

**Nabokov's Dark American Dream:
Pedophilia, Poe, and Postmodernism in Lolita**

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INTRODUCTION

The following thesis about Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita first began as a paper written as an assignment for a course about postmodern American literature. In the initial paper's title there was an allusion made to the implicated reader, and the paper itself was about giving Lolita a newer and postmodern reading. To read Lolita again, years after doing so initially, was a distinctly disturbing thing to do. The cultural climate has certainly changed since the mid-1950's when the book was first published in this country, and this alone makes the rereading of this novel an engaging opportunity. Lionel Trilling wrote that Nabokov sought to shock us and that he had to stage-manage something uniquely different in order to do so. Trilling believed that the effect of breaking the taboo "about the sexual unavailability of very young girls" had the same force as a "wife's infidelity had for Shakespeare" (5). We do like to think that we are unshockable. However, American culture today is marked by its lawlessness and nonexistent core of social standards on one end of the continuum, while at the other end, are indications of rabid intolerance of those deviating from what is left of social norms. We are sickened daily by the reports of violence which is spreading from beyond our cities' urban centers and into our suburban lives. We are glaringly and unequally separated by different levels of achievement in education and earning capacity. What does unite us, those within our prison walls and those without, is our horror and absolute disgust with the pedophile. These people are those for whom we reserve the most venom and our deepest antipathy. In other times and in other places, different demons were manufactured and used to stir up people's fears. Such demons were also used to assuage those for whom questions about their own normal responses had become troubling.

Vladimir Nabokov wrote out of his own personal need to do so, and would, no doubt, be surprised to see his work turned into some kind of indictment of American culture. Lolita was never meant to be such an indictment and was and is, certainly, more than that. However, as this thesis will attempt to show, Lolita, with its vast store of pedophilic themes, should make us scrutinize very carefully our current views of children and how uncomfortable we remain about their sexuality.

Besides the changes in the cultural climate, the novel must be read differently depending upon one's gender and one's individual circumstances. To be a woman reading this novel is to be made vastly uncomfortable. To be a woman reading this novel when one is older than Lolita's mother is to be made even more uncomfortably aware of one's aging body. What is so adorable in Humbert's girl-child--Lolita's crass vulgarity, slovenliness, and her refusal to look at the world using Humbert's aesthetic lens--is all made to seem grotesquely loathsome in the mother. Humbert also spares nothing as he catalogues Charlotte's corporal imperfections and remains depressed at the sight of this "handsome" woman. Charlotte has too much of what Lolita has so little. Humbert has the poor taste to see or smell the rottenness of those who are aging and he then feasts upon the young flesh of his beloved Lolita.

To be middle-aged and also to have daughters around the age of Lolita and within the nymphet boundary as set forth by Humbert makes the reading of this novel that much more troubling. It is disquieting to find oneself applying Humbert's way of envisioning to one's own daughters. How would Humbert see my older daughter who is twelve years old and has perfect pale skin, dark hair, and a slender body? He would have no time for my second daughter who is the child with the tummy, freckles, and no soulful looks indicating tragic thought. Why does it seem desirable to have one daughter who might delight the connoisseur? This is upsetting business, and yet instead of turning away, we should look at Humbert himself and examine his methods. He plays every angle and is thinking every minute about ways to lure his prize into his magnetic orbit. To look also at the world

through Humbert's eyes and see it unfold as a playing field for those initiated in the art of the exalted gaze is dizzying, and without doubt, designed to make the reader question herself (himself). Every reader who grapples with this book and finds oneself cheering Humbert on in his seduction attempts and feels curiously let down after some of these attempts are thwarted is implicated. Nabokov is slyly subversive and the reader, like Lolita, is lured within Humbert's range of vision. Humbert is so persuasively adept that most of us go willingly. After all, Lolita is only a novel and we can have our fun with it at little or no personal cost, right? Nabokov puts his readers on dangerous ground and emerges relatively unscathed after having written a brilliant tour de force.

For a brief period of time, some twenty years after World War II, and probably for the last time ever, sex was cut loose a bit from death. Now, of course, in our age of AIDS, sex and death are as joined as ever before so that a certain darkness has infected even the most married and monogamous. After all, we still have children who will have to navigate treacherous sexual seas. The time is ripe for a reading of Lolita that demands an examination of Humbert and the narrative of the pedophile. The first chapter of this thesis, as indicated by the title, will have pedophilia as its primary subject. Lolita, as has been noted many times, by many of its critics, is rich in its allusions to other well-known works of literature. What has not received much critical attention is that the novel is also a parodic compendium of themes which are held to be key to the pedophilic experience.

The material in the first chapter will include the writing of a convicted child molester, recent psychological studies relating to pedophilia, material from the 1930-40's relating to sexual aberrations, and Nabokov's autobiographical work, Speak, Memory. Brandon Centerwall argues in a fascinating paper entitled, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Nabokov and Pedophilia," that Nabokov was a closeted pedophile. Centerwall believes that Lolita deserves a newer reading because of Nabokov's own child-loving propensities. Centerwall writes persuasively, but his arguments are not wholly convincing and it is my contention that Nabokov's psychological profile will remain a mystery. Besides Centerwall's article, James

Kincaid's Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture will be examined since it is his belief that pedophilia is inevitable in American culture which has invested itself so heavily in the eroticizing of the child. While Kincaid does not allude to Nabokov or Lolita in particular, his work is important in this chapter because I believe that Nabokov was uniquely prescient about the way an American identity has been shaped after the World War and the extent of our child-loving is an important component of this identity.

I think that Lolita, besides being a very personally relevant book for Nabokov, is also one which is excoriating about American culture. Nabokov disagrees with this view, but that should not dissuade us from looking at the way he saw our suburban version of perfection. The nagging questions remaining long after one has finished with the novel are about the nature of Humbert's crime and the extent of the damage done to Lolita by him. Lolita sobbed herself to sleep every night while she was in Humbert's care and he did nothing to release her from his imposed prison. Nabokov paints this picture of domestic horror using the sunlit tones of the suburban palette. For a man of Nabokov's taste and aristocratic sensibilities, the American cultural assumption of moral superiority and boundless optimism must have seemed misplaced if not outright galling. Humbert's anthropological descriptions of life in the American suburbs and along her interstates is as utterly cynical as it is unerring.

Unlike Nabokov, Edgar Allan Poe had no use for sun-dappled scenes of normal domesticity, and yet Poe's life and work hold fundamental keys to an understanding of Nabokov and Lolita. In the second chapter of this thesis, I will discuss the life and work of Edgar Allan Poe as it relates to Lolita. The most frequent literary allusions in Lolita have to do with Edgar Allan Poe and it will be shown how Nabokov's satire about American suburban life is enriched because of these references to America's most problematic writer. I believe that in order to understand Lolita, we must take into consideration the psychoanalytic nature of the criticism accorded to Poe's life based upon his prose and poetry. Poe's poetry and fiction, filled with repetitive images of the deaths of beautiful women, was thought to be

a direct manifestation of the trauma stemming from personal losses suffered when he was a young child. Nabokov is well-known for his sharp loathing of Freudian principles, which had been, all too often, inflexibly and simplistically applied. Poe's life has been minutely dissected according to Freud's psychoanalytic theories and the results of this must have fascinated and appalled Nabokov. I think Lolita is a carefully constructed argument against the belief in the overarching importance of traumatic events occurring in early youth.

Poe's life provided for his critics a vast array of personal excesses and even school children know about the early death of Poe's mother, his marriage to a very young cousin, and his drinking bouts. Poe's personal life coupled with his lurid tales and haunting poetry were exceptionally appealing themes for psychoanalytic critics. Elizabeth Phillips, in an article called, "The Hocus Pocus of Lolita," very wisely calls our attention to the satire in Lolita based upon the Freudian analysis of Poe's life. Phillips alludes to Marie Bonaparte's well-known book The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation and to Bonaparte's treatment of Poe's life as it is illuminated through his fiction. Bonaparte's treatise on Poe's life is a fascinating piece of literature in its own right and I have examined some of her emotional prose in the second chapter. I think that Nabokov would have hated the very thought of someone like Bonaparte examining every piece of his fiction in order to arrive at conclusions about his personal life. It is my contention that Lolita is a very thorough statement warning against future trespass in Nabokov's own life by such psychologically minded writers. The principal sources used for the second chapter will be the psychoanalytic case study of Poe written by Marie Bonaparte and Geoffrey Green's book, Freud and Nabokov. In the latter, Green persuasively argues that Nabokov's intense antipathy toward Freud and his own careful crafting of a public persona have become inextricably linked. Green's thesis is that because Nabokov made his hatred of Freud so well-known, Freud became for Nabokov a ghostly and presiding presence. It is my belief that Nabokov's dismissal of Freud and his yearning to control what his public thought of him personally have much to do with Poe and the mysteries of his life "solved" by psychoanalytic

critics. Lolita is about many things, but certainly one facet of the novel has to do with the dangers of applying too literally psychoanalytic tenets. Nabokov liberally used Poe's work in the form of parody in Lolita and without understanding Poe's "Annabel Lee" and his doppelganger tale, "William Wilson," Lolita cannot be understood.

In the second chapter, Poe and Nabokov are portrayed as writers fascinated with the drama inherent between their created characters and their doubles. Humbert and Quilty are the most obvious of Lolita's doubles, but the doppelganger effect at work between Lolita and Charlotte has not been given as much critical attention and bears further investigation. Lolita and Charlotte are distinctly similar, yet to Humbert, Lolita represents perfect beauty and Charlotte represents its opposite. When I read Lolita again, I was angry with Humbert lucidly presenting his hierarchy of beauty. To Humbert, only girl-children are thought to be physically perfect and worthy of his penetrating gaze. I felt Humbert to be grossly unjust and as he represents a kind of cultural norm, railed against his and society's unfairness. After doing the reading in preparation for this chapter, I am not so ready to direct my anger in Humbert's direction. Indeed, even as he represents an extreme in our cultural milieu, I arrived at the sad conclusion that beauty is not fair and too often gives its owner unearned power. As trite as this conclusion may be, it makes us question how we construct our notions of what or who is beautiful. Whether we like it or not, beauty will continue to exert its strong pull. I contend that beauty and the creation of beautiful art are key facets to an understanding of Lolita.

