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“MY AGE OF INNOCENCE GIRL” —
HUMBERT, CHAPLIN, LITA AND LO¹

In January 1997, Vladimir Nabokov’s son Dmitri answered a query posted on *Nabokv-L*, the Vladimir Nabokov Online Forum, as to whether his father’s most infamous hero, Humbert Humbert, could have been inspired by a real-life counterpart, the silent film comedian Charlie Chaplin. “Sure,” he replied. “And Pnin was modeled on Rudolph Valentino.”² Dmitri’s terse response sparked a brief discussion which extended into an even briefer consideration of whether the characterization of Lolita had similarly been inspired by Chaplin’s second wife, the child actress, Lita Grey, a question no doubt informed by “Lo: Lita,” Kenneth Anger’s account of their marriage and divorce in his scandal-driven *Hollywood Babylon*, published in 1975.³ Following Dmitri’s line, the Forum inevitably and quickly dismissed both contentions, a position that was further supported by his subsequent insistence that Nabokov could have had no desire to pay tribute to a man known for his pro-Soviet stance, let alone associate with him whilst both were living close by in Switzerland. “My father,” he argued, “no matter how much he enjoyed Chaplin’s comic skills, had valid

¹ This article was originally given as a paper at the 55th Annual Conference of the British Association for American Studies at the University of East Anglia in April 2010. I would like to thank the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies for its support of this project, and also Jean Gooder, Ian Bell and Andrei Rogatchevski for their help and encouragement.

² Dmitri Nabokov, *Nabokv-L* <<https://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv/cgi-bin/wa?A0=NABOKV-L>>, 23 January 1997.

³ See *Nabokv-L*, 23–26 January, 12 March, 2 and 7 July 1997 and 15–22 April 2003.

political cause to avoid frequenting the man.”⁴ This assertion was echoed by the publisher, George Weidenfeld, who recalled that Nabokov did in fact meet Chaplin in Switzerland, but “did not take to him, probably because of his left-wing sympathies.”⁵ In his own words, however, Nabokov was far more gentle. In a 1970 interview he included Chaplin silents in a list of the films he most admired, tempering his praise with an untypically understated afterthought:

[T]he only kind of picture I liked, and still like, was and is the comedy of the Laurel and Hardy type. I enjoyed tremendously American comedy — Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Chaplin. My favourites by Chaplin are *The Gold Rush* [1925], *The Circus* [1928], and *The Great Dictator* [1940] — especially the parachute inventor who jumps out of the window and ends in a messy fall which we only see in the expression on the dictator’s face. However, today’s Little Man appeal has somewhat spoiled Chaplin’s attraction for me.⁶

Analysis of Nabokov’s work, both Russian and American, reveals not only that Nabokov paid consistent and not necessarily always discreet homage to Chaplin, but also that he figures, quite significantly, in *Lolita* as a piece of real-life contemporary America, as a complementary shadow to Humbert Humbert (in a way that he had not done before in Nabokov’s fiction), and as a critical element that comprises the distinct and autonomous narrative perspective which Nabokov embeds within the novel. At the same time, Chaplin’s relationship with Lita Grey clearly resonates with that of Humbert Humbert and Lolita, whilst the affinity between the two girls generates a concomitant allusive dynamic which enhances and extends our understanding of Lolita’s world.

CHAPLIN’S SHADOW AND THE MAKING OF “LOLITA”

Nabokov’s first years in America coincided with two highly publicized court cases that effectively ended the career of one of Hollywood’s most celebrated veteran stars. From the

⁴ Dmitri Nabokov, *Nabokv-L*, 17 April 2003.

⁵ Baron George Weidenfeld, *Remembering My Good Friends: An Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 253. Thanks to Yuri Leving for drawing this to my attention.

⁶ Interview with Alfred Appel Jr., August 1970, in Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), p. 163.

summer of 1943, fifty-four-year-old Charlie Chaplin was tied up in a long-drawn-out paternity suit filed by Joan Barry, a twenty-three-year-old aspiring actress who was under contract to his Hollywood studio. As Chaplin entered court to defend himself against Barry's accusations, the FBI, which had long been suspicious of his left-wing affiliations,⁷ mounted an investigation, accumulating nearly 2,000 pages of depositions, memos and interviews, replete, according to one Chaplin biographer, with "inaccuracies" based on "hearsay, rumours, poison-pen letters and cranky unsolicited correspondence."⁸ Then, in early 1944, just as his lawyer was about to file for dismissal, the FBI arraigned Chaplin for violating the Mann Act, accusing him of transporting Barry across state borders for sex.⁹ Chaplin was eventually acquitted, but the damage had been done. For the first time since his sensational divorce from his second wife in 1927 (fig. 1), Chaplin's private life was exposed to merciless, and very public, scrutiny.

The paternity case, which he lost in April 1945 — even though blood tests proved he wasn't the father — had been initiated by Barry leaking the story of her pregnancy to *LA Times* gossip columnist Hedda Hopper.¹⁰ Hopper despised Chaplin and sustained a vitriolic campaign across all her syndicated outlets, bent on destroying him.¹¹ Every excruciating detail of both proceedings was reported and photographed, even his fingerprinting by the FBI. Chaplin's recent marriage to his latest protégée, Oona O'Neill, the playwright Eugene

⁷ See "Chaplin and the Second Front," in Charles J. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture: The Evolution of a Star Image* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 186–94. For a concise, personal account see "Charles Chaplin," in Alistair Cooke, *Six Men* (London: Penguin, 1978), pp. 47–48.

⁸ David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (London: Paladin, 1986), p. 750. For more, see John Sbardellati and Tony Shaw, "Booting a Tramp: Charlie Chaplin, the FBI, and the Construction of the Subversive Image in Red Scare America," *The Pacific Historical Review*, 72 (November 2003), 4, pp. 495–530.

⁹ The Mann Act, originally known as the White-Slave Traffic Act (1910), prohibited the transportation of females across state lines for "immoral purposes," but was also used to prosecute men for having sex with under-age women. Since its inception, only 10 cases have been brought. Defendants have included Jack Johnson (1912), Frank Lloyd Wright (1926) and Chuck Berry (1962). For more, see <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/18/usc_sup_01_18_10_I_20_117.html>.

¹⁰ For Hopper's account, see Hedda Hopper, *From Under My Hat* (London: Frederick Muller, 1953), pp. 109–14.

¹¹ For more, see Jennifer Frost, "'Good Riddance to Bad Company': Hedda Hopper, Hollywood Gossip, and the Campaign Against Charlie Chaplin, 1940–1952," *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 26 (December 2007), 2, pp. 73–86, and "Joan Barry, The Press and the Tarnished Image," in Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, pp. 197–213.

O'Neill's eighteen-year-old daughter, did nothing to save his reputation.¹² His new film project, the 1947 black comedy, *Monsieur Verdoux*, flopped, and when Chaplin left for England in 1952 for the premiere of his next release, *Limelight*, the US authorities revoked his re-entry permit.



Fig. 1. Lita Grey Chaplin, 1927 (b.Lillita McMurray, 1908)¹³

¹² The announcement of Oona's birth and that of Chaplin's first son were made in the same July edition of *Time* magazine that featured Chaplin on the front cover and a review of *The Gold Rush*. See "Milestones", *Time*, 6 July 1925:

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601250706,00.html>> [accessed 19 April 2010].

¹³ "CHAPLIN'S \$10,000,000 TIED UP BY WIFE'S SUIT. The movie fortune of Charles Chaplin, estimated by his wife, Lita Grey Chaplin, at \$10,000,000 was tied up by an injunction pending settlement of her suit for divorce on charges of cruelty, indignity and misconduct." Publicity still, Keystone View Co. Inc. of N.Y., dated 16 January 1927. Author's collection.

By this time, Nabokov was living in Ithaca, where he had been teaching Russian and European literature at Cornell University for the past four years. He had arrived from Europe in 1940 and initially settled in New York, but by the autumn of 1941 had moved to Massachusetts to take up a lecturing post at Wellesley College. In December he published his first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which was followed by his second, *Bend Sinister*, in 1947. That April he wrote to his friend, the writer and critic Edmund Wilson, to say that he had begun work on a “short novel,” *A Kingdom by the Sea*, which would evolve into the story of a paedophile, Humbert Humbert, and his child love, Lolita.¹⁴ His idea for the novel was not new. The theme of paedophilia had been central to *The Enchanter*, a novella written in Paris in the late 1930s which he thought he had destroyed but in fact survived the move to America and turned up in his papers some twenty years later. Echoes of *The Enchanter*’s corrupted father/daughter relationship reverberate in *Bend Sinister* when Adam Krug dreams of “surreptitiously enjoying Mariette while she sat, wincing a little, in his lap during the rehearsal of a play in which she was supposed to be his daughter.”¹⁵ There are also hints in other, earlier, works. In *A Nursery Tale*, a story from 1926, “a somewhat decrepit but unmistakable Humbert” is seen “escorting his nymphet,”¹⁶ and in his last Russian novel, *The Gift* (1937–38), Zina Mertz’s stepfather fantasizes about a little girl.¹⁷ Meanwhile, “Lilith,” a poem written in 1928 “to amuse a friend,”¹⁸ presents the first and starkest realization of the Nabokovian nymphet (as well as “the most explicit rendition of sexual intercourse in his Russian works”),¹⁹ in which the mythical temptress is recast as a pubescent, green-eyed demon. The flower she wears in her hair designates her nymphic status — a water lily, from the family Nymphaeaceae — but far from offering the paradise that the poem’s protagonist believes himself to have stumbled upon, post mortem, she proves to be a denizen of Hell.²⁰ Although Nabokov

¹⁴ See Simon Karlinsky (ed.), *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940–1971* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: California University Press, 2001), p. 215.

