted already, it is highly debatable that he wanted to create a typical, “normal” American “girl-child” who is treacherously seduced and depraved by a monstrous predator from the old corrupt Europe. It would be a very naïve and tendentious reading of this novel to suppose that these civilizational allegories were of any concern to this writer. He was much more interested in moving Pushkin’s observation (quoted above) that we can experience (or, rather, succumb to) sexual love at any age, but that in the middle age the “deathly passion’s imprint is sad.”

Some of the most characteristic readings of the novel today come from pedagogic perspectives, i.e., to what extent is this book teachable to undergrads and how one can teach it best. The character of Lolita is undoubtedly central to these pedagogic concerns. Eric Naiman, for example, lets us know that in his senior seminar,

several students have criticized Humbert – and Nabokov – for being unable to envision or represent Lolita’s experience of physical pleasure in her sexual encounters with Humbert: the reality, they argue, would be more complex. This argument inevitably leads to a discussion of whether the reality of sexual abuse or statutory rape should matter for a good reading of *Lolita*, as well as to a consideration of the habitual uses of representations of female pleasure in pornographic, usually male-oriented, verbal and cinematic texts (Kuzmanovich 2008, 41).

While I think the problem of statutory rape is only very remotely linked to this work of fiction, and it is hard for me to understand what “pornographic texts” Naiman considers along with *Lolita* and why he has to do so, I think his students may be quite right in questioning Nabokov’s portrayal of his character’s sexual behavior. Part of the problem may have been related to the fact that the writer knew very little about adolescent girls and could rely primarily on only occasional observations. But more importantly, Nabokov’s inability (or unwillingness?) to present Lolita’s sexuality in more detail may have had to do with a lack of understanding of and

attention to female sexuality characteristic of numerous major Russian writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that Nabokov seems to have partially inherited.<sup>23</sup>

In his recent book Naiman quotes a female student of his (perhaps, different from the one mentioned by him in the earlier article) who called the novel “misogynistic” because Nabokov “could not bring himself to represent female sexual pleasure.” One may agree or disagree with the student’s perceptive comment, but Naiman is certainly wrong when he goes on to claim that if Nabokov had decided to express Lolita’s experiencing sexual pleasure, the novel “would risk toppling into the genre of at least soft-core pornography” (Naiman 2009, 148).<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the most efficient way of approaching this problem is to start with the Lolita-Quilty relationship. Chronologically, it begins long before the Lolita-Humbert one; in addition, we know for sure from Lolita herself that Quilty was “the only man she had ever been crazy about” (Nabokov 1970, 272).

Although Nabokov peppered the text with thinly veiled references to Quilty, this character remains rather schematic and undeveloped, even if Nabokov intended it this way. It is unclear why he had cared to pursue Lolita for such a long time and had taken pains to mock H.H. in the process, if he got rid of her shortly thereafter when she refused to take part in his filmed orgies at Duk Duk Ranch. We do know, however, that he touched her inappropriately when she was about nine, sat her in his lap, and kissed her face, which made her “furious” (Nabokov 1970, 272). It is therefore Quilty who is the true pedophile and “pervert” of the novel, not so much Humbert, a bashful, hypocritical, sexually conservative monomaniac. To Quilty, sex is all about pleasure and experimentation; H.H. seems to always, even in his most playful, ironic mood, reduce it to its procreative function, something dull and monotonous. Quilty is obviously a

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<sup>23</sup> Naiman’s students seem to be more perceptive than Kuzmanovich’s. The latter didn’t like the Jeremy Irons-read audiobook and complained that “despite Irons’s lyrical voice... in his reading of Lolita’s speech they hear less of her desperation than in their own readings of the passages in which she calls her relationship to H.H. ‘incest’ and threatens to tell the police that he ‘raped’ her” (Kuzmanovich 2008, 22). Irons might or might not appreciate these bits of criticism coming from US undergraduates, but it is perhaps the instructor’s responsibility to explain to his students that the relationship had very little to do with incest or rape and that they should read the text more attentively to be able to catch several layers of irony therein: Nabokov’s, the narrator’s, and Lolita’s. Here is the passage Kuzmanovich’s students must have meant when they questioned Irons’s credentials:

“You chump,” she said, sweetly smiling at me. “You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you’ve done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, dirty, dirty old man” (Nabokov 1970, 141).

One can only try to imagine Irons with his “lyrical voice” trying to show some “desperation” while reading these lines.