Humbert's way of looking at the world seems very current since it has much to do with the patriarchal power of images and advertisement. In the third and last chapter of this thesis, I will discuss postmodernist themes as they relate to the characters of Lolita and Charlotte. These themes--commodification, body image, and beauty--are distinctly relevant to Nabokov's female characters. Regarding commodification, I think Lolita may have been one of the earliest examples of postmodern fiction with postmodernism's hallmark use of the exhaustive catalogue of consumer goods. The America of Lolita is shown to be on the brink

of galloping consumerism and now many of us here in America are living lives marked by materialistic concerns that would have amazed earlier generations. Nabokov, with his fascination with high and low culture, found fertile ground for study in America and the results of this fascination can be seen within the pages of Lolita. I think this merging of high and low culture in Lolita is another sign of postmodernism at work. The main source for this first section of the chapter will be Rachel Bowlby's book, Shopping with Freud, in which she discusses the character of Lolita as the ultimate American consumer.

Besides the issues of consumerism, a newer reading of Lolita must push its main female characters to center stage. It is difficult to imagine the middle-aged woman, who, while reading Lolita, would not be angry at Humbert's descriptions of Charlotte. I winced at Humbert's picture of Charlotte in a bathing suit and realized that those words of Humbert's have been my own about myself. Moreover, besides her physical imperfections, Charlotte is painted as an awful mother. Yet, Humbert dimly realized that Lolita missed her mother after her death and felt her loss keenly. Issues regarding the maternal body, the aging body, and the beautiful body will be discussed in the second portion of the third chapter. I had planned to use Naomi Wolfe's The Beauty Myth in this section; however, it was a book I found to be overly facile, anecdotal, and too content to cast women simply as victims willing to cede control of their personal visions of themselves to the patriarchal forces shaping the unending stream of media images. Wolfe makes many good and insightful points, but the way images of beauty are constructed and agreed upon as a culture is more complex than she indicates in her book. Instead, I chose to examine some work done by Camille Paglia. She is often ridiculously outrageous, and though her work causes feminists to howl in protest, Paglia's Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson was selected as the primary source for this section because she is extremely convincing about the inherent power residing with women and mothers. She also writes persuasively about what it means to be beautiful in Western culture. Paglia more than suggests that despite our best efforts to deny beauty's allure, the Western eye will seek to subvert the natural and to construct hierarchies

which will never be democratic or equalizing. I believe the character of Lolita does represent beauty and by rendering her in words, Humbert seeks to create her as a character immune to the passage of time. Paglia argues that beauty will always be evocative of the pagan and non-rational realms of life. I think that in order to serve beauty's ends, time must be made to stand still and this is what Humbert tries in vain to do. It was during my recent rereading of Lolita when the subject of anorexia intrusively asserted itself in my mind. At first this seemed strange because there is nothing in Lolita to suggest the self-willed deprivation of nourishment. On the contrary, Lolita is shown to be eating in a host of scenes and when not eating, being given some other treat. Moreover, the last look the reader gets of Lolita is of her hugely pregnant and already old at seventeen. Despite this, I think that today's Lolita would be anorexic, since, as we know now, anorexia is a horrible but uniquely effective measure to make growth and development cease. Humbert's aesthetic gaze seeks to carve away any flesh that is evocative of the maternal, and for many of us Humbert's way of envisioning has become our own. Such a contention about Nabokov's mid-century Lolita being today's anorexic girl is certainly conjectural, but perhaps not overreaching too much. Eating and being fed are at the core of Lolita. Maud Ellman in her book The Hunger Artists seeks to deconstruct what it means to eat food and she compares the act of being fed with being heard or unheard. This text will be the primary source used in the section about Lolita and anorexia.

In conclusion, it is my intent to show that Lolita remains a uniquely interesting novel still exerting a hold over readers forty years after its publication. At first glance, the three sections of this paper may appear unrelated. However, each of the three sections is ultimately concerned with what it means to have an American identity. We say we are a nation who loves its children even as we know so many of them are living abjectly hopeless lives. Our current and largely middle-class obsessions marked by the demonization of the pedophile and paranoid fantasies regarding the prevalence of child abductions serves to show how acute Nabokov was in his observations of a fundamental duplicity at work in his

adopted country. Related to this is our American love of child-like innocence and how elaborately we must look away from the untenable in order to preserve our own carefully fashioned innocent identities. Nabokov most certainly must have noticed the religiosity governing much of American thought and what has been called our "vulnerability to outbreaks of paranoia" (Ryan). Carving out an identity also has much to do with Poe's fictional characters who are constructed with words heavy with the longings and desires of their creator. Nabokov must have been fascinated by Poe's characters and their attempts to identify themselves through the use of words and images associated with belonging to a patrician class. At the end of the twentieth century words have taken on a vaporous quality and are not potent enough to admit anyone entry into an elite class. Lolita, with its focus on consumer goods, clearly shows how insubstantial Humbert's words are in the face of America's materialistic culture. Today, we attempt to fashion ourselves as beautiful and perpetually young people. Our daughters, in the search for an aesthetic ideal and sense of control, are choosing to deny themselves nourishment. Nabokov, the brilliant outsider looking at American culture, was able to see the hope and child-like optimism existing in this country after World War II and as a writer was enthralled and bemused with this "new" world. In Lolita, Nabokov depicted the dark side of American culture and offered his rendering of American people eager to identify themselves as consumers in love with the seductive words of advertisement.

Chapter 1 **Pedophilia and Lolita**

The first chapter will be a discussion of themes relating to pedophilia that Nabokov used to create his famous character, Humbert, in his novel, Lolita. This troubling subject has been given much attention lately by the press and makes a new examination of Lolita seem particularly timely. Critics have duly noted the subterranean thread that winds throughout the novel is Humbert's pedophilia. However, in the critical literature about Lolita there has not been a satisfactory examination of the nature of the pedophile and those images central to the "average" pedophile's secret obsessions. Nabokov has taken themes familiar enough to the obsessive and has turned pathology into art. Humbert's desires are particularly relevant to examine today because of the hysterical tone dominating much of our public discourse in America. In a review of Andrew Sullivan's new book called Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality, Alan Ryan makes an excellent point about the diversity of beliefs and life styles found in America. Ryan states that we are "unusually nervous about each other's reliability and normality, resulting in the mixture of conformism and variety which everyone since Tocqueville has remarked on" (87). Nabokov sought to revel in and increase this nervousness with Lolita. Nabokov upends our beliefs about evil and monsters and this is as relevant today in the nervous nineties as it was in the squeamish fifties. An examination of Humbert's obsession and Nabokov's accuracy in describing pedophilia enriches an understanding of Lolita. Nabokov got his descriptions right according to experts in that field. Besides accurately portraying Humbert, Nabokov takes a genre unfamiliar to many, if not most, of his readers, namely the pedophilic narrative, and turns his readers' sympathies inside out. There are layers of parody within the novel and these narratives indicative of the pedophilic experience comprise one of them. Lolita is made to seem that much more subversive a novel by more fully examining what Nabokov was up to by so accurately describing Humbert's tormented desires. Also, it is not difficult to understand

how an interest in Nabokov's novel would lead one to muse upon the personal and sexual inclinations of Lolita's author. Nabokov, with his well-documented abhorrence of Freud and the Viennese doctor's ferreting around for the psychological nugget which is held up in triumph as that which explains all, would hate this digging around in his personal life. However, Nabokov's writing is deeply personal and he uses themes in a profoundly repetitive manner. Such repetitiveness begs the scholar and critic to poke around a bit between the lines.

Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita is a story of obsession and the transformative nature of art. Pedophilia is inextricably part of the story and, therefore, it is an understatement that Lolita was and remains a provocative work. A novel describing in excruciating and hilarious detail a man's obsessive passion for a twelve-year-old girl tramples upon societal and cultural taboos. In the first chapter of this thesis, the following questions will be raised and discussed. What exactly is the nature of child-loving in our current culture? Do all of us fall along some pedophilic continuum as has been suggested by James Kincaid in his book, Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture? Was Nabokov's alter ego really Humbert Humbert and therefore was Nabokov a closeted pedophile as has been persuasively argued by Brandon Centerwall in a paper called, 'Hiding in Plain Sight: Nabokov and Pedophilia?' Finally, the evocative power of potent memory and its ability to insinuate upon our mind's eye the almost photographic duplication of scenes witnessed and savored long ago, will be discussed as the source of Nabokov's masterpiece, Lolita.

Perhaps it is fitting that a thesis about Lolita should begin with the ending of the book. Nabokov stipulated that his words written about Lolita should be printed at the end of the novel in every edition. This coda called, "On a Book Entitled Lolita," is a curious mopping-up affair which represents Nabokov's attempt (obviously successful) to control all aspects of his public persona. Nabokov sought to put to rest any musings about the personal predilections of the novel's author. Nabokov writes about the arduous journey Lolita had to undergo in order for it to be published, and he noted that it was published first in France, and

only after it received critical praise in Britain and the United States was it allowed to be published in those countries. In Strong Opinions, Nabokov even reveals that his wife stopped him at one point from burning the manuscript of his precious Lolita. He writes with cynicism about publishing houses and the three themes which were held in the mid-1950's to be completely and utterly morally subversive:

Their refusal to buy the book was based not on my treatment of the theme (pederasty) but on the theme itself, for there are at least three themes which are utterly taboo as far as most American publishers are concerned. The two others are Negro-white marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren; and the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106. (316)

Notice that Nabokov states that it is the American publishing business that has the moral scruples to hold back (at least in the 1950's) texts that would offend tastes of the reading public. Ironies pile up upon ironies. Everyone now knows that Lolita became a huge success, was held to be risqué, and all the same, made much money for Nabokov. What a huge joke Nabokov pulled on all of us in America and how correctly he saw into the nature of our very souls. Nabokov wrote because of an obsessional need on his part to rid himself of or transform certain of his experiences into art. We must all be thankful that there are people for whom the act of writing is so completely necessary that for them not to be able to write would be tantamount to leading a life void of meaning. So, on the one hand, Lolita is a hugely personal work, and yet on the other, it can also be viewed as a powerful indictment or subversive celebration of the morally decadent and decidedly childish nature of our lives here in America.