¹⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), p. 178.

¹⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 768.

¹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 172–73.

¹⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Collected Poems*, translated by Dmitri Nabokov, edited by Thomas Karshan (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 188.

¹⁹ Maxim D. Shraye, “Nabokov’s Sexography,” *Russian Literature*, 48 (2000), p. 499.

²⁰ See *Collected Poems*, pp. 83–84.

claimed that “intelligent readers will abstain from examining this impersonal fantasy for any links with my later fiction,”²¹ it is this same sly and lovely, dim-eyed and bright-lipped little girl that Humbert identifies amongst his “throng” of innocents. More a descendent of Gabriel Rossetti’s youthful, spell-binding creature than the figure of Hebrew legend, first bride of Adam, witch and seducer, this “demon child” is the “Lilith he long[s] for.”²²

Where Nabokov’s idea *was* new, however, was in its very detailed evocation of 1940s America. By comparison, *The Enchanter* had been set in an unidentified provincial French town, with faceless protagonists. Nabokov remembered it as a “dead scrap” — “The little girl wasn’t alive,” he complained.²³ Now, however, not only was he anxious to make his little girl live, but also to “invent” a world for her that was convincingly American.²⁴ Amongst other things, the revelations surrounding Chaplin’s private life disclosed by his two recent trials would have provided a rich source from which to draw.²⁵

In his research for *Lolita*, Nabokov documented every aspect of post-war American life that was relevant to his story, from the interests and behaviour of adolescent girls to the activities of sex offenders and murderers, two of whom — G. Edward Grammar and Frank La Salle — feature in Humbert’s narrative (*AL*, 287–88, 289). In September 1952 Grammar was arrested for the “Perfect Murder,” as the *New York Times* described it. The police

²¹ Ibid., p. 188.

²² Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, edited by Alfred Appel Jr. (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 20 (all subsequent references are to this edition), and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “Body’s Beauty” (1870), Sonnet LXXVIII from *The House of Life*, in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Jerome McGann (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 161. For commentary on *Lolita*’s predecessors and other literary and cultural precursors, see Julian W. Connolly, *A Reader’s Guide to Nabokov’s “Lolita”* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), pp. 9–28; Ellen Pifer, “Nabokov’s Novel Offspring: *Lolita* and Her Kin,” in *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp. 65–88; Neil Cornwell, “Imitations of Lo: Sirens, Joyce and Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” *Zembla* <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/cornwell.htm>>, and Graham Vickers, *Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov’s Little Girl All Over Again* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2008), pp. 55–69.

²³ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Enchanter*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (London: Pan Books, 1986), p. 16; *The Annotated Lolita*, p. lvi.

²⁴ *Strong Opinions*, p. 26.

²⁵ On Nabokov’s Americanization, see Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, “‘April in Arizona’: Nabokov as an American Writer,” *American Literary History*, 6, Summer 1994, 2, pp. 325–35 and “By Some Sleight of Land: How Nabokov Rewrote America,” in Julian W. Connolly (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 65–84; Alfred Appel Jr., “The Road to *Lolita*, or the Americanization of an Émigré,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 4, September 1974, 1, pp. 3–31, and John Haegert, “The Americanization of Humbert Humbert,” in Pifer, “*Lolita*”: *A Casebook*, pp. 137–53.

found his wife's bludgeoned body in an overturned car on a hillside embankment — Grammar's attempt to make her killing look like an accident. Four years earlier, the newspapers reported the arraignment of LaSalle for violation of the Mann Act following his arrest for the abduction of Sally Horner, an eleven-year-old “bobby-soxer.” She became LaSalle's fugitive “sex-slave,” travelling with him across America for two years before he eventually abandoned her in a California motel.²⁶

Nabokov had drawn on newspaper stories in his fiction before. Hermann Karlovich, the narrator of the 1936 Berlin novel *Despair*, alludes to two cases of murder and insurance fraud reported in the German and Russian-émigré press.²⁷ Such injections of actuality establish an involute dynamic that unsettles the relationship between text and context, author and narrator.²⁸ This dynamic is compounded in *Lolita* by Humbert's extraordinarily diverse and richly allusive text, which almost wholly subsumes the impact of details taken from real-life scenarios. In *Lolita*, Humbert attempts to blind the reader with a “torrent of ‘irrelevant’ details” so that the “most important information” is “deliberately masked.”²⁹ While such details are manipulated by Hermann Karlovich and Humbert Humbert to support and extend their fictionalized personae, they are also crucial in revealing Nabokov's ulterior purpose, for “the allusions to something else behind the crudely painted screens” expose “the real plot” that lies “behind the obvious one.”³⁰ Here Nabokov is describing the structural style of Nikolai Gogol's fiction, in which the “gaps” and “holes”

²⁶ See *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 287, 289. For commentary, see Alexander Dolinin, “What Happened to Sally Horner?: A Real-Life Source of Nabokov's *Lolita*,” *Zembla* <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/dolilol.htm>>. Humbert refers to Lolita as a “bobby-soxer” but asks her not to see herself as — what she is — his “cross-country slave” (*The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 59, 150).

²⁷ See Don Barton Johnson, “Sources of Nabokov's *Despair*,” in Gavriel Shapiro (ed.), *Nabokov at Cornell* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 10–16.

²⁸ For commentary, see Nomi Tamir-Ghez, “The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita*,” *Poetics Today*, 1 (1979), 1–2, “Literature, Interpretation,” pp. 65–83; “Lolita,” in Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 198–227, esp. pp. 207–27; “On the Dark Side of Aesthetic Bliss: Nabokov's Humanism,” in Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 158–71, esp. pp. 164–71; “The Language of Lolita,” in Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), pp. 103–42, esp. pp. 138–42, and Leland de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 88–95.

²⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 148.

³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 142, 152.

of his prose reveal his overriding presence.³¹ Similarly, as Alfred Appel argues, “there are at least two ‘plots’ in all of Nabokov’s fiction: the characters in the book, and the consciousness of the creator above it,”³² that is, essentially, Nabokov’s “contiguous world.”³³

In *Lolita*, Nabokov’s ulterior purpose is to demonstrate the presence of a perspective other than Humbert’s, both within the fiction itself, in the form of Dr John Ray Jr.’s foreword, and beyond it, as disclosed by the novel’s “subliminal coordinates” (*AL*, 316), its “interesting shades and underwater patterns.”³⁴ As an element of these patterns, Chaplin reverberates across Nabokov’s novel, complementing and counterpointing Humbert’s story, providing a real-life contemporary American scenario that underpins the novel’s dominant concerns and which simultaneously enables these alternative points of view to emerge.

“THE DELIGHTFUL LITTLE TOOTHBRUSH MUSTACHE”

Lolita features a single, implicit reference to Chaplin which has been noted by just two commentators. In 1996, Chaplin biographer Joyce Milton listed, in a single paragraph, a sequence of shared characteristics that she deemed to be evidence of Chaplin’s formative influence on the genesis of Nabokov’s controversial hero, including his iconic “toothbrush mustache.”³⁵ Two years later, in a two-page *Explicator* entry on *Lolita*, Bill Delaney described “the striking parallels between Humbert Humbert and the world’s most famous wearer of a toothbrush mustache.”³⁶ Delaney and Milton base their contentions on a casual exchange that takes place early on in the narrative between Humbert and Charlotte over dinner:

At dinner tonight the old cat said to me with a sidelong gleam of motherly mockery directed at Lo (I had just been describing, in a flippant vein, the delightful little

³¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 142–45.

³² *The Annotated Lolita*, p. xxvi.

³³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 220.

³⁴ *Nabokov: Selected Letters*, p. 209.

³⁵ See Joyce Milton, *Tramp: The Life of Charlie Chaplin* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 280.

³⁶ Bill Delaney, “Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” *The Explicator*, 56 (Winter 1998), 2 pp. 99–100 (p. 99).

toothbrush mustache I had not quite decided to grow): “Better don’t, if somebody is not going to go absolutely dotty.”³⁷

While Charlotte is referring to Clare Quilty, the playwright on whom Lolita has a crush and with whom she later escapes, Humbert’s vision encompasses a range of possibilities, from Edgar Allan Poe to Adolf Hitler, the most resonant of which to Lolita, an “avid reader of movie magazines” (*AL*, 49), is Charlie Chaplin. The figure that serves Humbert’s immediate purpose of prophetic irony, however, is Quilty, who is later seen sporting a “small dark mustache” above a “rosebud degenerate mouth” (*AL*, 218).³⁸ Although Chaplin is obscured in this instance by the shadow of Quilty, once the allusion is registered, the operation of other relevant details is initiated, connecting him, crucially, to both Quilty and Humbert. As a playwright, screenwriter and director, Quilty, like Chaplin, is in the movie business. Quilty, like Humbert, has a penchant for very young girls, as did Chaplin. Lita Grey was barely sixteen when he married her, but he had met her when she was only twelve, the same age as Humbert’s Lolita when he first sets eyes on her in the back garden of her mother’s house in Ramsdale.³⁹ The “degeneracy” Humbert identifies in Quilty (and which he, of course, shares) can be found, therefore, in a real-life counterpart. Thus Chaplin stands in the novel alongside Dante, Petrarch, Novalis and Poe, with whom Humbert proudly claims affinity, but is distinguished by his criminality, aligning him ever more closely with his fictional contemporary. Meanwhile, both he and Humbert are aliens in the United States. Designating himself “a citizen of the world,” British-born Chaplin refused to become an American citizen,⁴⁰ while Humbert, of Swiss/English parentage,

³⁷ *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 47–48. See also p. 360, 48/1ff, which mentions Poe and Quilty but not Chaplin.

³⁸ In his screenplay for Kubrick’s *Lolita*, Nabokov describes Quilty’s moustache, simply, as “obscene.” Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay* (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 56.