<sup>24</sup> I am thankful to Dr. Yuri Leving for bringing to my attention this excerpt from Naiman’s book and for many other insightful comments on my essay.

hyperphile who is interested in kinky experiments and for whom there is little or nothing emotional or humane about sexual intercourse. Nabokov may have intended him to serve as a parody of American masculinity, akin to Dostoevsky's conception of his most memorable libertine, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov.<sup>25</sup> A major enigma of the book is why Lolita had fallen in love with him at that moment (when she sat in his lap) and why she kept being attracted to him throughout her life. She was, of course, a pre-pubescent child of about nine who did not have any prior experience; her mother Charlotte's flirtatious behavior may have been partly responsible for the feelings of jealousy and, ultimately, attraction to Quilty. The relations between the mother and daughter had been tight, and they seem to have always been rivals in love. In addition, Lolita was attracted to males who would seem to be father figures, but there is nothing in the text pointing to her daughterly feelings toward Quilty; her attraction to him appears purely erotic. She did perceive Humbert partly as a parent though, "granting" him that "he had been a good father" (Nabokov 1970, 272).

It is also crucial for understanding the satirical element of the novel that Quilty is a celebrity, a renowned playwright. Lolita thinks he is a "genius," which is a strong, restrictive term in the Russian usage (granted only to the likes of Pushkin and Chaikovsky, almost never to Chekhov or Dostoevsky), but maybe not so much in an American cultural-linguistic setting. In Lolita's words, he "saw – smiling – through everything and everybody," and that made him unlike anybody else. Quilty apparently had lied to Lo that he would take her to one of those Hollywood tryouts and she would become an actress in a movie based on his play.

Humbert actually thinks that Quilty had "sodomized" Lolita – the choice of the verb points to Humbert's (and his author's) homophobia rather than to what actually happened between Lo and Quilty (Nabokov 1970, 295). It is very amusing that he chooses this particular term, but at the same time understandable: Lolita by then had been petted by Quilty, deflowered by Charlie, abused by Humbert himself and now subjected to group sex by Quilty at the ranch. For Humbert, however, there is no better term than "sodomy" to describe the harm inflicted by Quilty.

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<sup>25</sup> The comparison of Quilty with Fyodor may appear farfetched, but both men met their violent deaths in punishment for their lasciviousness and depravity; the former was executed by the insulted "father," whose stepdaughter he had "sodomized," while the latter was annihilated by his own illegitimate son, Smerdyakov, appalled at his biological father's godless, hedonistic lifestyle.

In other words, all these loosely connected bits of information about Quilty lead one to think of him as a scheme, a figment of the narrator's imagination rather than a believable, fully drawn character. Nabokov's goal is self-evident though: he needed to introduce Quilty to counterpoint him to Humbert and allay the latter's deviance by contrasting him with a much more obvious pedophile and "pervert." In addition, he needed "Cue" to mock the North American "celebrity cult" by portraying its corrupting effects on the most vulnerable consumers of pop culture, i.e., children.

Finally, we can now try to approach the Lolita-Humbert relationship. First of all, their affection was mutual at the beginning, and Humbert did not force her into their first intercourse; it was fully consensual. Of course, we must bear in mind Lo's tender age, but Nabokov certainly wanted his readers to consider their relationship not in moral or legal terms but in the aesthetic realm of creative imagination where there is room for all kinds of possibilities, including this "scandalous" passion-love.

Secondly, as shown above, their fragile mutual fondness is ruined not by their age difference and not even by Lo's pre-existent infatuation with Quilty (although the former and the latter definitely played a part), but by Humbert's sexual hypocrisy and conservatism, by his resorting to blackmailing and "terrorizing" (Nabokov 1970, 151) his partner instead of trying to build a respectful relationship. He had his chance to gain her love, but he tragically failed to take it. His self-confident belief that he was so intelligent and broad-minded, while Lolita did not live up to her I.Q. and was "mentally, a disgustingly conventional little girl," might or might not be self-deception, but in any event hardly related to his failure. His patronizing, but vulgar style of producing jokes and ponderous puns only aggravated the matter:

Come and kiss your old man... and drop that moody nonsense. In former times, when I was still your dream male [he never was one: in fact, it was always Quilty! – A.L.] you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals... But now, I am just your *old man*, a dream dad protecting his dream daughter.... The rapist was Charlie Holmes; I am the therapist... I am your father, and I *am* speaking English, and I love you (Nabokov 1970, 149-150).

If a man feels he is in love with a woman (and this love is the love of his life), it is axiomatic he should not remind her of the age difference so very often and avoid conflating his dubious father status with that of a lover. By choosing this tactic of dealing with Lolita, Humbert actually self-

deconstructs and prevents the relationship from growing into a mutually affectionate one. Lolita's response of treacherously deceiving him and ultimately running away with someone who had avoided positioning himself as a father figure is therefore logical and perfectly understandable from both moral and emotional standpoints. H.H.'s prohibiting her to mix with other adolescents was the last drop into the cup of her patience.

But it must be understood that H.H. is "in the grip of an obsessional lust" and, as a man in "passion-love," he is a "sick man, a patient" (Trilling 2000, 366, 368). Trilling makes a wonderful point when he argues that the modern idea of love is very remote from passion-love; it is thus inadequate to judge Humbert's behavior in terms of "sexual health"; and he was definitely *not* aspiring to create a "healthy family" with Lolita. But his predicament is not only about his own sexual hypocrisy; as noted above, it is also about the "sexual hypocrisy of American life" (Trilling 2000, 364). H.H. was never able to figure out how to act with Lolita partly due to the fact that she was certainly a precocious, oversexed "girl-child," whose sexuality was simultaneously restrained and stimulated by the hypocritical society.