What has received far less scholarly attention is that Lolita is also a virtual compendium of themes dear to the heart of the "average" pedophile. According to James Kincaid, most pedophiles are simply what the name suggests, "lovers of children." Kincaid asks his readers to think about how many of us would be eager to consider ourselves as members of a group who adore children? Kincaid writes with conviction about the

importance of his theme of child-loving in our society. He states that all of us know the difference between healthy and normal love of children and "a love which is sick and freakish" (3). His intent is to explore how we come by this knowledge and suggests our knowledge on this subject "is more likely a prescribed cultural agreement cemented by fear, desire, and denial" (3). Kincaid's theory about the ambivalent attitude that is the hallmark of our feelings about children, illuminates Nabokov's central character in Lolita, namely, Humbert Humbert. Humbert describes himself as a monster, and yet the reader becomes fond of this first-person narrator because he delights us all with his disarming humor, even as he potters about, performing his horrible deeds.

In his introductory chapter, Kincaid states that we have demonized the pedophile, but he (or she) functions in a useful role since it is the pedophile who, by way of contrast, indicates what normal responses are and should be. It seems Nabokov was quite right in his assessment of the three subjects which were held to be absolutely taboo in the 1950's. His list would not be so inclusive these days, since pedophilia would be the only one left on the list. Kincaid writes with candid conviction and courage since it is unsettling to get near this subject without risking having pointed queries raised about one's personal stake in the matter. Kincaid writes that the way we talk about child-loving is really "monster talk" and the talk which is busy "rejecting the pedophile" is at the same time creating that role (3). Kincaid states that our imaginations conjure up a picture of the pedophile so that we may "recoil in disgust" at the spectacle (3). Kincaid hastens to point out that pedophiles are not imaginary beings and that they do of course exist in our society, but "our discourse creates a space for them, a space that we can bet will not go unoccupied" (3). He believes that in American society, "we invest a great deal of cultural capital in the importance of pedophilia" and that the reasons behind this are anything but clear (3). Even though Kincaid does not directly allude to Lolita, according to his thesis, Humbert, Nabokov's prowling predator, is supremely important since he stands apart from the rest of us and by him we may gauge our own normality.

Lolita is a novel that describes the voyeuristic joys accruing to the person skilled in looking. The delicate frisson provoked when one spies an object of desire is elaborately worked out for us by Humbert. Kincaid writes that very few pedophiles actually touch or desire to have relationships physically consummated; however, what they do desire is to have glorious fantasy. The evanescence of childlike beauty makes the pedophile a connoisseur of the most rarefied kind. Nabokov, the keen lepidopterist, knew well the rigorous classification systems needed for that field and brought his knowledge of butterflies to bear on his novel about his human nymphet. Just as Nabokov goes to extensive lengths to classify and describe a precious butterfly specimen, Humbert delights in classifying differences among girl children. Listen to the words of Nabokov's Humbert as he speaks about the essential nature of the pedophile. Humbert writes in his diary that 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 . . ." (87). He hastens to assure his readers that unlike other men, "we are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do" (87). Humbert writes what is an accurate portrayal of the pedophile and describes this person as an "unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentleman, 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" (87). He assures us that pedophiles are not killers because "poets never kill" (88).

Kincaid would agree with Humbert's tortured assessment about the marked timidity of most pedophiles, and offers his readers the work of Kenneth Plummer who "compiled a point-by-point refutation of the common line" about who pedophiles really are:

in place of a dirty old man we have an average age of 35 (Kinsey); only as few as 12% are strangers; in the overwhelming majority of cases, the attentions are not forced on the child; very seldom is sexual intercourse attempted or intended; far from traumatizing the child, these experiences are usually felt to be pleasurable. (185)

Kincaid is quick to point out that not many of us would accept these arguments, certainly not the last one about such acts being regarded as pleasurable by the child. Humbert would agree wholeheartedly with Kincaid, who seeks to deconstruct the myths about the pedophile in our society. Kincaid writes that "the average pedophile is married, perhaps more happily than most, and has sexual intercourse within that marriage a little more than average" (192). He believes it is very difficult to imagine that most pedophiles are "rather prudish, conventional, possibly more controlled than the average male, showing only an average-at-best response to sexual stimuli" (192). Kincaid says that most troubling to people is the unsettling news that "few sexual offenders against children are demonstrably psychotic in any obvious way" (192). Humbert, evidently, knows well of what he speaks and the demonized view of the pedophile runs counter to the picture of the "mild, dog-eyed gentleman," which is, in actuality, closer to the mark.

What is it about children that makes them so desirable? The image many of us in our culture have of children is an overly sentimental one. This image, however, is perfectly delectable because the child our culture has created is pure, innocent, and free of anything akin to adult sexuality. As a society, we are inundated with news about abused children, kidnapped children, molested children, and the fears of communities where convicted pedophiles reside. As a society we are only too ready to have our fears played out before us and this seems a wholly plausible response in light of Kincaid's thesis. He writes that our thinking about "the child has been assembled in reference to desire, built up in erotic manufactories, and that we have been laboring ever since, for at least two centuries, both to deny that horrible and lovely product and to maintain it" (4). Kincaid believes that pedophilia "is located at the cultural center" and describes it as a response to the image of the child we have created and therefore pedophilia is something that "we have made necessary" (4). He argues that "if the child is desirable, then to desire it can hardly be freakish" and that when we deny this desirability, we "put into operation pretty hefty engines of denial and self-deception" (4). Kincaid argues that because we have insisted on the absolute innocence and

purity of children, "we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism"

(4). Kincaid writes persuasively about how we have made the pedophile an important fixture in our culture:

by attributing to the child the central features of desirability in our culture -- purity, innocence, emptiness, Otherness--we have made absolutely essential figures who would enact this desire. Such figures are certainly not us, we insist, insist so violently because we must, so violently that we come to think that what we are is what these figures are not. They come to define us: they are the substance we feed on. The pedophile is thus our most important citizen, so long as he stays behind the tree or over in the next yard: without him we would have no agreeable explanation for the attractions of the empty child. We must have the deformed monster in order to assure us that our own profiles are proportionate. (4-5).

The passage just quoted is important because in it Kincaid establishes the duplicity at work in our society. Humbert would find his task of convincing a jury of his unique and singular love for Lolita much more difficult today. In our current climate, Humbert's deft comedy would meet with sullen rejection, since not many of us would allow ourselves to be amused by Humbert's comic account of his attempt to ravish a stupefied, newly orphaned twelve-year-old girl.

Kincaid's words about the "deformed monster" in our midst may at first seem hyperbolic, but they certainly bear investigation. Kincaid talks about our voyeuristic culture where great amounts of time are spent in socially sanctioned ways of looking at our children: at their little league games, recitals, dance classes, school assemblies, etc. He also indicates the moral conundrum that occurs when young victims, after "suffering" the ministrations of the local pedophile, tell investigators that the perpetrators of these monstrous crimes were the first people to ever show true caring. Kincaid asks us to admit that some of the children we profess to love so much are in fact being neglected and offered little if any true warmth or affection. Kincaid also indicates that the American public is fascinated by the poignant images of children looking at us from the sides of milk cartons and that we cannot get

enough of this material as evidenced by the plethora of television movies which have children and the dastardly things done to them as their compelling theme.

In relating Kincaid's work to Lolita, the question that emerges now is about the ambivalence we feel about children in our society and how much of this ambivalence did Nabokov perceive to be a function of American society and how much was indicative of his grappling with a very personal issue. Nabokov was a writer who saw keenly and observed minutely, so that Lolita appears to be a unique melding of rich social satire and a painstaking attempt to work out some deeply felt concerns. Nabokov writes about his mother's brother, his Uncle Ruka, in his autobiographical work, Speak Memory, which was published immediately prior to Lolita. Uncle Ruka had a fondness for young boys and a particular interest in his young nephew, Vladimir. Nabokov writes seemingly without pain and most certainly without the histrionics which accompany today's confessions about having been sexually exploited as a child.

Uncle Ruka appeared to me in my childhood to belong to a world of toys, gay picture books, and cherry trees laden with glossy black fruit: he had glass-housed a whole orchard in a corner of his country estate, which was separated from ours by the winding river. During the summer, almost every day at lunchtime his carriage might be seen crossing the bridge and then speeding toward our house along a hedge of young firs. When I was eight or nine, he would invariably take me upon his knee after lunch and (while two young footmen were clearing the table in the empty dining room) fondle me, with crooning sounds and fancy endearments, and I felt embarrassed for my Uncle by the presence of the servants and relieved when my father called him from the verandah: "Basile, on vous attend." (68)

Nabokov's uncle had the financial means certainly, but also the vision of a magician or enchanter so that under his direction, he enclosed an entire garden in glass so that cherry trees would always be able to bear their fruit. Nabokov writing about his uncle is compassionate and uses words that express a high degree of gratitude. Uncle Ruka must have emerged as a figure who aroused complex emotions in his nephew, and I suggest these emotions were a mingling of irresistible allure and shame born of a certain complicity.

Nabokov is undeniably consumed by the past. He was born into a family of fabulous wealth and privilege, and by using his powerful gifts as a writer, he became a verbal photographer of his past by composing vignettes of sweet, Proustian poignancy.