³⁹ Lita, however, claimed to have first met Chaplin in a Hollywood tearoom when she was just seven. Both Kenneth Anger and Marianne Sinclair describe the encounter at “Kitty’s Come-On Inn” as engineered by Lita’s mother who was waitressing there. See Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1975), p. 123, and Marianne Sinclair, *Hollywood Lolita: The Nymphet Syndrome in the Movies* (London: Plexus Publishing, 1988), pp. 30–31. Lita also described meeting him twice more, once when she was nine and again at eleven, when Chaplin invited her to visit him at his studio. See “Wife Calls Chaplin An Actor, Not A Man: Lita Grey Says Their Romance Began When She Was Only Seven Years Old,” *New York Times*, 20 February 1927, p. 18. See also Dieter Zimmer’s chronology of the novel at <<http://www.dezimmer.net/LolitaUSA/LoChrono.htm>> [accessed 25 November 2012] which details Humbert Humbert’s and Lolita’s ages as 37 and 12½ respectively.

⁴⁰ Quoted in the *Los Angeles Herald Express*, 15 April 1947; Robinson, *Chaplin*, p. 546.

remains determinedly allied to his European roots. Both men exploit their “strangeness” as a means of protecting an inviolable moral and social autonomy that enables them to pursue their singular desires without compunction. The figure of Chaplin that Nabokov casts here, however, is markedly different from the cameos that are scattered across his earlier work.

Chaplin first appears in “Easter Rain,” a story from 1925, his image on a movie poster refracted by its reflection “in a puddle near a brightly lit cinema,” such that only his “angled feet” and “curly head” are discernible in the distortion of light and water.⁴¹ A year later, he takes on a more corporeal form as Nabokov recalls how a “droll and touching Charlie Chaplin came mincing with his toes thrust out” in the films he saw as a student at a Cambridge cinema.⁴² The “cosmic sight gags”⁴³ of Chaplin and his contemporaries subsequently informed Nabokov’s writing during his time in Berlin,⁴⁴ inspiring the cabaret sketches he wrote for the Bluebird Café,⁴⁵ whilst the slapstick “Locomotions” they featured anticipated the “farcical elements”⁴⁶ of his later novels — Luzhin’s collapse in *The Defense* (1930), the surreal pantomime of *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938) and Quilty’s murder in *Lolita*. Meanwhile, Chaplin’s most famous on-screen persona steps into the worlds of *The Gift*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and *Pnin* (1957). In *The Gift*, Nabokov’s hero/narrator, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, spots “over the entrance to a cinema a black giant cut out of cardboard [...] with turned-out feet, the blotch of a moustache on his white face beneath a bowler hat, and a bent cane in his hand.”⁴⁷ The Tramp’s heavily kohled eyes then combine with the black “blotch” of his signature moustache in flower beds of “rippled

⁴¹ “Easter Rain,” in *Collected Stories*, p. 740. It is interesting that Chaplin should be glimpsed in this disembodied form, residing in the “otherworldly” domain of the puddle. First introduced in the 1923 story, “Sounds,” this motif was to become central to the disclosure of alternate dimensions in Nabokov’s 1947 novel, *Bend Sinister*. See *ibid.*, p. 17 and Nabokov’s introduction to *Bend Sinister*, pp. xiv–xv.

⁴² Vladimir Nabokov, “The University Poem,” in *Collected Poems*, p. 31.

⁴³ Note by Alfred Appel Jr. in his 1970 interview with Nabokov (*Strong Opinions*, p. 164). See also, Alfred Appel, Jr., *Nabokov’s Dark Cinema* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 246.

⁴⁴ Along with Chaplin, Nabokov cited Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Laurel & Hardy and the Marx Brothers. See *Strong Opinions*, pp. 163–64. For commentary, see Alfred Appel, Jr., “Nabokov’s Dark Cinema: A Diptych. 2. Positive Images: Several Fine Messes,” in Simon Karlinsky and Alfred Appel, Jr. (eds), *The Bitter Air of Exile: Russian Writers in the West, 1922–1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: California University Press, 1977), pp. 241–73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 243–49.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 244.

⁴⁷ *The Gift*, p. 151.

pale, black-blotched pansies (somewhat similar facially to Charlie Chaplin).⁴⁸ In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* Chaplin's Tramp materializes fully on screen, "stiffly trotting away from the big wicked man and skidding on the street corner,"⁴⁹ whereas in *Pnin* Chaplin's presence takes on a greater significance, becoming pivotal to the delineation of character, as Nabokov's hero decides one evening to attend the "unusual movie offerings" of Christopher and Louise Starr on the Waindell College campus:

The first part of the programme, three ancient movie shorts, bored our friend: that cane, that bowler, that white face, those black, arched eyebrows, those twitchy nostrils meant nothing to him. Whether the incomparable comedian danced in the sun with chapleted nymphs near a waiting cactus, or was a prehistoric man (the supple cane now a supple club), or was glared at by burly Mack Swain at a hectic night-club, old-fashioned, humourless Pnin remained indifferent. "Clown," he snorted to himself. "Even Glupishkin and Max Linder used to be more comical."⁵⁰

The Chaplin "shorts" that Pnin describes here are *His Prehistoric Past* (1914) and either *The Immigrant* (1917) or *Caught in a Cabaret* (1914).⁵¹ The four "chapleted nymphs" are from *Sunnyside* (1919), and appear in a sequence dreamt by the Tramp as he lies concussed in a ditch. In white diaphanous dresses with garlands in their long hair, four young girls rescue the Tramp and frolic with him in a meadow until he falls back into the ditch. Dreaming that they are rescuing him again, he finds himself being rudely hooked out by his boss and a group of farm hands.

Alfred Appel argues that Pnin is unable to "laugh at Chaplin's comedy [...] because his own life is too Chaplinesque."⁵² From a broader perspective, however, by dismissing Chaplin in reluctant favour of his predecessors Max Linder and Pan Glupishkin,⁵³ Pnin

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 287. Nabokov was in Berlin when Chaplin made his second visit to the city in 1931.

⁴⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 39.

⁵⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 67.

⁵¹ See Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, p. 38, and Gennady Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's "Pnin"* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1989), p. 142 (entry 80.22).

⁵² Appel, *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, p. 296. "Although Pnin is accompanied by a yapping dog rather than a grateful orphan girl," Appel continues, "his unsentimental departure echoes the Little Tramp's smiling exit in *Modern Times* (1936), a farewell performance" (p. 298). Appel also sees the physical comedy in Nabokov's screenplay for Kubrick's film of *Lolita* as "Chaplinesque" (p. 238).

⁵³ The tramp had been a popular figure in early silent film since the turn of the twentieth century. Pan Glupishkin was the Russian alias of the French comic actor, André Deed, who created the character of

asserts both his foreignness and his age, elements that are perpetually at odds with the post-war American environment in which he finds himself. Humbert Humbert, on the other hand, although also a foreigner, actively emulates Chaplin, as he does many other icons of contemporary popular culture, in a cynical gesture of assimilation which he deploys to both ingratiate himself with and attract Lolita.⁵⁴

At the same time, it could be argued that the particular nature of Chaplin's incarnation in *Lolita* is linked to Nabokov's 1928 poem, "Lilith," via *The Kid*, Chaplin's silent feature of 1921. Nabokov was in Berlin when the film was released there in November 1923,⁵⁵ one of a flood of new American movies that began to be imported as legal strictures were relaxed and the period of "great inflation" came to an end.⁵⁶ Albeit far more innocent, the dream sequence towards the end of Chaplin's film bears remarkable similarities to the scenario depicted in Nabokov's poem, in which a dead "rake" is partially seduced by a "winged" nymphet.⁵⁷ Not only this, but Chaplin's angel child is played by his second wife-to-be, the then twelve-year-old Lillita McMurray (fig. 2).

In the four-and-a-half-minute sequence,⁵⁸ the Tramp dreams that the Kid (the abandoned boy he unofficially adopts and who has disappeared) returns as an angel and takes him up to heaven. With feathered wings the Tramp sits quietly playing his harp when he is disturbed by Lillita's angel, who has been instructed by Sin to "vamp him."⁵⁹ She begins to flit around, beckoning him to her and they kiss. Her Sweetheart sees them and

Cretinetti when he left Pathé-Frères to work for Itala in Turin in 1909. He was replaced in France by Max Linder who by 1906 had starred in over 100 films in the guise of an incompetent dandy. See Richard Abel (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Early Cinema* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 207–11.

⁵⁴ For commentary, see "Images of Terror and Desire: *Lolita* and the American Cinematic Experience, 1939–1952," in Barbara Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), pp. 123–67.

⁵⁵ He was there until late December when he went to visit his mother and sisters in Prague. See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 220–21.

⁵⁶ Thomas J. Saunders, *Hollywood in Berlin: American Cinema and Weimar Germany* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994), p. 179. For more on Chaplin in Berlin, see Thomas J. Saunders, "Comedy as Redemption: American Slapstick in Weimar Culture," *Journal of European Studies*, 17 (1987).

⁵⁷ Nabokov, "Lilith," pp. 83 & 84.

⁵⁸ *The Kid*, a six-reeler, ran for 52 minutes, making this sequence a substantial part of the film, comprising almost a tenth of its length.

⁵⁹ Intertitle from *The Kid*, Charles Chaplin Productions, 1921. In use at the turn of the twentieth century, a vamp (from "vampire") is "a woman who intentionally attracts and exploits men; an adventuress; a Jezebel"; to vamp is "to behave seductively." See *OED Online*, December 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/view/Entry/221292>> [accessed 18 February 2013].

jealous, starts a scrap. The Tramp tries to escape but is shot by an angel policeman and left slumped in a pile of scattered feathers as Lillita looks on.