Sarah Herbold is therefore absolutely right when she encourages her students to "articulate the paradox of Lolita's duplicity and confront head-on its confusing implications." She argues that "while Lolita can be seen as a victim, she must also be seen as a powerful agent, in whom erotic desire and creativity are as closely intertwined as they are for Humbert (and Nabokov)" (Kuzmanovich 2008, 138).

Dmitri Nabokov echoes Herbold as he compares Lolita with her main forerunner – the heroine of *The Enchanter*, who is much less developed as an autonomous agent:

Dolores Haze may, as Nabokov says, be "very much the same lass" as the Enchanter's victim, but only in an inspirational, conceptional sense. In other ways the earlier child is very different – perverse only in the madman's eyes; innocently incapable of anything like the Quilty intrigue; sexually unawakened and physically immature (Nabokov 1986, 127).

Indeed, since Lem and Trilling's programmatic essays, there has not been too much criticism that would focus on Lolita as an independent, powerful force playing a major role in the love triangle with Quilty and Humbert, having her own sexual desires and preferences, making her own choices. Herbold's essay very helpfully points toward the necessity of such critical perspectives.

One can easily see the numerous Russian sources and progenitors of the Lolita-Humbert relationship, some of which have been mentioned above (Kuprin's Sulamith and King Solomon, Sologub's Lyudmilochka and Sasha Pylnikov, Georgii Ivanov's obsessive images of lust and violence involving young girls in *The Decay of the Atom*, etc.), but one must be able to see the novelty of Nabokov's approach, achieved through a cross-pollination of these Russian sources with English, French and American literary benchmarks of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: from Byron, Poe and Melville to Proust and Joyce. In tandem with this cross-cultural, multi-tradition approach, he was able to incorporate into his novel a vast amount of sexological discourse that had been extremely influential at that time (such as the work of Havelock Ellis and Alfred Kinsey). He saw that the American society was getting obsessed with the "nightmare of pedophilia" and with protecting itself from sex predators and aggressors, but he decided to cause a commotion by showing this phenomenon in all of its complexity, demonstrating the continuum of pedophilia on the example of two very different lovers of Lolita: Quilty and Humbert. He shocked his audiences on both sides of the Atlantic by crossing the lines of the permissible in moral-legal terms and thus in many ways anticipated subsequent studies of sexualities providing our deeper understanding of sexual attraction and allowing for certain additional possibilities whenever two consenting partners find themselves passionately attracted to one another. Books like *Lolita* thus arguably raise the cultural weight of literature as they enrich the public's awareness of such controversial social phenomena as a possibility of consensual relationships whenever one of the partners happens to be considerably younger than the legal age of consent via representing such "illicit love" in a novelistic, fictional medium.

In addition, *Lolita* stands as one of the first endeavors of an author of Russian descent to win the attention and sympathies of Western audiences by constructing a complex metaphoric commentary upon the condition of Western cultures (briefly described in what follows). It is remarkable that in generating this commentary Nabokov relied heavily on Russian sources, both literary and extra-literary, some of which have been discussed in this essay. It is important that in the tremendous discursive formation created around *Lolita* in the West we are still able to discern the elements of "Russianness" in its conception and design.

Amid the tremendous amount of ink spilled over the novel that seems to have been addressed from all possible vantages by now, my approach to Nabokov's masterpiece does not lie within psychoanalytical, feminist, or "victimological" paradigms. Although I did use a few

details from Nabokov's life, I have tried to refrain from purely biographical criticism as well. My objective was to provide sexual portraits of the major characters without downplaying the importance of the novel as a cultural commentary upon such phenomena as sexual hypocrisy of US society, its obsession with sexual deviants, European anti-Americanism, and American stereotypes about European cultures. In addition, it was crucial for me to emphasize that all the four main characters – Lolita, Humbert, Quilty, and Charlotte – had East Slavic prototypes and predecessors, both in Nabokov's own work (such as *The Enchanter*) and in the work of the Silver Age authors he knew quite well, from Sologub and Kuprin to Ilf & Petrov and Georgii Ivanov. Finally, my approach is inherently inter- and trans-disciplinary as I have tried to contextualize this novel in the socio-cultural and intellectual fields of its period and beyond, arguing for a fuller understanding of outstanding literary works as not so much the products of an individual artistic genius but as complex statements on what Mikhail Bakhtin would call the "last questions of being." Having been influenced – or even predetermined – by the scientific/sexological, medical and psychiatric discourses of their times, novels like *Lolita* (as well as, for example, James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in earlier periods) have proved capable of impacting these very discourses in their turn upon entering the public sphere.<sup>26</sup>

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