Nabokov's uncle is the key to Nabokov's Speak, Memory and also to Lolita, and these two works are simply not readable in the same way they may have been in the past. The cultural times have changed markedly. Nabokov does not use a single word about his uncle that depicts feelings of exploitation. Today, we would simply say that Nabokov is in a state of denial and did not realize that he was certainly a victim. Kincaid calls what we choose to believe in, as far as pedophilia is concerned, a power paradigm where there are clear lines drawn between the young child as victim and the exploited one, with the adult fulfilling the role as the powerful exploiter or rapist. Notice the way Nabokov describes the daily lunch time encounters between him and his Uncle Ruka. I suggest that the young Vladimir could have been conveniently missing at those times, or he could have run screaming from the dining room. Could not his parents have intervened? The young Nabokov reported that he only felt an embarrassment for his uncle for behaving this way in front of the servants. He doesn't say whether or not he enjoyed this fondling or having endearments crooned to him, but neither does he indicate that these experiences damaged or traumatized him. They probably did, however, change him. Nabokov wrote in Speak Memory, that by the time he was just a couple of years older, he received no more than the usual and perfunctory attention that an uncle might give any nephew. Young Nabokov must have severely felt the breach, or the painful cessation of his uncle's interest and missed acutely his uncle's intensive looking and ecstatic admiration. How painful was this rupture to Nabokov? How unspeakable were these feelings for him? Were these the feelings of which he wished himself so eagerly to be rid?

It is delectable to see oneself cast in the role of the darling of the camera's eye. Every look, every gesture, and even every lapse is bathed in the light of worshipful adoration. Nabokov must have been aware, perhaps even hyper-aware of himself as a figure of beauty

and of desirability. He lost this adoration by simply existing in time or in other words, by getting older. As it was for Proust, Nabokov is compelled to recapture the past in order to revel in it, to rework it, and to examine it from every angle possible. In Lolita, desire is looked at prismatically by Humbert, and Nabokov, the consummate artist and gamesman, could cast himself in the role of every character in his novel. How amusing it must have been to view himself, in part, as a crass American school girl who becomes the beloved focus of adoration of a much older and urbane man? Brandon Centerwall believes that by giving Humbert the characteristics most closely resembling his author, that this too-obvious stratagem alone would be enough to throw the curious off the scent. In other words, Centerwall suggests that Nabokov practically insists that his readers see similarities between himself and Humbert in order to hide the truth (in plain sight) about being a secret pedophile. This seems too ridiculously pat somehow and not as complex a response as is warranted. What is not ridiculous is Centerwall's attempt to find the personal code in Lolita. Nabokov's writing is deeply personal, containing strong autobiographical elements, and this should inform our reading of his work.

The way Lolita is read also has a great deal to do with the way by which we view the period we have marked off as constituting childhood. It appears that we all operate under the power paradigm posed by Kincaid and attributed to Foucault (and others) which posits that we are all, despite ample evidence to the contrary, under the sway of the image of the child as a distinct entity completely separate from the adult and the adult world. We have more clearly designated childhood as a separate, happy, and golden time of play and uncapturable poignancy. What would time travelers from past centuries make of the current obsession of many parents to create, what in their minds would be, the perfect childhood? Kincaid writes of the Victorian admonition "that as the home is, so is the boy" and believes that "this sort of flummery is meant to inflate morale, to reassure parents that, at bottom, they do indeed exist" (84). He goes on to say that parents do need to be told "that they are the sole and absolute source of the child, because there is always the possibility that it's

really the other way round" (85). Kincaid argues that we as a society see children as so captivatingly desirable and for this "we must blame someone, namely the pedophile, as much a necessary cultural construction as a real-life criminal" (184). As subversive as this notion is regarding the cultural position of the pedophile, it is even more disquieting to puncture notions about the power paradigm as regards to child-loving. He then asks us to look at the roles played by the adult and child within the power paradigm. It is Kincaid's belief that, according to the power paradigm, "all sexual encounters between adults and children involve a self-evident power imbalance and are thus deeply coercive" (186). He then asks us to go beyond the power paradigm where the air gets a bit "thinner" and stomachs tighten in nervousness, and writes that through power, "the narrative can only be told in one way, as a story of rape," since it would be "patently ridiculous" to suppose that the child can ever be the instigator in such relations" (187). He points out, however, that even though these "power narratives sound wholly persuasive," somehow "child sexuality and child eroticism elude the control of power" (187). Kincaid adds that despite the shortcomings of the power paradigm as a model for childhood sexuality and child eroticism, we have denied other possibilities and through denial, we have insisted that the model be made to fit (187).

Kincaid's proposal that the child is not completely powerless, nor an empty slate makes us distinctly uncomfortable. As Kincaid does in his book, Nabokov in Lolita upends our beliefs about the innocent, angelic, and asexual child. If what Kincaid argues has even a degree of truth, we would have to call into question many of our notions about the innocence that seems unique to those fleeting years of childhood.

Lolita herself is the real mystery since she is emphatically not a cipher. She operates outside of the power paradigm and after all it is she who initiates sex with the panting and incredulous Humbert. Lolita is forthright and quickly undercuts Humbert's romantic and purple prose. When Humbert tries to delicately describe what their sleeping arrangements will be while on their unique odyssey, Lolita immediately sizes up the situation and names it for what it is. After Humbert patiently explains that he and Lolita will be thrown together

much of the time and because of his not inexhaustible supply of cash, motel rooms will be shared. Humbert also informs Lolita that "for all practical purposes I am your father" (119). Lolita, whose spirit has not yet been broken, cheerfully informs Humbert that the word he is vainly trying to find to describe their situation, is "incest" (119). Just saying the word provokes Lolita to release her "young golden giggle" (119). Lolita may be only twelve years old, but she is not a blank slate. We should ask ourselves if any of our children are.

Humbert is transfixed by this point of juncture which is the exquisite point between knowingness and innocence existing in a kind of fragile equipoise and seen in the exchange discussed above. Humbert is very definite about the precise age of his nymphets who are the sole objects of his desire. Nabokov is also stingingly amusing as he pinpoints Humbert's passion. Notice the first part of the description of nymphets in the following passage from the novel and its tone initially indicative of the dispassionate psychological treatise.

Compare that with the rest of the passage with its words of soaring passion and aching longing.

Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as "nymphets."

It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see "nine" and "fourteen" as the boundaries - the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks - of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea. Between those age limits, are all girl-children nymphets? Of course not. Otherwise, we who are in the know, we lone voyagers, we nympholepts, would have long gone insane. Neither are good looks any criterion; and vulgarity, or at least what a given community terms so, does not necessarily impair certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm that separates the nymphet from such coevals of hers as are incomparably more dependent on the spatial world of synchronous phenomena than on that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes. Within the same age limits the number of true nymphets is strikingly inferior to that of provisionally plain, or just nice, or "cute," or even "sweet" and "attractive,"

ordinary plumpish, formless, cold-skinned, essentially human little girls, with tummies and pigtailed, who may or may not turn into adults of great beauty (look at the ugly dumplings in black stockings and white hats that are metamorphosed into stunning stars of the screen). A normal man given a group photograph of school girls or Girl Scouts and asked to point out the comeliest one will not necessarily choose the nymphet among them. You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!), in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs - the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate - the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; she stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power. (16-17)

This above passage has been included because it is such a crucial one in Lolita. Humbert describes for the uninitiated reader how to discover just who the nymphet is and what this tortured knowing then entails. Humbert alludes to the power held by the nymphet, but tells us that it is he who imbues the nymphet with a certain recognition of that power. In Humbert's schema, it takes the vision of an artist, madman, or the melancholic to magically create this figure of immense power and allure.

Lolita is the adorable repository of Humbert's tortured desire. Nabokov allows his readers to know that she is not a blank slate, yet Humbert is never able to see her except in terms of his own fantasies. Humbert even adores Lolita's crass vulgarities since these are viewed as delectable flaws rendering the possessor ironically more "perfect." Kincaid points to Derrida who located desire in those spaces or gaps and asks "is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes . . . : the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges . . . ; it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance as a disappearance" (31). Humbert, "a creature of infinite melancholy," must convince his readers that what he sees is real and worthy of his secret torment.

Nabokov describes Humbert's tortured gaze while he is plotting his seduction of Lolita at the Enchanted Hunters Inn. Humbert portrays a Lolita who drowsily sits upon the edge of the bed and unknowingly treats Humbert to an extensive show of leg and thigh. Humbert calls this his "hermetic vision of her which I had locked in--after satisfying myself that the door carried no inside bolt" (123). Nabokov's novel is replete with such "hermetic visions" of Lolita because Humbert has confessed that he has made it his life's "work" to know how to look so that he is able to burn certain images upon his mind's eye. Kincaid writes that many pedophiles are poets, but all are photographers (194).

Issues surrounding the child's complicity or non-complicity have been held to be key in current studies about childhood sexual abuse. In a recent study, characteristics of the child and his or her role in the abuse have been examined. In the first half of this century, children who had been sexually abused were thought to have been complicitous in so far as they subconsciously desired some kind of infantile sexual activity (Gomes-Schwartz 16). Recently, studies indicate that "the child's role has been overemphasized largely because of adult sexual fantasies and the attitudes inherent in a male-dominated society" (Gomes-Schwartz 16-17). The characteristics accorded to the sex offender have also undergone a change. The early perception that the sex offender was mentally retarded, senile, or psychotic is not an acceptable one these days (Gomes-Schwartz 17). Instead of a psychotic madman, "most such offenders demonstrate a wide range of character structures, social backgrounds, and levels of psychological functioning" (Gomes-Schwartz 17). Nabokov was well aware of the psychological material devoted to this subject available at the time of his writing. Books having sexual aberrations as their theme were published by the Liveright Publishing Corporation with the explicit and thrilling warning printed on the title page: "The sale of this book is strictly limited to members of the medical profession, Psychoanalysts, Scholars and to such adults who may have a definite position in the field of Psychological or Social Research" (Stekel). Case studies followed where the person being studied would confess his own particular obsessional hobbyhorse. The words of the tortured

are, not surprisingly, much more entertaining than the dry and ponderous tones of the doctor trying to make some rational sense of it all.

Readers of Lolita should not forget that Humbert Humbert's story, told in confessional form, is his own case study delivered in highly parodic terms. Lolita opens with the curious foreword written by John Ray, Ph.D. In it he issues a sly warning and effectively beckons the reader on because in his prefatory words he indicates that the reader will meet "the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac." Ray then writes that these characters are "not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils" (6). Nabokov's fictional John Ray, Jr. tries to persuade us that Lolita is an edifying work and one that "should make all of us--parents, social workers, educators--apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world" (6). Nabokov has taken pains with this foreword and in it laughs at the serious and ponderous tones used by experts in the field of sexual aberration. John Ray/Nabokov, like the crafty pedophile, lures the docile, albeit serious reader in and by so doing, we become complicitous, even appreciative voyeurs. To read Lolita, we suspend our own identities and, in essence, become very willing voyeurs.