Fig. 2. Lillita McMurray and Charlie Chaplin. Still taken on the set of *The Kid* (1921).
The Kid © Roy Export S.A.S.

As this article will demonstrate, the dream sequence from *The Kid* and the real-life scenario that is its backdrop, apart from functioning as precursors to the first of Nabokov's depictions of the nymphet, reverberate throughout *Lolita* as a palpable and compelling subtext to and commentary on both the novel and its protagonists. Whereas in *Pnin* and previous works, Nabokov has Chaplin enter and exit explicitly yet, essentially, arbitrarily, in *Lolita* the figure of the Tramp, along with his child bride, once initially registered, are woven into the fabric of the novel so discreetly as to be barely discernible, and yet their presence, informed by both Chaplin's present predicament and past aberrations, is of far greater consequence.

CRIMES AND MISDEMEANOURS

Having broken the story of Barry's paternity suit in the *Chicago Tribune* in June 1943, Hedda Hopper went on to cover both trials in detail, along with her compatriot from the *New York Daily News*, Florabel Muir. On 11 February 1944, the *Chicago Tribune* ran the story of Chaplin's arraignment on its front page under the headline "U.S. Jury Indicts Chaplin," and went on to report every stage of both trials under front-page banner headlines.⁶⁰ On the same day a front-page article in the *New York Times* detailed the charges of "criminal conspiracy" against Chaplin. He was accused, along with "a Judge, Police Officers and Friends," of "railroading" Barry "out of town" and "feloniously transporting" her to New York to "live with him as his mistress."⁶¹ A few days later, *Newsweek* printed a "devastating" article entitled "Chaplin as Villain," describing the pending prosecution as Hollywood's "biggest public-relations headache since the Fatty Arbuckle murder trial of 1921."⁶² *Time* magazine's coverage was similarly denigrating. On 3 April 1944 it described the "off-screen" courtroom Chaplin as "a dapper, grey multimillionaire of 54, widely envied in Hollywood for his unassailable arrogance and for his affairs with a succession of pretty young protégées."⁶³ The following January it ran two articles, the first wryly describing the paternity case in which Barry detailed Chaplin's self-identification with Peter Pan, the innocent, impish boy who would never grow up. Chaplin protested that Barry's lawyer was "trying to make [him] look like a monster:" "I have committed no crime," he insisted. A week later, the same lawyer was quoted in his summing up, calling Chaplin a lying "Cockney cad," "a master mechanic in the art of seduction," a "hoary headed old buzzard" who "goes around fornicating [...] with the same aplomb that the average man orders bacon and eggs for breakfast."⁶⁴ Chaplin's attorney,

⁶⁰ Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, pp. 214–16.

⁶¹ *New York Times*, Friday 11 February 1944, 1, p. 34.

⁶² Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, pp. 215–16; "Chaplin as Villain: Recalling Arbuckle Case Reaction, Hollywood is Fearful of Scandal," *Newsweek*, 21 February 1944, pp. 46–47 (p. 46).

⁶³ "CRIME: Mann & Woman," *Time*, 3 April 1944

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,850389,00.html>> [accessed 23 March 2010].

⁶⁴ "CALIFORNIA: Just a Peter Pan," *Time*, 1 January 1945

however, remarked that he “was the best witness” he had “ever seen in court.” He was “so small that the tops of his shoes barely touched the floor,” He sat “lonely and forlorn,” with “the whole weight of the United States Government against him.”⁶⁵

The protracted commotion generated by Chaplin’s court appearances caught Nabokov’s attention.⁶⁶ In March 1944 he wrote to Edmund Wilson, quoting from newspaper reports of the case that related an incident of Barry threatening Chaplin with a gun:

I rather liked the phallic implications of the pistol with which Joan toyed, in between her “act of intimacy” with the “completely disrobed” Charles Chaplin. Apparently the “white-haired comedian” had to choose between himself and the pistol going off and wisely selected the least lethal course. Or perhaps the gun acted as an aphrodisiac? One never knows with these great lovers...⁶⁷

Apart from the coverage of the paternity suit, the details of Chaplin’s alleged violation of the Mann Act must have resonated with the coverage of the Frank LaSalle/Sally Horner story. Nabokov has Humbert complain at some length about the law, reporting that he had seen “some bunkum” in the newspapers “about a middle-aged morals offender who pleaded guilty to the violation of the Mann Act and to transporting a nine-year-old girl across state lines for immoral purposes.” Humbert concludes with a typically loaded double entendre, arguing that “I deplore the Mann Act as lending itself to a dreadful pun” (*AL*, 150), although he must be fully aware of the extent to which he is also guilty. On the Act’s inception, one lawyer commented that “for the first time adultery is treated as a geographical offense; there is no crime unless the gentle passion combines with

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,791803,00.html>>; “People: People”, *Time*, 8 Jan. 1945 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,775315,00.html>> [accessed 19 April 2010].

⁶⁵ Jerry Giesler quoted in Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940’s* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 1986), p. 192.

⁶⁶ The *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *Time* and *Newsweek* were amongst the American papers Nabokov read and continued to read after he moved to Switzerland. In 1940 he began reviewing for the *New York Times* and the *New York Sun* and in 1962 made the covers of *Newsweek* and *Time*. See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 18, 461, 467, 566.

⁶⁷ Karlinsky, *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, p. 142. Karlinsky notes: “Joan Barry’s paternity suit against Chaplin was very much in the news at the time. During the trial, an earlier episode was revealed in which Miss Barry had threatened Chaplin with a pistol and he disarmed her by ‘wooing and winning her then and there’.” *Ibid.*, p. 143.

wanderlust.”⁶⁸ Humbert’s wanderlust takes him and the object of his not so “gentle passion” across almost every state line in the USA, twice.

Humbert may not consider the Mann Act much of a threat, but is likely conscious of the potential jail term he would have to serve for “statutory rape, or second-degree sodomy” (*AL*, 150–51). As Susan Elizabeth Sweeney details, he commits a series of other crimes “on the books in the 1940s and 1950s,” including “kidnapping,” “sexual slavery; Peeping Tomism, corrupting a minor’s morals” and “engaging in prostitution.” Indeed, the entirety of his narrative is cast as both a confession and a defence made before an imaginary court which is composed “behind bars, with Humbert ‘writing under observation,’ first in a “psychopathic ward” and then a “tombal cell.”⁶⁹ Humbert converses directly with his lawyer and his psychiatrist, addressing both a fantasy judge and a jury comprised of “winged gentlemen” and, by turns, “sensitive” and “frigid gentlewomen” (*AL*, 125, 135, 132). As he subjects himself to this “mock trial,” so his “execution” of his nemesis, Clare Quilty (*AL*, 252), becomes a form of “vigilante justice in which he proclaims Quilty’s guilt, decides his punishment, forces him to ‘read his own sentence’ in the form of a poem, and then carries out that sentence.”⁷⁰ Quilty’s murder plays out as a “darkly comic travesty of legal proceedings,” but the same could be said for the entirety of Humbert’s narrative as he calculatingly emulates every stage of a criminal trial, during which he “admits the falsity of his confession even as he articulates it,” whilst turning the convention of the detective story or murder mystery on its head by “obscuring” his “victim’s identity — except for strategically-placed clues — until the crime’s final reconstruction.”⁷¹

Humbert’s manipulations are sophisticated and cynical, but the figure he casts across his text is predominantly that of the persecuted victim struggling for justice, even if it is a distorted justice meted out exclusively on his own terms. Meanwhile, the figure of an

⁶⁸ “CRIME: Mann & Woman.”

⁶⁹ Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, “Executing Sentences in *Lolita* and the Law,” p. 1, notes 7 and 8, *Zembla* <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/Nabokov/sweeney1.htm>>, reprinted from *Studies in Law, Politics and Society*, 30 (2003): “Punishment Politics and Culture,” pp. 185–209. See also, Frederick Whiting, “‘The Strange Peculiarity of the Lover’s Preference’: Pedophilia, Pornography, and the Anatomy of Monstrosity in *Lolita*,” *American Literature*, 70 (1998), 4, pp. 833–62.

⁷⁰ Sweeney, “Executing Sentences,” p. 2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

“unhappy, mild, dog-eyed” Humbert, “sweating in the fierce white light, and howled at, and trodden upon by sweating policemen” (*AL*, 88, 70) is uncannily reminiscent of the “lonely and forlorn” Chaplin pleading his innocence to a hostile court, “his platinum hair damp against his perspiring forehead,” and claiming to be “an ill-used man.”⁷² According to one juror, Chaplin “overacted on the witness stand when he turned toward us and tried to charm us.”⁷³ Humbert, too, attempts to charm his audience, to “inveigle” his readers into “acquiescing in his deeds,”⁷⁴ but Nabokov offers an unequivocal indictment of this “hateful man” when he describes him as nothing more than “a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear ‘touching’.”⁷⁵

This notion of “ill-use” extends in turn to those whom Humbert and Chaplin abuse. In Chaplin’s case, his most famous victim was Lita Grey. When his first wife, Mildred Harris, sued him for divorce on grounds of mental cruelty in 1920, the press were “unusually restrained and discreet,”⁷⁶ but in March 1924 Chaplin invited them to witness his new leading lady signing her contract for *The Gold Rush*, and from that point on they followed Lita’s story closely, through marriage, divorce and beyond. She was mentioned, for example, in reports of Chaplin’s marriage to Oona O’Neill in 1943,⁷⁷ and it was Chaplin’s reputation, tainted by the 1927 divorce, which made Oona’s father, Eugene, object to the wedding and subsequently disinherit her. Like many others, O’Neill had not forgotten that “Chaplin’s wife had charged him with ruining young girls, with every form of perversion,” and that “he was guilty as everyone knows.”⁷⁸

⁷² “Just a Peter Pan.”