For the uninitiated reader or voyeur, Humbert proves to be an eager mentor and is brilliantly forthcoming about his basic maneuvers as he offers us a pedophile's guide book of schools, parks, playgrounds, and pools, where the serious student can gorge upon a scenic feast comprised of frolicking children. Humbert is most interested in establishing a warm rapport with his readers and demands that we see as he sees. What Humbert sees is an alternate view of the quotidian world, and in that world he is on the perpetual hunt for that Derrida-like flash of exposed skin which hints at so much more. What Humbert offers to the reader is an unsettling look at the world and indicates that there is in operation a secret and mystical cabal of the initiated who are able to see the erotic allure where you and I might see only the sweetly adorable. Humbert is convinced that only a few souls are so blessed and

cursed with the power to truly see . . . Humbert is proudly flaunting of his particular burden because in his mind it marks him as a person of a superior kind of knowing.

The dimmest of my pollutive dreams was a thousand times more dazzling than all the adultery the most virile writer of genius or the most talented impotent might imagine. My world was split. I was aware of not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine; both would be termed female by the anatomist. But to me, through the prism of my senses, "they were as different as mist and mast." (18)

Humbert may be as he describes himself, a tortured visionary, but he is sly in his insinuations that he is a superior being who is not content to travel the same sexual course as other men.

This yearning to have others see as Humbert sees is evidently not unique to Nabokov's hero. Howard Hunter, a convicted child molester, seeking to "give back" to the community something of edifying use, has written a book which operates as a warning to society about the machinations of the pedophile and offers resources designed to assist those afflicted. Hunter (Nabokov would have chuckled over the name) has written a chapter about certain scenarios where the molester is able to lure and then secure his prey. He mentions the overnight outing, the neighbor needing chores done in the house, the coach near the shower stall, and the almost infinite variety of possibilities accruing to being near a swimming pool. Hunter describes his penchant for swimming areas and relates how he would suggest to his young "victims" that he hold their suits while they shower. He talks about the "normal natural horseplay" in the pool and admits that he would find every opportunity to "accidentally" "touch the child's private areas whenever possible" (93). Hunter, who is quite detail oriented, discusses the pleasures involved with rubbing on suntan lotion and the post-swim shower (93).

Humbert also adores the opportunities afforded by being in proximity to bodies of water and the barely clad young bodies that are drawn to such. Compared with the earnest account offered by Hunter, Nabokov's prose shimmers with the passionate aim of beckoning the reader into Humbert's mind so that we may see through his eyes. In this passage,

Nabokov begins as he does many times, slowly and with a detached calm. Then, as Humbert's passions take over, the prose becomes ardent, as though the very words are being painfully wrenched from the deepest recesses of Humbert's heart. Humbert mentions that he "freely advocated whenever and wherever possible the use of swimming pools with other girl children" (161). He would sit in his comfortable robe, sometimes with a bag of candy or a book, and always with "tingling glands" and watch his Lolita in the company of other girls. Lolita was described as "rubber capped, bepearled, smoothly tanned, as glad as an ad, in her trim-fitted satin pants and shirred bra" (161). Humbert would then compare Lolita to the other children around her and always Lolita would emerge at the top of Humbert's hierarchy.

Humbert Humbert and Howard Hunter are exploiters of the prosaic situation and they seem to make a mockery of those of us who only perceive children as themselves and not the possessors of acute and bewitching charm. These characters operate between the lines, in the spaces, and at the margins, and they look at the rest of us with ironic pity at our obtuseness. Nabokov's prose makes us call our own actions and our own looking into question by having us delight in Humbert's lush prose. The reader is lured by Humbert and his wicked humor just as his character lures Lolita. As Howard Hunter states, and he should know, "a suspect's mind is constantly, even unconsciously working toward another conquest" (92). As Kincaid indicates in his book, for the pedophile, the game is infinitely variable and infinitely delectable, for delectation is all.

Central also to the pedophile's experience is the naughty subject of spanking and bottoms. James Kincaid indicates that not only does the reddening of bottoms figure largely in the minds of many pedophiles, it is also a potent issue whether acted upon or not in everyone's experience of child rearing. Nabokov's Uncle Ruka not only made him the legatee of his vast estate upon his early death in his late forties, but he also bequeathed another legacy which became, for Nabokov, an early fascination with the popular culture of America. From Speak, Memory, we learn that Nabokov was much taken with certain comic strips where a ritual beating figured prominently for comic intent.

[Uncle Ruka] would solemnly bring me from America the Foxy Grandpa series and Buster Brown--a forgotten boy in a reddish suit: if one looked closely, one could see that color was really a mass of red dots. Every episode ended in a tremendous spanking for Buster, which was administered by his wasp-waisted powerful Ma, who used a slipper, a hairbrush, a brittle umbrella, anything--even the bludgeon of a helpful policeman--and drew puffs of dust from the seat of Buster's pants. Since I had never been spanked, those pictures conveyed to me the impression of strange exotic torture not different from say, the burying of a popeyed wretch up to his chin in the torrid sand of a desert, as represented in the frontispiece of a Mayne Reid book. (69-70).

Kincaid, in his chapter called "The Naughty Child," notes that the connection between sexual excitement and flogging has been documented from the ancients on down (255). He sarcastically notes that in our own day, we are quick to see sexuality in most every human transaction; however, "our culture nonetheless claims that undressing a child and beating it on an erogenous area is benign" (261).

Bottoms and lap-sitting scenes are delectably arrayed for the reader throughout Lolita. Early in the novel, at that point where the reader desires some kind of dramatic crescendo or sign that salaciousness will indeed be proffered, the naughty child, Lolita, plops her legs across Humbert's lap. Humbert does not need much more than this, except time enough to perform his magic. The reader is treated to the sight of Humbert's glorious arousal and like Humbert we are in too deep to look up in horror. Nabokov/Humbert "has us" at that point. Alfred Appel, the annotator of Lolita, rather prissily, asserts that Nabokov took a shocking subject, then makes us sympathetic to Humbert, after which he made us expand our potential for "compassion, and demonstrated that the certainty of our moral feelings is far more tenuous than we ever care to admit" (36). To say this in another way, Nabokov has turned on some of his most gentle readers with the spectacle of a grown-up, hirsute man, rubbing himself against the legs of a twelve-year-old-girl. How wickedly subversive! In that famous early scene, Humbert describes how the pressure on his lap of Lolita's "sunburnt legs" provoked such passion he achieved orgasm or what he calls, "my distant golden goal" (59).

Humbert is perpetually interested in laps and at one point petulantly complains that Lolita, for all she cares, might as well have been sitting upon the handle of an old tennis racket as upon the lap of her adorer. At the end of the novel, when Clare Quilty rears his head more assertively as Humbert's doppelganger and "fellow traveler," Quilty's front end of his red "cod piece" of a car literally nudges the backside of Humbert's (Charlotte's) old Packard all over the map. It should not come as a surprise that at times in the novel, Humbert mistakenly identifies Quilty as his Swiss Uncle Gustave who, Humbert relates, "was also a great admirer of le decouvert" (139).

Humbert uses words of golden and rosy hue, and these are "loaded" words signaling the smarting glow achieved after a paddling. Listen to the words used as Humbert describes the mural he would paint in the dining room of the Enchanted Hunters, where the famous botched and then carried-through seduction took place. The mural is a weird Boschian nightmare of the interior of Humbert's mind or the pedophile's mind:

There would have been a lake. There would have been an arbor in flame flower. There would have been nature studies--a tiger pursuing a bird of paradise, a choking snake sheathing whole the flayed trunk of a shoat. There would have been a sultan, his face expressing great agony (belied, as it were, by his molding caress), helping a callypygean slave child to climb a column of onyx. There would have been those luminous globules of gonadal glow that travel up the opalescent sides of juke boxes. There would have been all kinds of camp activities on the part of the intermediate group, Canoeing, Coranting, Combing Curls in the lakeside sun. There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday. There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child. (134-33)

This business of the wincing child, the stinging, and the smarting, are all images of pain and the delectation of pain.

Kincaid speaks about the erotic nature in pedophilic narrative tales of this reddening of bottoms and writes about this pink glow which is the reward for the momentary inconvenience of the actual spanking (265). He indicates that "this glowing always, in one

way or another, comes into being in these radiant tales, both as a warming reward to the child and also to the adult" (265). Kincaid writes that in pedophilic narratives, the adult who "flushes--glows with excitement as she or he looks on at the blushing--glowing being produced" is in a state of arousal (265). These narratives about spanking are "scarlet-dyed" and "red-saucy" (Kincaid 265).

Humbert is keenly moved by the image of Lolita playing tennis. In one particular scene, Humbert's words are those for whom the lash is significant and alluring. Humbert first describes Lolita's serve as having "beauty, directness, youth, a classical purity of trajectory" and, "despite its spanking pace, fairly easy to return..." (232). Humbert moans that he did not have the foresight to photograph every stroke she made upon the tennis court. At the end of the passage, Humbert, who can recall so precisely these images of Lolita, tells us that "my very loins still tingle with those pistol reports repeated by crisp echoes and Electra's cries..." (232). Nabokov's words, "spanking" and "tingling loins," signify a fascination with the small difference which exists at times between pain and pleasure

Nabokov has turned the aberrant's confessions into art and it is all the more remarkable that he has done so while flagrantly using all of the words and images dear to the pedophile. Through his character, Humbert, we are made to look with his eyes and the reader, too, feasts upon the sight of Lolita. At the end of his masturbation scene, Nabokov describes the aftermath with words like, "glow," "rosy," "gold-dusted," and the sun "pulsated." For Humbert at that point, Lolita had been "safely solipsized," (60) but sadly enough for the reader, she has left the rest of us disquieted and unsure.

In the years since Nabokov's death, heretical questions have been raised and broached publicly about the author's sexual predilections. These questions must have been bandied about since the publication of Lolita, yet Brandon Centerwall notes that it had been "an article of faith" among the 'Nabokovians' and "carefully nurtured by the Master himself" that he was definitely not a pedophile (468). Centerwall is not convinced and offers evidence, which he believes supports his position that Nabokov was indeed a tortured and secret

pedophile. He indicates that if Nabokov had been a pedophile then all of the literary "interpretation predicated upon Nabokov's presumed sexual orthodoxy" may not be correct or satisfactory (468).

Centerwall assures his readers that he is not so limited as to suggest that an author of Nabokov's singular brilliance could not imagine the world of the pedophile sufficiently without sharing in those proclivities himself. He asserts that "Nabokov could easily create a convincing portrait of a pedophile even if he were not one himself" (468). In good postmodern style, Centerwall is impressed by the meanings between the lines on a page and examines the words Nabokov uses to discuss Lolita in his ending note, "On a Book Entitled Lolita." He quotes Nabokov who says, "I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book" (311). Centerwall should ask, what exactly was Nabokov trying to get rid of? Nabokov did seem to be ferociously grappling with this pedophilic theme for years and Centerwall charts Nabokov's earlier attempts to rid himself of this subject's hold via earlier works and autobiography.

Centerwall is right to look suspiciously at Nabokov's estimation of the true beginning of that germ of an idea that turned into Lolita. The sources of Lolita came under critical scrutiny soon after its publication. It is in the more recent criticism where Nabokov's own anecdotes concerning this matter are treated with some suspicion and held up as misleadingly suspect.

Like Centerwall, Anna Ljungren is also fascinated by the origins of Lolita and by Nabokov's less than honest descriptions about original sources of inspiration. She notes that Nabokov describes "somewhat mockingly" that the "first manifestation of this work was an attack of intercoastal neuralgia late in 1939" (199). Ljungren writes that "this account, expressing an Adam-like attitude towards creativity, evades the question of literary sources of this work" (199). The critic/researcher must rely on clues, much as Humbert does when he looks upon all of those enigmatic names devised by Clare Quilty written in the many motel registers, in order to establish the literary sources for Lolita. Nabokov relates in "On a Book Entitled Lolita," that he became fascinated by a brief newspaper account of an ape in a

zoo, who after being taught to draw and given appropriate materials, "drew" the bars of his own cage (311). In Lolita, Humbert frequently alludes to himself as an ape. Ljungren and Centerwall duly note this ape story as one possible inspiration point but indicate that the basic plot of Lolita was written, in attenuated form, in one of Nabokov's earlier works written in Russian in 1935-37 and called The Gift. Ljungren writes that within the pages of The Gift "it is a philistine" character who suggests the following story as a possible subject for a novel" (200):

Ah, if I had a tick or two, what a novel I'd whip off! From real life, imagine this kind of thing: an old dog--but still in his primes, fiery, thirsting for happiness--gets to know a widow, and she has a daughter, still quite a little girl--you know what I mean--when nothing is formed yet, but already she has a way of walking that drives you out of your mind.--A slip of a girl, very fair, pale with blue under the eyes,--and of course she does not even look at the old goat. What to do? Well, not long thinking, he ups and marries the widow. They settle down the three of them. Here you can go on indefinitely--the temptation, the eternal torment, the itch, the mad hopes. And the upshot--a miscalculation. Time flies, he gets older, she blossoms out--and not a sausage. Just goes by and scorches you with a look of contempt. Eh? D'you feel here a kind of Dostoevskian tragedy? (200).

This passage from The Gift and quoted from Ljungren's article has been included because it is important to note just how similar this situation devised much earlier by Nabokov is to his later Lolita. From this initial idea came a reworking, again in Russian, and this time expanded into a novella called Volshebnik (The Enchanter--Centerwall or The Magician--Field) According to Andrew Field, Nabokov was not uneasy about the theme outlined in The Gift, but about the way it was handled. In his novella, Volshebnik, the nymphet is a twelve-year-old French girl, and this, Nabokov told Robbe-Grillet, was the reason the story had not succeeded: he did not know any French children of that age (328). Andrew Field, in his book, Nabokov: His Life in Art, offers his readers significant portions of the text of Volshebnik. In that novella, there is another delectable lap-sitting scene. The words and the

rhapsodic tone of Nabokov's earlier Humbert (the magician-Arthur) bear a striking similarity to those in Lolita.

Unsteady in her drowsiness, she stumbled against the edge of the armchair, and, then, simultaneously sitting down, he drew her to him by encircling her hip; she, arching her body, grew up like an angel, strained all her muscles for a moment, took still another half-step, and then lightly sank down in his lap. "My darling, more poor little girl," he murmured in a sort of general mist of pity, tenderness, and desire, observing her sleepiness, fuzziness, her wan smile, fondling her through her dark dress, feeling the stripe of the orphan's garter through its thin wool, thinking about her defenselessness, her state of abandonment, her warmth, enjoying the animated weight of her legs which sprawled loose and then again, with an ever so light bodily rustle, hunched themselves up higher--and she slowly wound one dreamy tight-sleeved arm around the back of his neck, immersing him in the chestnut odor of her soft hair. (329)

This passage was included because it is so similar to the lap-sitting scene in Lolita, which is much more well-known. The scene described above is replete with words of longing and the ache of nostalgia. The seduction scene from Volshhebnik is a visual or cinematic spectacle and one where the reader can easily conjure up the image of the young girl's tightly fitting sleeve and soft hair. In order for his American Lolita to be even more lifelike, Nabokov, pursued his "scholarly research" with zest. He told a reporter in Ithaca that he took many bus rides in order to listen to the patter of school-girls and there he took "note of the peculiarities and character of American teenage jargon" (Field 328). Some research is indeed a labor of love!

It is important to remember here that at the time of Lolita's publication in the mid fifties, Nabokov's novels in Russian were virtually inaccessible to most Americans. Ljungren, for one, attributes no sinister motivation to Nabokov for less than fully coming forth with every scrap about Lolita's patrimony. Centerwall is not so charitable and believes Nabokov deliberately tried to hide his particular interest in this pedophilic/incestuous story by trying to gloss over his repetitious use of the theme in earlier works..

Brandon Centerwall, in his article with the amusing title, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Nabokov and Pedophilia," writes that the time for circumspection and nicety is over. In our meanly spirited age of "outings" and the elevation of nearly everyone at one time or another to the realm of celebrity status, it seems nobody is really safe anymore from prying eyes. Furthermore, Centerwall believes the establishment of Nabokov's sexual persona is not to be done in order to slake the thirst for gossip, but to look anew at certain positions held about Nabokov's literary work, most particularly about Lolita. Centerwall writes that if Lolita embodies the author's hopeless desire for forbidden fruit, then the text itself will be invested with its true tragic meaning. Centerwall seeks to give voice to Lolita's "strangled rage" and deems his intrusion upon Nabokov's closely guarded private life justified as decent scholarship (468). In Nabokov's Strong Opinions, Nabokov demurely states that Lolita did not have an original and about how she was completely made up from composite fragments of many children. He writes: "She was born in my own mind. She never existed. As a matter of fact, I don't know little girls very well. When I considered this subject, I don't think I knew a single little girl. I've met them socially now and then, but Lolita is a figment of my imagination" (16). Nabokov's research on school buses has previously been mentioned, but he also posed as a parent of a prospective student at a girls' school and painstakingly recorded the various heights and weights of a sampling of adolescent girls at different junctures along the path to maturity. In Brian Boyd's biography of Nabokov, there is a picture of one of these index-card charts. What may have appeared as a bit of authorial flotsam and jetsam now appears somewhat unsettling in our current climate. It is difficult to pick up a daily newspaper or listen to a news report without reading or hearing about child molestation. Today, teachers are being told to "teach, don't touch," and anyone who works with children wonders when an innocuous gesture may be misconstrued by someone as a "bad touch." Today, one's exalted gaze would be enough to set off the alarm.

Nabokov stated clearly that he wrote to be "rid" of something and Centerwall wonders why, with so much repetitious working out of the theme of child-loving, was Nabokov so

unsuccessful at doing so. Michael Wood, writing about Lolita, alludes to Nabokov's interest in the "aberrant" aspect of the human psyche which appears to be titillatingly close to what would be deemed "normal." Wood writes that Lolita was "written out of the obscure and continuing interest in deviance that fuels all of Nabokov's best fiction" (39).

Wood states that Lolita was a work Nabokov "thought no one would read and that he might himself never be able to acknowledge" but that it brought him "international fame and a considerable fortune" (39). What is indeed interesting about the success of Lolita is that as Wood states, it is "now a classic" and "so respectable that casual readers have to be reminded to be shocked" (39). Wood may be correct about the reading public no longer being shocked about incest or childhood sexuality, but it would be difficult to imagine new readers of Lolita finding Humbert at all amusing.

Centerwall points to clues strewn about by Nabokov indicating his affinity with Humbert. He believes the use of the double name, "Humbert Humbert," indicates Nabokov's own, Vladimir Vladimirovich to be the best, most striking example of this. According to Centerwall, Nabokov, via Lolita, has implicated himself as being personally involved with the same desires as Humbert Humbert. In an attempt to out-Nabokov Nabokov (a decidedly risky venture), Centerwall uses some amusing sophistry to link Humbert's assertion that only one who has succumbed to the perilous magic of nymphets can one "know" one, to a remark made by Nabokov. He points to Nabokov's casual ruminations about the type of actress to play Lolita in the filmed version of the novel. Centerwall writes:

Nabokov remarks that when he met the young actresses who aspired to the role of Lolita he felt that Sue Lyon was a "nymphet" whereas Tuesday Weld was not. On what basis could Nabokov render such a judgment unless he did perceive Lyon to be a nymphet and Weld not; that is, because he was a pedophile? (469-70)

Humbert fixes precisely the boundaries of nymphethood and proclaims that only the "initiated" are able to perceive their devilish charm. According to Centerwall's thesis, Nabokov all but admits that he is a fellow-sufferer when he ticks off the nymphic charms of one actress while declaring another toothsome beauty to possess none. With a writer as

supremely aware as Nabokov was about everything he said and wrote, this "evidence" of Centerwall's appears less than satisfactory. It is one of the tenets of this thesis that Lolita and her nymphic charms tapped neatly into our American psyche. After reading Humbert's description of a nymph, are there many who could resist making the delicious distinctions set forth by Humbert? Perhaps, Nabokov did slip and implicate himself, but he would not be alone. Today, the fashionable image that is enjoying huge success as indicated by its emulation among too many young women is the "look" of the too-slender, waiflike girl-child with the hauntingly empty eyes. We all know, even if we cannot admit to ourselves that we do know, what Nabokov was talking about.