⁷³ “People: Family Circles,” *Time*, Monday, April 30, 1945.
<<http://time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,797415,00.html>> [accessed 19 April 2010].

⁷⁴ Brian Boyd, “Lolita,” in *The American Years*, p. 227.

⁷⁵ *Strong Opinions*, pp. 26, 94.

⁷⁶ Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, p. 44.

⁷⁷ See, for example, “Oona O’Neill Wed, Chaplin’s 4th Wife,” *New York Times*, 17 June 1943, and “Gasoline Romance. People: People,” *Time*, 28 June 1943,
<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,790997,00.html>> [accessed 19 April 2010].

⁷⁸ Travis Bogard and Jackson B. Breyer (eds), *Selected Letters of Eugene O’Neill* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 296.

“MY AGE OF INNOCENCE GIRL”: CHAPLIN’S LITA GREY

When Chaplin spotted twelve-year-old Lillita McMurray in a crowd of extras on the set of *The Kid* in 1920 he was so taken with her that he dubbed her his “Age of Innocence Girl,” asking a set decorator to paint her in the style of Joshua Reynolds’ portrait (figs 3 & 4): “Take your time,” he told him, “and make it good.”⁷⁹



Fig. 3. *The Age of Innocence*, ?1778, Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792). © Tate, London 2013

⁷⁹ Lita Grey Chaplin, *My Life with Chaplin: An Intimate Memoir*, with Morton Cooper (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1966), p. 28.



Fig. 4. Lillita McMurray posing for the Chaplin company artist on the set of *The Kid*, 1920⁸⁰

The chance appearance of Lillita on Chaplin's set prompted him to revise a dream sequence that he had already planned for the end of his film. She would be its new, and central, protagonist. This child offered Chaplin the perfect dramatic motivation for the conflict between good and evil that was to be played out between the Tramp and his "old enemy", the Policeman. That there is no trace of Lillita's Flirting Angel in Chaplin's original idea, or indeed, any mention of her (both the Tramp and the Kid are alluded to in the film's synopsis by their real names) confirms that she was indeed the sole inspiration for the final version of the sequence:

Jackie [Coogan – the Kid] is there and he takes Charlie by the hand and then Charlie himself finds he also has wings, strong white wings. And he finds he can fly. But, alas, Sin creeps in and Charlie becomes involved in a fight with his old enemy [the policeman, now in angel form]. He tries to escape – to fly away – but he is ruthlessly

⁸⁰ *My Life with Chaplin*, n.p.

shot down – down – down, and awakens to find himself being shaken by the big policeman whom he had eluded over the house tops.⁸¹

After *The Kid*, Lillita took a bit part in Chaplin's next film, *The Idle Class*, in which she appeared with her mother, and when her contract expired, left to go back to school. In 1924, at the invitation of Chuck Reisner, a family friend and Chaplin's assistant director, she returned to the studio. When Chaplin saw her again he decided she would star in his next film, *The Gold Rush*. She was fifteen. Chaplin changed her name to Lita Grey, after a silver-grey kitten he had given her. By the autumn she was sixteen and pregnant. Chaplin removed her from the set and replaced her with Georgia Hale, who had just finished work on Josef von Sternberg's *The Salvation Hunters*. Threatened with charges of statutory rape, Chaplin took Lita to Mexico and married her, commenting to reporters that "this is better than penitentiary but it won't last." In January 1927 Lita filed for divorce on the grounds of serial infidelity, cruelty and "grievous mental suffering." She claimed that Chaplin had "read banned books" to her (including D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) and had argued that "all people do it" when she objected to his demands for oral sex — at the time a criminal offence in the State of California — which she described as an "abnormal, against nature, perverted degenerate and indecent act."⁸² Chaplin argued that he was simply "like many other foolish men" and blamed Lita's mother for forcing her daughter upon him. Along with the details of Lita's lengthy complaint, which was published as a pamphlet and disseminated widely in the press, five other actresses were implicated in the case, threatening not only Chaplin's career but the business of several Hollywood studios. Seven months later Lita was granted \$625,000, the largest settlement in a divorce to date. Two years on, Chaplin's "versatility and genius" was honoured by the Motion Picture Academy at their first Oscar awards ceremony.⁸³ When in 1952 Lita was subpoenaed by the Attorney

⁸¹ "Synopsis for *The Kid* exactly as it was written by the Chaplin Studio in 1921" <<http://www.charliechaplin.com/en/films/1-the-kid/articles/35-The-Kid-Synopsis>> [accessed 11 November 2013].

⁸² Lita Grey Chaplin and Jeffrey Vance, *Wife of the Life of the Party: A Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), pp. 133, 136 (the full complaint is reprinted on pp. 131–62). California's Oral Sex Perversion Statute brought with it a sentence of up to fifteen years' imprisonment. See also, David Shipman, "OBITUARY: Lita Grey," *The Independent*, 4 January 1996 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_19960104/ai_n9632851> [accessed 20 March 2009].

⁸³ *Ibid.*

General's office to testify at a hearing to decide Chaplin's right to stay in the US she refused to condemn him. Chaplin was said to have remarked that he was grateful to her for resisting an opportunity to be "heartless and vengeful,"⁸⁴ but when it came to writing his autobiography he could not bring himself even to mention her name, describing their marriage in barely five lines.⁸⁵ She, on the other hand, had plenty more to say, publishing two candid accounts, the first in 1966 and a revised version, which appeared posthumously, in 1998.⁸⁶

LITA, IN HER OWN WORDS

Although the latter version, according to Lita's son, Sydney Chaplin, is "*her own story, in her own words*,"⁸⁷ the details of both accounts barely differ. They each include the key episodes in Lita's relationship with Chaplin — her first encounter with him in a Hollywood café in April 1916,⁸⁸ her experiences working on *The Kid* and *The Gold Rush*, Chaplin's attempt to seduce her whilst on location and his subsequent consummation of their relationship in the steam room of his Beverly Hills mansion, his hostility towards her on discovering her pregnancy, the train journey back to Los Angeles on their wedding night, Chaplin's infidelity, and the psychological and emotional abuse that led to her filing for divorce.

While Lita's accounts fall outside *Lolita*'s frame of reference, they nevertheless generate striking parallels with, but equally also, intriguing divergences from the "nerves"⁸⁹ of Nabokov's novel. The first is her description of the consummation of her relationship with Chaplin, which echoes the scene in *Lolita* where Humbert furtively steals Lolita's innocence. A pyjama-clad Humbert finds himself on Charlotte's davenport, with Lolita in her Sunday best beside him, her legs in his lap. (Chaplin was also in red silk pyjamas, laid up with flu, when he made his first attempt to seduce a fully-dressed Lita in his hotel room

⁸⁴ *My Life with Chaplin*, p. 321.

⁸⁵ See Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 300.

⁸⁶ *My Life with Chaplin and Wife of the Life of the Party*, which covers only the early part of her life, ending with the 1927/28 divorce.

⁸⁷ *Wife of the Life of the Party*, p. xi (italics in the original).

⁸⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 4 and note 9.

⁸⁹ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 316.

in Truckee, where they were filming *The Gold Rush*.)⁹⁰ Humbert manoeuvres himself beneath her, gradually bringing himself to sexual climax while Lolita, seemingly oblivious, munches on an apple and hums along to Humbert's "Carmen" song. Humbert insists that he has done no harm — "I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and Lolita was safe." "The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her" (*AL*, 62). He has, he believes, experienced a kind of vicarious consummation, with Lolita "safely solipsized" (*AL*, 60):

What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita — perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness — indeed, no life of her own. (*AL*, 62)

Chaplin's similar impulse to disembody or abstract the object of his desire was played out in the fog of his steam room with fifteen-year-old Lita, also lying passive in lifeless submission. This is how she recalled the scene:

The foglike mist billowed, grew thicker and thicker, finally filled every inch of the room. I couldn't see anything. The steam, gently caressing me, was making me drowsy, and I lay down on the marble slab and closed my eyes. [...] I draped my arm over my forehead and crossed my ankles, wondering what was to happen next.

What happened next was Charlie, lying beside me and teasing my neck with swift, darting kisses. "It's easier this way," he said huskily. "We can't see each other."⁹¹

As their relationship progressed, it became apparent that the real-life Lita conflicted with Chaplin's imagined ideal. Already she had graduated from the vision of perfect child in Joshua Reynolds' painting to another idolized female, the incarnation of Napoleon's Empress Josephine, who was, in Chaplin's eyes, both "virgin and vixen, innocent and knowing."⁹² Chaplin's fury at Lita's pregnancy demonstrated the extent to which he had been indulging a misguided fantasy. Suddenly she was a "whore," conniving, dangerous and treacherous.⁹³ On the train back from their wedding in Mexico, Chaplin asked Lita why

⁹⁰ *My Life with Chaplin*, pp. 62–68.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95, and *Wife of the Life of the Party*, p. 42.