Besides the fashion industry, we also get our thrills by the staging and spectacle of courtroom trials. Nabokov has delivered for us, his breathless readers, an unreliable narrator Humbert, who is assiduously pleading his case before a jury. Humbert can be viewed as possessing some measure of cultural prescience, and the reader is implicated by the sympathetic attention given to Humbert's carefully crafted confessions. Kincaid writes that today, through the trials of those accused of child molestation, we are using "our legal system to provide us with access to these guilt-free forms of scape-goating pornography" (341). Kincaid, like Nabokov before him, is onto something. Kincaid says that we, in our society, are "creating gothic melodramas, monster stories of child-molesting and playing them out periodically (often), we provide not just titillation but assurances of righteousness" (341). We do not want Humbert's pleading to the jury to be over; we want more. About our current times, Kincaid writes that we want these contemporary trials not to be over, nor do we want to gain some kind of satisfaction that justice or truth has been served through them. He writes that "we do not want it all to be over with, and these trials perpetuate themselves in order to keep our needs and desires coursing along" (Kincaid 341). Perhaps Nabokov did thrill to Humbert's working out of his own morality play, but what about the rest of us?

Humbert makes us question our own tastes as he makes his case for his particular brand of desire. Kincaid writes that the prose and poetry emanating from the pedophilic

experience tends to emphasize the fastidiousness of it all. Pedophiles often make the claim that what they thrill to is a superior refinement. "Disdaining the ordinary close connection of the sexual and the animal (hair, sweat, smell), the pedophile implicitly accuses us of being swinish in our tastes and practices" (194-95). The image of the child in pedophilia as sweet and fresh as a spring morning serves as "a reproach, however absurd, to conventional behavior" (Kincaid 195). Kincaid writes that the pedophile "somehow manages this half-subversive positioning, and puts forward this nagging and preposterous claim that it is (we) who are defiled" (195).

Nabokov's Uncle Ruka and his penchant for the darling boy of eight or nine most probably does resonate throughout Nabokov's life and work. Centerwall believes Nabokov's own molestation at the hands of his uncle necessitated the adult Nabokov's having to "get rid" of this aspect of his past. Lolita is more than some attempt at writing therapy and the cast of its characters decidedly more complex. However, Centerwall's attempt to "break" the personal code in Lolita is a justified response to the system of lures and traps set out for the reader by Nabokov. The reader of Lolita should not be satisfied with the too-obvious. Nabokov and Humbert are not one and the same for that would indeed be too simple.

Lolita does employ autobiographical elements and this should inform our reading of the work. Moreover, what has changed dramatically in the years since the publication of Lolita is our fascination with everything associated with childhood. We are, more and more, child oriented and yet, we show the strains of ambivalence in our neglect and mistreatment of many of our nation's children. Our culture is becoming more and more bifurcated, with some children growing up in extraordinarily nurturing (or so we think) environments, while the rest of the children fear every day for their lives in their rotten neighborhoods. As parents, we are nostalgic in advance, thinking all the time of years ahead when our children will be grown into adults with all of their many grown-up imperfections. We are sad because they will grow up and become no better or even no worse than their parents. We

store up our memories and take our Kodak pictures so that we will be able to convince ourselves we have nothing to regret.

At the poignant end of the novel, Humbert declares his love for Lolita.

. . . and there she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her gooseflesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits, there she was (my Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby, dreaming already in her of becoming a big shot and retiring around 2020 A.D.--and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. (277)

Instead of suggesting that Nabokov and Humbert are one and the same or that Humbert's confession of a deeper and more mature love is an emotional epiphany, the scene can be read as the artist finally finding his own aging self acceptable and inherently lovable.

Lolita is a novel of the fun-house where the mirrors show shifting images. Lolita, Humbert, and Quilty all prismatically represent aspects of Nabokov's life and Nabokov, the artist, can easily imagine it all. It is too neatly facile to state, as Centerwall does, that by virtue of the fact of what Nabokov leaves unsaid, all signs indicate a tortured secret life. Nabokov probably did have his secrets. However, Humbert's confession of love for the "elderly" seventeen-year-old Lolita, along with the fact that the reader finds the confession plausible, means that Nabokov has magnificently succeeded. He has succeeded by virtue of the fact that we have followed where he beckoned, and believe if only for the time spent with the book, Humbert's famous maxim that "sex is but the ancilla of art." (Lolita 259).

Chapter 2

Poe and Lolita

Who are the great American writers you most admire?

When I was young I liked Poe, and I still love Melville, whom I did not read as a boy...
(Strong Opinions, 64)

You have often expressed your hostility to Freud, most noticeably in the forewords to your translated novels. Some readers have wondered which of Freud's works or theories you were most offended by and why. The parodies of Freud in Lolita and Pale Fire suggest of [a] wider familiarity with the good doctor than you have ever publicly granted. Would you comment on this?

Oh, I am not up to discussing again that figure of fun. He is not worthy of more attention than I have granted him in my novels and in Speak, Memory. Let the credulous and the vulgar continue to believe that all mental woes can be cured by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts. I really do not care. . .

(Strong Opinions, 66)

In the first chapter there was a lengthy discussion about Lolita being for Nabokov, a deeply personal novel. Because of this, it may appear curious that so much of Lolita is framed by Nabokov's elaborate use of allusions to the life and work of the American writer, Edgar Allan Poe. In this chapter, not only will these allusions be discussed, but there will be an attempt to discern why Poe's work was chosen by Nabokov to figure so prominently in his novel. Elizabeth Phillips, in a paper called, "The Hocus-Pocus of Lolita," believes that Lolita is a satirical study of the "orthodox Freudian view of the life and writings" of Poe, about which Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalytical study is probably the best known. With

great relish, Nabokov punctures Freudian notions about the importance of scenes witnessed as a very young child becoming, for the adult, the veritable fount of all creative and passionate inspiration. In Lolita, Nabokov exposes the ridiculousness of applying Freudian tenets too literally by using what we all seem to know about Poe's life and reputation and then by having "Poe's syndrome" applied to Humbert. The effect of this in the novel is distinctly comic. Humbert clearly sees himself in Poe-like terms, and diction imitates closely the style of Poe's short-story character, William Wilson. This use of language by Poe and Nabokov will be examined in the second portion of this chapter as it relates to Lolita and to Poe's doppelganger tale of good versus evil. It could be easily argued that we create ourselves through our use of language. Nabokov, the polyglot, was supremely aware of the importance of using words to literally call a thing into being, e.g. to create its identity. The third section of this chapter will have to do with the crafting of an American identity. Many of us are eager to say just what it is that Lolita is "about," and while it is impossible to say it is about any one thing, the novel deals extensively with the way we create ourselves and the world around us. It is my belief that, contrary to what Nabokov stated in his afterword about Lolita being a celebration of an American identity, it is, rather, the reverse. Lolita is, at best, a cynical view of our country where a certain child-like optimism about having it within our power to create ourselves anew, remains, even for us today, one of our most cherished if misplaced characteristics. There is something unseemly and "un-American" at the heart of Poe's writing, just as there is at the core of Lolita. In America, many of us like to believe in the inherent perfectability of humankind and about there being an intrinsic moral code guiding our actions. Poe, on the other hand, appears altogether convinced that human action is governed often by the malevolent urgings of the imp of the perverse.

One of the many problems which arise from this puzzling book concerns the way Nabokov wanted Lolita to be read. Where does the reader actually begin to read Lolita and what should we, his readers, think about the extent of his authorial control over us? Nabokov's desire for firm control of his readers' experiences with his text is an important

issue in this second chapter. It will be argued that, as he did for his characters, Nabokov carefully constructed his own character through written interviews and memoirs, and offered to the public only those words that had been meticulously thought out and superbly sculpted. Geoffrey Green in his book, Freud and Nabokov, discusses Nabokov's public persona shown to us through writing done in "his own voice" and explores how willing we have been as his readers to read "him" the way he wished we would. Green quotes Roland Barthes about the "father" or author of a text becoming a "paper author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work" (4). It is true that Nabokov took great pains to create himself as a character and we see in his afterword and in Strong Opinions that he was most eager for his public not to view him as Humbert's double. By focusing so much upon Poe and his tortured reputation, Nabokov, in effect, warns those readers who would simplistically assume that Lolita is autobiographical.

In the case of Lolita, Nabokov used the life and works of Edgar Allan Poe to frame his elaborate argument illustrating the futility of knowing anything resembling the truth about anyone's emotions or motivations. Nabokov's particular hatred of Freudian beliefs about the root causes of human psychopathology is well-known and comically underscored by Nabokov's use of Poe's psychoanalyzed life as the basis for Lolita. Further, it is my belief that Poe's reputation has, in essence, become very much part of what it means to "read" anything by him. Now, what we know about Poe infuses every word, every story, and every poem with certain meanings that were not controllable by Poe. It is the contention of this thesis that Poe's reputation has become, in effect, another "Poe text." For Nabokov, to be pinned down like one of his precious butterflies for clumsy psychological examination was utterly insupportable. Nabokov knew what the psychoanalysts had done to Poe, and Lolita can be viewed, in part, as Nabokov's way of preventing that same reductionistic gaze being cast upon himself or his work.