⁹² *My Life with Chaplin*, pp. 81–82.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

she hadn't thought to put an end to her misery. He took her onto the platform of the observation car and suggested she jump.⁹⁴

Whilst Humbert also considers escaping across the Mexican border to marry his Lolita (*AL*, pp. 173–74), he is thwarted in his desire to keep her, and her progeny, forever by his side, in his dream of being able to “practi[se] on supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad” (*AL*, 174), by her escape. When he finally confronts her in Coalmont, Lolita has become Mrs Dick Schiller, “pale,” “polluted” and pregnant with another man’s child (*AL*, 278). The shock of seeing her reduced to “only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet” he once “worshipped” (*AL*, 277–78) forces Humbert to concede that his “great radiant sin”⁹⁵ was nothing more than “a sterile and selfish vice” (*AL*, 278). Critically, it is a realization that allows another truth to emerge:

You may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court, but until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth. [...] No matter, even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be tainted and torn — even then would I go mad with tenderness at the sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice, my Lolita. (*AL*, 278)

Humbert initially directs his impassioned declaration at the fantasy jury who he perceives to be sitting in judgement of him throughout the narrative, before making a deft and dramatic move apparently to turn towards Lolita and confess his undying love. Yet the gesture is hollow, for the words are spoken to an imaginary reader and a Lolita who is long gone. This empty pronouncement, therefore, is indicative of his failure to acknowledge, on any level but the physical, the person with whom he has been so intimate. As he subsequently admits, “I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind” (*AL*, 284). Yet, that Humbert exposes his vulnerability in this way, even whilst he denies Lolita any response, marks this as one of the narrative’s most viscerally honest scenes. This is reinforced by the comments Nabokov made in an interview in 1959, in which he claimed to

⁹⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 3–4, and *Wife of the Life of the Party*, p. 54.

⁹⁵ See Appel’s note in *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 442: 278/1.

have written it “through his own tears.”⁹⁶ “The good reader,” he said, wiping away an imaginary tear, “should feel a smart in the corner of their eye” as Humbert weeps before Lolita.⁹⁷ In the light of this, Humbert’s plea to his “gray-eyed,” “sooty-lashed,” “auburn and almond” Lolita (*AL*, 278) becomes less a cynical ruse, a desperate, last-ditch attempt to redeem himself, than an agonizingly sincere declaration of a love that comes too late but is, nevertheless, a revelation.

Pregnant, married and “hopelessly worn at seventeen” (*AL*, 277), Lolita compellingly echoes Lita’s condition, but the similarity, rather than generating points of contiguity, here initiates a complete reversal. Whereas for Chaplin, reality caused the “mirage” of Lita to disintegrate catastrophically, for Humbert the message of Quilty’s play which he was so quick to denigrate, that “mirage and reality merge in love” (*AL*, 201), turns out to be the novel’s “secret,” “spectacularly exposed” as the true impetus and ultimate resolution of his quest.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the impact of Humbert’s revelation is diminished by his deliberate exclusion of its object, and further still when set against Chaplin’s treatment of Lita in his autobiography, where all trace of her is erased from the record of his past. Like Chaplin’s text, Humbert’s manuscript enacts a similar process of erasure, so that Lolita’s place at its centre is ultimately and irrevocably eclipsed by his own solipsized perspective.

CRITICAL RESPONSES: APPREHENSIONS AND OMISSIONS

A handful of critics have commented on the similarity of Chaplin’s predilection to that of Nabokov’s hero, namely Kenneth Anger, Marianne Sinclair, Bill Delaney, Graham Vickers and Joyce Milton. Milton argues that the echoes are “no accident,” and along with Sinclair, details Chaplin’s particular affection for little girls which began with his first teenage

⁹⁶ Durantaye, *Style is Matter*, p. 89. “En écrivant sa dernière rencontre avec Humbert, je pleurais, comme Flaubert à la mort de Madame Bovary.” “Nabokov sans Lolita,” interview with Jeanine Delpuch, *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 29 October 1959, pp. 1–2 (p. 2).

⁹⁷ “Le bon lecteur devrait avoir un picotement au coin de l’oeil (Nabokov essuie une larme hypothétique) lorsque Humbert donne de l’argent à sa Lolita mûre et infidèle.” Interview with Anne Guerin, *L’Express*, 26 January 1961, pp. 26–27 (p. 27).

⁹⁸ *The Gift*, p. 159.

infatuation.⁹⁹ As Vickers contends, “at a single stroke” in Hetty Kelly (his first love) Chaplin “encountered his Annabel Leigh and discovered what Humbert already knew — that nymphets have a very short shelf life before they turn into conventional young women.”¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, he “finds it hard to see any real parallels between Humbert and Chaplin, apart from their shared ‘Europeaness’.”¹⁰¹ Throughout his account of the Chaplin/Grey scandal, Kenneth Anger refers to Lita as “Lolita,” describing her as “the original of that most legendary of nymphets.” He also emphasizes her heritage — she had a Mexican mother and an Irish-American father — which closely parallels Lolita’s, who was conceived on her parents’ honeymoon in Mexico and is half Irish.¹⁰² Meanwhile, Bill Delaney’s 800-word essay cites the resonance of two contemporary Chaplin films, *Monsieur Verdoux* and *Limelight*, von Sternberg’s *The Salvation Hunters* from 1925 and the names Charlie and Charlot (the French name for Chaplin’s Tramp) in Charlotte and Charlie Holmes, with whom Lolita plays sex games at Camp Q, as indicative of Chaplin’s critical role in both *Lolita*’s conception and design.¹⁰³ Delaney also sees echoes of Lita Grey in Nabokov’s characterization. “The close resemblance between ‘Lolita’ and ‘Lillita,’” he argues, “is the most conspicuous allusion to Chaplin in [the] novel.” He continues:

Haze, the last name of Lolita and her mother, suggests the color gray. Nabokov calls Gray Star, “the capital town of the book” [...] Gray Star is “a [fictitious] settlement in the remotest northwest” [...]. Lita Grey was the female star of Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* (1925), a story about the remotest northwest, until the pregnant girl had to be replaced.

⁹⁹ Milton, *The Life of Charlie Chaplin*, p. 280; Sinclair, *Hollywood Lolita*, pp. 30–34. Omry Ronen and Yuri Tsivian also briefly mention the Lita Grey ‘scandal’ in their comparison of Chaplin’s *King of New York* and Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. See “Dubli,” *Zhurnal’nyi zal*, 6 (2009) <<http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2006/9/ci15.html>>. Thanks to Yuri Leving for alerting me to this source.

¹⁰⁰ Vickers, *Chasing Lolita*, p. 60.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰² Anger, *Hollywood Babylon*, p. 123; *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 239. See also, Barbara Wyllie, *Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), pp. 128–30.

¹⁰³ Delaney, “Nabokov’s *Lolita*.”

Delaney's essay reads essentially, however, as a list, at the end of which he briefly comments on Chaplin's portrait of Lita painted in the style of Joshua Reynolds' *The Age of Innocence*. "When Humbert visits Lolita in a classroom at Beardsley School for an immoral purpose," Delaney details, "he notices a print of Reynolds' 'Age of Innocence' on the wall." Whilst this comparison — between two versions of a painting by Joshua Reynolds, one an imitation, the other a faded copy — suggests the possible formative role of Lita Grey in Nabokov's conception of his child heroine, Delaney does not attempt to pursue its implications.

Prior to this scene, Humbert has already explained to his reader how he bribes Lolita for favours (*AL*, 183–85), but nowhere in his narrative does he offer such a graphic depiction of the mechanics of his subjugation, humiliation and violation of her. Not only this, but the location of the transaction — Lolita's classroom — indicates the degree to which Humbert is prepared to invade and defile every last remnant of Lolita's autonomous world, even what must surely be her one remaining place of sanctuary. That Reynolds' painting should overlook the scene only serves to amplify the poignancy of what Lolita is forced to relinquish.

Nabokov places Reynolds' painting directly above Humbert as he takes advantage of what he quickly recognizes as an irresistible, chance "combination":

Mushroom was smelly, with a sepia print of Reynolds' "Age of Innocence" above the chalkboard, and several rows of clumsy-looking pupil desks. At one of these, my Lolita was reading the chapter on "Dialogue" in Baker's *Dramatic Technique*, and all was very quiet, and there was another girl with a very naked, porcelain-white neck and wonderful platinum hair, who sat in front reading too, absolutely lost to the world and interminably winding a soft curl around one finger, and I sat beside Dolly just behind that neck and that hair, and unbuttoned my overcoat and for sixty-five cents plus the permission to participate in the school play, had Dolly put her inky, chalky, red-knuckled hand under the desk. (*AL*, 198)

Whilst the sepia print reflects the dreary shabbiness of "Mushroom" and the lost innocence that Lolita embodies, her anonymous class-mate becomes the real-life incarnation of Reynolds' little girl, as oblivious as the painting to the part she plays in the pleasure Humbert furtively steals. Her "porcelain-white neck" and childish curls suggest

that she has replaced Lolita as the archetypal image of innocence, yet she cannot escape the corrupting force of Humbert's desire as she too is implicated, merely, by his gaze. Humbert's voyeuristic impulse replays a key aspect of the Davenport scene, in which Lolita is reduced to a mere two dimensions, visualized as "a photographic image rippling upon a screen," with Humbert cast as "the humble hunchback abusing [himself] in the dark" (*AL*, 62), except here it is the anonymous blonde who is subject to this cinematic transmigration. That the scene is played out in silence complements its almost total lack of colour — save for Lolita's red knuckles — distinctly recalling the soundless, black-and-white universe of Chaplin's cinema, the medium into which his Lillita is also transported.

Reynolds' painting generates an ironic tension between its classic depiction of innocence and Humbert's and Chaplin's corruption of it, for whilst innocence may be an element of their child lovers' initial appeal, it is quickly dispelled by a far more sinister aspect. For Humbert, Lolita belongs to a special category of nine- to fourteen-year-old girls who possess "fantastic" powers. A true descendent of the Lilith of Nabokov's poem, this nymphet is "not human" but a "little deadly demon," capable of driving grown men insane. Similarly, Chaplin is drawn to twelve-year-old Lillita by the "fascinating," "mysterious" quality he sees in her eyes,¹⁰⁴ a quality that is played out in her role as the Flirting Angel in *The Kid*, sent as Sin's emissary to corrupt Chaplin's dream Tramp. To both men, therefore, these so-called innocents are, with their "fey grace" and "insidious charm" (*AL*, 16, 17), the distillation of evil, and beguiling arbiters of chaos and death.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, Chaplin's admiration of Reynolds' painting expressed the extent to which he cherished his ideal of a childlike existence, his desire to be a kind of Peter Pan figure closely correlating with Humbert's own sense of arrested development. Although Humbert claims that "there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten [...] generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet's spell" (*AL*, 17), there is, nevertheless, in

¹⁰⁴ *My Life with Chaplin*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁵ For commentary, see Eric Goldman, "'Knowing' Lolita: Sexual Deviance and Normality in Nabokov's *Lolita*," *Nabokov Studies*, 8 (2004), pp. 87–104; Julian W. Connolly, "Why are Nymphets 'Demonic'?": Remarks on the Cultural Roots of Nabokov's *Lolita*," in *The Real Life of Pierre Delalande: Studies in Russian and Comparative Literature to Honor Alexander Dolinin*, ed. David M. Bethea, Lazar Fleishman and Alexander Ospovat, *Stanford Slavic Studies*, 34 (2007), 2, pp. 674–86, and Pifer, "Nabokov's Novel Offspring".

his assertion of his “adult” world over Lolita’s, a sense that all this is a masquerade. Critically, it is in his very first vision of Lolita, sunbathing “on a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked” and “peering at [him] over dark glasses,” that he recognizes his “lost Riviera love,” Annabel Leigh:

It was the same child — the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. ... I saw again her lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused; and those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts — that last mad immortal day behind the “Roches Roses.” The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished. (*AL*, 39)

As time disintegrates, Humbert becomes, once again, Annabel’s thirteen-year-old lover, standing in “adult disguise” before Lolita (*AL*, 39). Chaplin’s pursuit of very young women was fuelled by a similar desire to reverse time, to regain something “sweet and simple,”¹⁰⁶ to retreat to a place not unlike the idyllic setting of Humbert’s own “preadolescent” love (*AL*, 14). “Being with you keeps me young,” he would tell Lita, “keeps me happy and stimulated, gives me strength to live and work in this dirty cesspool of a world.”¹⁰⁷ At the same time, throughout her first autobiography, Lita Grey emphasized her husband’s desire to “fix,” as Humbert does, “the perilous magic of nymphets” (*AL*, 134). Chaplin “fixed” his Lita by having her portrait painted in the style of a child even younger than her, and yet he sabotaged his own attempts to capture her “virginal innocence,” to have her stay young and “forever incorruptible”¹⁰⁸ by refusing to accept the impossibility of his dream and its real-life consequences.

In his essay, Delaney details a number of thought-provoking allusions in Nabokov’s novel, but there are also some that he misses, including an intertextual echo of *The Gift*’s Chaplinesque “blotches” in the “smudgy” twitch of Quilty’s black moustache (*AL*, 295), and the name of Chaplin’s divorce attorney, Gavin McNab, which resonates both with the

¹⁰⁶ *My Life with Chaplin*, p. 100.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 103.

author himself and the fantastical character McFate identified by Humbert who, he believes, both colludes with and conspires against him.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, Charlie Holmes recalls Chaplin's first theatrical role in a British production of *Sherlock Holmes*, which he toured with between 1903 and 1906. Chaplin was fourteen, Charlie Holmes is thirteen, the same age as Humbert when he first falls, so fatefully, in love.¹¹⁰ The name of the Enchanted Hunters Hotel too, which Delaney cites as a possible allusion to Sternberg's *The Salvation Hunters*, metamorphoses across the novel to become the corrupted title of Quilty's play — *The Hunted Enchanters* — and the name of the street, Hunter Road in Coalmont, where Lolita lives with her husband Dick. Humbert also adopts it as one of his many fanciful identities, recalling his faceless precursor in Nabokov's 1938 novella. On his way to murder Quilty, a drunk Humbert becomes "an enchanted and very tight hunter" (*AL*, 294). Elsewhere he describes himself as an "enchanted traveler," ironically evoking his far-from-enchanted cross-country travels with Lolita which, he admits, "had only defiled in a sinuous trail of slime that lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country" (*AL*, 166, 175–76).

Another key corresponding detail between Nabokov's fictional hero and the real-life Chaplin that Delaney and other critics have missed is the way in which guns feature in both scenarios. Nabokov remarked on the gun levelled at Chaplin by Joan Barry, seeing it as a kind of aphrodisiac gesture, with clear sexual connotations. This he takes up in *Lolita*, where Humbert's gunplay becomes inextricably entwined with the complexities, contradictions and compromises of his sexual exploits. Exposed in Paris as a cuckold, he remembers "once handling an automatic belonging to a fellow student, in the days [...] when I toyed with the idea of enjoying his little sister, a most diaphanous nymphet with a black hair bow, and then shooting myself" (*AL*, 29). Far from proffering a gun, it only occurs to him after the fact to merely deal his wife an angry "backhand slap" across the cheek (*AL*, 29). In his dreams of revenge he is an impotent marksman, the bullets he fires falling "feebly" to the floor (*AL*, 47), and yet he attempts to sustain a sense of potential threat to Lolita throughout the narrative, initiated by his "Carmen" song's parody of the

¹⁰⁹ For commentary, see *Nabokov at the Movies*, pp. 154–55. McNab had also defended Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle in 1921 and 1922 in three trials for the manslaughter of actress Virginia Rappe.

¹¹⁰ The Sherlock Holmes stories which Nabokov read as a boy were to inform his treatment of the detective genre throughout his fiction.

gangster/moll scenario — “Drew his .32 automatic [...] and put a bullet through his moll’s eye” (*AL*, 62) — a threat which he admits, ultimately, to have been a sham: “Then I pulled out my automatic — I mean, this is the kind of thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it” (*AL*, 280). Humbert fails to live up to his fantasy of the cool, ruthless killer, however, by relinquishing the illicit power that possession of a deadly weapon traditionally grants to the very person he has placed under threat, long before he announces the pretence he has played out before Lolita. After Lolita escapes from him he imagines her as a gun-wielding fugitive and thus she becomes, temporarily, the imagined incarnation of his romantic ideal:

Officer, officer, there they are—
Dolores Haze and her lover!
Whip out your gun and follow that car.
Now tumble out and take cover.

Wanted, wanted: Dolores Haze.
Her dream-gray gaze never flinches.
Ninety pounds is all she weighs
With a height of sixty inches. (*AL*, 257)

Nevertheless, he is eventually able successfully, albeit clumsily, to enact his revenge on Quilty with a real weapon, “Chum,” the Colt .32 that had belonged to Harold Haze, the murder prefigured in fantastic dimensions by the “tremulous” black-and-white, gigantically enlarged image of a gun glimpsed in a scene from a drive-in movie (*AL*, 216, 293). Meanwhile, Quilty’s magnified vulnerability as he faces a drunk and incoherent Humbert, naked under his “purple bathrobe,” parallels Chaplin’s “disrobed” state before Joan Barry.¹¹¹ Humbert’s gunplay echoes not only the incident reported in the Barry/Chaplin trial, but also two episodes in Lita Grey’s complaint. Just two weeks after their wedding, Chaplin offered Lita a loaded revolver, suggesting that she use it to “end it all.” When she told him to stop, he turned the gun on her, threatening to kill her — “I might suddenly get crazy anytime,” he said. Two years later Chaplin came after her with the same

¹¹¹ Humbert also has a purple silk dressing gown, and attempts to drug Lolita with purple pills (see *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 57, 70, 84, 94, 122, 246).

gun, threatening to kill her if she dared to leave or say anything to the press about their relationship. With that Lita left the house and never returned.¹¹²

LO:LITA

Hints of Chaplin are scattered across Humbert's text, but does Lita Grey become anything more than an implied presence embedded in a single scene? Beyond the mutation of Lillita to Lolita, and the fact that the two girls look alike — Lolita has “soot-black lashes,” “five asymmetrical freckles” on her “bobbed nose” and “auburn” hair (*AL*, 44) (fig. 5) — Lita's shadow can be discerned primarily through the explicit association of Lolita with the colour grey, which is initially evoked by her surname, as Delaney points out, but also by her “great gray eyes” (*AL*, 120).



Fig. 5. Lita Grey at 15. Publicity shot for *The Gold Rush*¹¹³

¹¹² *Wife of the Life of the Party*, pp. 145–46.

Within the confines of the narrative, greyness denotes the colour of Lolita's world, introduced by her grey tennis ball which their new lodger Humbert spots in the Haze hallway (*AL*, 37). In Coalmont, five years later, a married and pregnant Lolita anxiously pummels a grey cushion on the sofa beside her as Humbert interrogates her about her time with Quilty (see *AL*, 277). Yet the greyness that is reflected in Lita's surname also combines with a range of astral allusions, initiated by her screen status, that recur across the novel. As Alfred Appel points out, a "gray star is one veiled by haze (Lolita's surname)," whilst the spell cast upon Humbert by Annabel Leigh, "that little girl with her seaside limbs," is delineated by a "haze of stars" (*AL*, 323: 4/8, 15). Lolita's star-like quality is asserted in Humbert's garbled Carmen song — "and the stars, and the cars, and the bars, and the barmen" (*AL*, 61) — which is played out in a premonition of a future scenario. When he goes to confront her in Coalmont, Lolita tells him that for two years she drifted, doing "restaurant work in small places." This recalls Humbert's romanticized vision of her escaping "with a mere fifty dollars in her purse" and "somehow reach[ing] Broadway or Hollywood — or the foul kitchen of a diner [...] in a dismal ex-prairie state, with the wind blowing, and the stars blinking, and the cars, and the bars, and the barmen, and everything soiled, torn, dead" (*AL*, 277, 185). Here, the allusion takes on a tragic dimension, recalling Lita Grey's far from romantic, post-Chaplin fate as a washed-up vaudeville performer, reported as "sad even when she's singing happy tunes."¹¹⁴

Humbert pursues his transcendent theme by playing the "starling" to Lolita's "starlet." The term "starlet" becomes, for Humbert, yet another means of defining his nymphets, but its popular use, dating back to the early 1920s to characterize very young, aspirant film actresses,¹¹⁵ forms yet another link between the movie fanatic Lolita, who "sees herself as a starlet" (*AL*, 65) and the real-life starlet, Lita Grey. At the same time, the

¹¹³ *My Life with Chaplin*, n.p.

¹¹⁴ Listing for a new show at the Follies Theater, downtown Los Angeles, *Billboard Magazine*, 3 July 1948, p. 40.

¹¹⁵ "A young woman, generally in her early twenties, who was developed by one of the Hollywood studios as a future star." Ira Konigsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997), p. 388. The first recorded use of the term was in 1920. See "starlet, n.," *OED Online*, December 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.libproxxy.ucl.ac.uk/view/Entry/189147?redirectedFrom=starlet&>>.

astral theme is made explicit via the stars, stardust and comic-book star-men of Humbert's "maniac's masterpiece" (*AL*, 257), the poem he writes after Lolita escapes with Quilty. They are expressive of the supernal quality of Humbert's love, and the loss that something so inherently delicate, ephemeral and transient inevitably brings:

Wanted, wanted: Dolores Haze.
Hair: brown. Lips: scarlet.
Age: five thousand three hundred days.
Profession: none, or "starlet."

[...]

My car is limping, Dolores Haze,
And the last long lap is the hardest,
And I shall be dumped where the weed decays,
And the rest is rust and stardust.¹¹⁶ (*AL*, 255, 257)

The desolate quality the stardust motif assumes here is starkly undercut, however, by its use earlier in the narrative, where the plum-coloured pills with which Humbert plans to drug Lolita on their first night together are described as "microscopic planetarium[s]" of "live stardust" (*AL*, 109). Not only does this utterly negate the motif's romantic cast in Humbert's ballad to his lost Lolita, but it also reveals the extent to which he adapts and adjusts the details of his text according to their expediency, all the while expecting the reader to have forgotten their previous incarnations in concession to his present predicament.

Meanwhile, the reach of Humbert's stars and starlets once again extends beyond the boundaries of "black Humberland" (*AL*, 166) to resonate in Chaplin's world. Lolita's Camp Q is located near Lake Climax, where she and her friend Barbara Burke "take turns" with Charlie Holmes. Chaplin's Lone Star Studio was originally known as Climax Studios,¹¹⁷ but Lone Star also recalls "Gray Star," the Alaskan "settlement in the remotest Northwest" (*AL*, 4), where Lolita loses her baby and her life. In Lita Grey's real-life location, the snowbound mountains of Truckee, northern California, she also suffers a double loss, of her

¹¹⁶ *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 255, 257.

¹¹⁷ Robinson, *Chaplin*, p. 164.

career and her innocence, for the few scenes of the film she shot were destroyed, and it was here that Chaplin first attempted to seduce her.¹¹⁸

Returning to the evolution of the colour grey in the narrative, the revelation of its special significance is initiated by the sole occurrence of a single word — *vair* — used by Humbert in his poem to describe the colour of Lolita's eyes: "My Dolly, my folly! Her eyes were *vair*, / and never closed when I kissed her" (*AL*, 256). Its implications, however, are only fully disclosed by its reappearance in the fourth chapter of *Pnin*, where it emerges during a discussion about Cinderella's slippers. Nabokov's hero argues that they were not, in fact, made of glass, but of "Russian squirrel fur," "a certain beautiful, pale winter-squirrel fur," "*veveritsa* [in Russian, or] *vair*, in French," "having a bluish, or better say, *siziy* [blue-grey], columbine [dove-grey], shade."¹¹⁹ This chance remark most explicitly alludes to the ominous "shadow-tails," the squirrels that accompany Pnin throughout the narrative,¹²⁰ but it also recalls a particular set of colours in the "solar spectrum" defined by Victor's art teacher:

Among the many exhilarating things Lake taught was that the order of the solar spectrum is not a closed circle but a spiral of tints from cadmium red and oranges through a strontian yellow and a pale paradisaal green to cobalt blues and violets, at which point the sequence does not grade into red again but passes into another spiral, which starts with a kind of lavender grey and goes on to Cinderella shades transcending human perception.¹²¹

The structure of Lake's "spiral of tints" prefigures Nabokov's visualization, in his autobiography, of time and space as a "spiritualized circle," "uncoiled," "unwound" and "set free," an open spiral that progresses, inexorably, in its ceaseless "convolutions" towards a transcendent dimension, an eternal, "Special space."¹²² Within Lake's spectrum, grey denotes a similar space that is beautiful, fragile, infinite, but in the context of

¹¹⁸ See *My Life with Chaplin*, pp. 62–68.

¹¹⁹ *Pnin*, p. 132.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73. For commentary, see Charles Nicol, "Pnin's History," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 4, Spring 1971, 3, pp. 197–208; William W. Rowe, *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1981), pp. 62–66, and *idem*, *Nabokov and Others: Patterns in Russian Literature* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979), pp. 130–31.

¹²¹ *Pnin*, p. 80.

¹²² *Speak, Memory*, pp. 211, 237.

Nabokov's story transforms what at first seems a trivial detail and merely yet another example of Pnin's pedantry into something with the power ultimately to disclose, via Cinderella's slippers and Pnin's lost love, Mira Belochkin (whose "name is a diminutive of *belka*, the Russian for squirrel"),¹²³ the operation of a benign metaphysical realm.

In *Lolita*, Nabokov establishes his heroine's affinity with this realm by directly associating the colour of her eyes with this specific shade of grey, an association whose subtleties could only be appreciated, as Pnin so expertly demonstrates, by a Russian, which Humbert is not. Although Humbert evidently understands its French connotations, he cannot be sensitive to its distinctive Russian aspect, which qualifies *vair* as a uniquely Nabokovian term, here "plotted" as one of the novel's "subliminal coordinates," the "nerve" that finally releases Lolita into a place of ethereal refuge and escape. Consequently, Gray Star, the "capital town of the book," assumes the quality of a Nabokovian "Special space," for this is where the novel's heroine resides for eternity, not in the work of art that Humbert claims his memoir to be, but in this remote, mysterious place, "veiled" itself, "by [a grey] haze." As Vladimir Alexandrov argues, the immortality Humbert believes he has granted Lolita is the "*kind* of immortality that the *sinner* can share with his *victim*, [leaving] open the possibility that Lolita occupies another space altogether."¹²⁴ Nabokov's Gray Star is that other space, one that lies not simply beyond the confines of Humbert's narrative and in defiance of his world, but which exists in a dimension that is exclusively and inviolably hers.

CONCLUSION

Lita's role in the novel's allusive patterning not only focuses attention on the role of the colour grey in revealing Lolita's true fate, but also contributes to the disclosure of Nabokov's influence at a metatextual level. While she belongs exclusively in this realm,

¹²³ Wylie, *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 127. For commentary on the significance of the related Columbine motif, see *ibid.*, pp. 135–38. Julian Connolly argues that the structure of the novel as a whole mirrors the structure of Nabokov's ceaselessly turning spiral. Julian W. Connolly, "*Pnin*: The Wonder of Recurrence and Transformation," in J. E. Rivers and C. Nicol (eds), *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life's Work* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 195–210.

¹²⁴ Vladimir Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 186. Emphasis in the original.

Chaplin serves as an agent of both Nabokov and Humbert, blurring the distinctions between Humbert's text and the "consciousness" of its "creator," and generating an involute dynamic that sets the "coordinates" of Chaplin's and Humbert's worlds into stark relief.

Chaplin's present and past life resonates across Humbert's text, from his recent and very public fall from grace back to its more intimate source — Lita's Flirting Angel, a creature that foreshadows the demon child of Nabokov's 1928 poem, "Lilith." Precisely what Nabokov thought of this veteran Hollywood star, however, is harder to determine. There is a hint of how his opinion changed over the years, implied in his description of Quilty in the screenplay for Kubrick's *Lolita*: "a tremendously successful phony, fortyish, roguish, baldish, with an obscene little mustache and a breezy manner which some find insulting and others just love."¹²⁵ The "droll and touching" figure Nabokov described in "The University Poem" is now more controversial, his "breezy manner" inspiring extreme and contradictory responses, the notion that he causes offence, new. Yet, ultimately, Nabokov refused to condemn him, openly acknowledging his admiration for both Chaplin's skill as a comedian and the timelessness of his art, even impressed by his reputation as a "great lover."

The ambivalence that characterizes Nabokov's attitude is also prevalent in *Lolita*, its problematic nature most dramatically expressed in the way Humbert's readers are compelled to respond to him. This, in turn, is compounded by the nuances of Chaplin's story that underpin the text and create an almost perfect reflection, in actuality, of Humbert's predicament. Together, they combine to communicate the elusive quality of both fictional and real-life characters and, essentially, of the fiction itself. Far more than simply a process of "modeling", therefore, Nabokov's deliberate placement of Chaplin in the novel's subtextual framework serves to reveal the complex design of one of his most intricate and challenging "constructions,"¹²⁶ whilst suggesting the potential reach of his real and imagined "contiguous" worlds.

¹²⁵ *Lolita: A Screenplay*, p. 56.

¹²⁶ A term Nabokov used in the introduction to his 1976 translation of "The Return of Chorb." *Collected Stories*, p. 767.



Fig. 6. “The Price is Love”: The Tramp and his Flirting Angel. Charlie Chaplin and Lillita McMurray in a deleted scene from *The Kid* (1921). *The Kid* © Roy Export S.A.S.

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