Edgar Allan Poe's problematic reputation received a boost when psychoanalysis gripped the imagination. It is well-known that the early years of the twentieth century

marked the intense rise in interest about the psychology of the self. Poe's writing with wildly imagined scenes of horror, premature burials, bloodied shrouds, bricked up victims, wildly thumping hearts, eerily beautiful women, and coldly calculating protagonists emerged as a suitable psychological smorgasbord for literary and psychological critics of the period.

Poe, the man, and his first-person narrators have coalesced so that they have formed one entity with each part inseparable from the others. Daniel Hoffman writes that psychoanalytic critics like Joseph Wood Krutch and Marie Bonaparte considered Poe, based upon his writings and some aspects of his personal life, to be psychotic (157). D. H. Lawrence, no stranger himself to overheated themes and treatments, wrote about Poe in a way that seemed to mirror Poe's use of a chain of logical premises leading to a conclusion elaborately worked out beforehand. Regarding Poe, he writes that all living organisms only live through contact with other living matter (112). He then states "each individual organism is vivified by intimate contact with fellow organisms: up to a certain point" (112). From this about the sacred and profane nature of love, Lawrence then extrapolates about the mingling of the two blood systems and the resulting pure moment when there is fusion between the male and female. He writes that Poe had "experienced the ecstasies of extreme spiritual love," and that once Poe had had such experiences, "he wanted those ecstasies and nothing but those ecstasies" (113). Lawrence contends that Poe wanted more than the simply physical and demanded a spiritual union with another: "He wanted that great gratification, the sense of flowing, the sense of unison, the sense of heightening of life. He had experienced this gratification. He was told on every hand that this ecstasy of spiritual, nervous love with the greatest thing in life, was life itself" (113). Lawrence ended his essay about Poe by issuing a warning about the inherent falseness of art which seems particularly apt in a paper about Lolita: "He [Poe] was an adventurer into vaults and cellars and horrible underground passages of the human soul. He sounded the horror and the warning of his own doom" (126). According to Lawrence, Poe was "doomed" and died wanting more love (126). Love is called a "ghastly disease" and Lawrence reminds us that Poe tried to make his

disease "fair and attractive" and succeeded and that this attractiveness is the "inevitable falseness, duplicity of art, American art in particular" (126). Poe could be considered successful because of his prodigious output and his ability to create lasting images of beauty. Lawrence's statement with its fevered pitch echoes the nature of Poe's writing and shows how closely linked were Poe's life and his written work. This description of Poe written by Lawrence was included because even as astute a reader as Lawrence was, he too assumes that Poe and his narrators are one and the same. Poe and his literary reputation hovers over every page of Lolita. Nabokov does not want his own readers to convince themselves that he is writing autobiographically through Humbert's fictional diary.

It is Marie Bonaparte's central thesis, based upon Freudian analysis, that Poe's mother's early death left such an aching void in his life that Poe was forever "fixated" on her. Bonaparte writes that "Poe had been doomed by fate to live in constant mourning" (83). She writes further that Poe's "fixation on a dead mother was to bar him forever from earthly love, and make him shun health and vitality in his loved ones" (83). About Poe's "repetition compulsion" Bonaparte writes that the early deaths of the most important women in his life "assumed for Poe the semblance of a fate imposed by destiny; a fate which, one by one, in similar though varied fashion, stole his "mothers" (44). She sees telling repetition in his themes and believes these are manifestations of the personal losses Poe suffered:

Time and again we find the same manifest situation, that of some ideal woman who sickens and dies, yet does not really die, since she lives on in unearthly radiance, putrescent and ethereal at one and the same time. Always and forever it is the same latent theme: that of Elizabeth Arnold's last agony and death--repeated in later years in little Virginia's agony and death. (Carlson, 175)

Poe, in his "Philosophy of Composition," states clearly that the most poetic topic in the world is the death of a beautiful woman. Bonaparte believes that Poe worked again and again using this philosophy because in infancy he "had seen his real and dearly loved mother, beautiful and young, on her death-bed" and that he was "to retain that vision deep in his unconscious as the criterion of all beauty and art" (45). Nabokov, who detested this type

of Freudian-based solution to the mystery which is character and personality, saw in these armchair diagnoses given to Poe, a laughable vulgarity.

Phillips states that Nabokov was well aware of Poe's reputation derived from his obsession-marked writing and she believes Lolita is a mocking parody of such Freudian-based tenets. It has been well established that Nabokov's statement about the "first throb" of an idea for Lolita came about after reading a newspaper account about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Phillips is right to point out that this "ape tale" is an allusion to Poe's short-story, "Murders in the Rue Morgue," a tale featuring both an escaped ape and the Jardin des Plantes. According to Marie Bonaparte, in her study of Poe's life and work, the ape represents, as it does for many children, a bestial father figure (Phillips 97). Readers of Lolita know that Humbert often alludes to himself as hirsute and ape-like. In fact, Humbert so frequently alludes to himself as being a gorilla-like monster, that it is disconcerting to be reminded (as Humbert does occasionally for us) that he is a very attractive man. Symbols used in Lolita and in Nabokov's afterword are not written as ominous portent but are used to poke fun at the overly credulous. Therefore, the novel and its curious afterword (written in Nabokov's own voice) becomes an elaborate system of snares and red-herrings designed to lure and then thwart the amateur psychologist.

The first chapter of Lolita, a mere half-page of prose, sets the psychic scene for the reader. "Lo. Lee. Ta. " (9). Humbert seems to be savoring, like a taste of marvelous wine, the name of his beloved. However, he will not offer Lolita fully to the reader until he tells us, in his homage to Poe, about Lolita's precursor, "a certain initial girl-child. In a principdom by the sea" (9). She is named, fittingly enough, Annabel Leigh after Poe's famous poetic heroine. The narrator and Annabel Lee in Poe's poem are envied by the angels for the purity and completeness of their love and it is the nature of this perfect love which becomes the reason why Poe's Annabel had to die. Humbert asks the jury to look at what the "misinformed," "simple," "noble-winged seraphs envied" between him and Lolita and states that all they will find in his story would be a "tangle of thorns" (9).

Humbert, before his "fall" into the traps of adulthood, describes himself in childhood as "happy," "healthy," and at home in a "bright world of illustrated books, clean sand, orange trees, friendly dogs, sea vistas and smiling faces" (10). Except for the freak accident "(picnic, lightning)," of his mother, Humbert paints his past in idyllic terms and there is nothing in his initial description of his early childhood indicating the tortured and obsessive thoughts which later plague him. The reader should note Humbert's hilariously succinct description of his mother's violent demise and this brevity is in distinct contrast to Humbert's usual florid style. This comic undercutting of what is usually thought to be a pivotal moment in one's life, namely the death of a beloved parent, is another indication of Nabokov's derision about all things Freudian. Humbert's description of his first love, Annabel, and their time together is a comedian's dream filled with exaggerated symbolism. Humbert describes how he and Annabel would sit together on the beach and there she would let the grains of sand sift through her fingers, signaling the passage of cruel time. Together they would contemplate their futures--Annabel wanted to be a nurse in some "famished Asiatic country" and Humbert wanted to be, fittingly enough, a spy. Apropos of innocent childhood, Humbert tells us that he and Annabel were so exquisitely sensitive in a special European way, that "the softness and fragility of baby animals caused us the same intense pain" (12). Humbert and Annabel fall "madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other" (12). If they had been able to "mate as slum children" Humbert argues, his tortured adult predilections might have been averted. As he is thwarted in his early attempts to snare Lolita, Humbert cannot find sufficient privacy to fully enjoy his Annabel. He and Annabel do manage to engage in "a brief session of avid caresses," and are witnessed only by "somebody's lost pair of sunglasses" (13). At the point when victory was almost at hand, the two child/lovers are spied by two "bearded bathers" who shout their "ribald encouragement" (13). Humbert's abrupt and dispassionate accounting of Annabel's eventual fate hilariously punctures his earlier and more exalted prose-style, and the reader is told curtly of Annabel's untimely death four months later. Humbert then becomes his own

analyst and with his memories of Annabel Leigh, he charts his "cravings, motives and actions" and convinces himself that "in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel" (14).

It was shown how Nabokov uses his brilliant humor in the first pages of Lolita to dismiss Freud and to make a mockery of how the Freudians had treated Poe. However, Nabokov's loathing of what had been done to Poe and his life is more than implied in the first pages of Speak, Memory. Nabokov calls Freud's world, "vulgar," "shabby," and "fundamentally medieval" and rejects Freud and his sexual symbols "completely" (20). He calls those scholars trying to ferret "Baconian acrostics" in Shakespeare's works, "bitter little embryos spying, from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents" (Speak, Memory 20). In Nabokov's scheme, it is most fitting that Humbert, not the most sterling of characters, sees himself as a helpless victim; one who has no choice but to follow his predestined path after having experienced perfection at such a young and impressionable age.

Humbert, the believer in reductionistic systems, does something truly horrible--more wrenching than the sexual act between a grown man and a young girl. Humbert allowed only his own, completely selfish reality to shape his and Lolita's world and, admitted at the end of the novel, that he never really knew Lolita at all. Humbert happens to overhear Lolita talking to one of her few allowed friends (another nymphet): "the dreadful thing about dying is that you are completely on your own" (284). This poignant insight of Lolita's causes Humbert to realize that he "simply did not know a thing" about his "darling's mind" (284). Only at that moment could he even entertain the notion that "behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate. . . regions absolutely forbidden to me . . ." (284). Humbert is able to perceive only himself and his needs, and he thereby reduces everything around him to the barest of essences whose reality is acknowledged when Humbert experiences fear, antipathy, or sexual arousal. By reducing everyone around him, Humbert's reality becomes a madman's and only when it is too late to

have real regret is Humbert able to feel something akin to compassion, "oh, my poor, bruised child" (284).

Nabokov pleads his own case against falling prey to reductionistic thought in Speak, Memory when he writes of his first sentient moments. He describes for us the moment when consciousness emerges for him as he comes to an understanding of the fluidity and arbitrariness of time. Nabokov realizes, as a four-year-old child, that others' lives, and not just his own, are being lived in time's overarching element. Nabokov paints a picture of himself as a child holding the hands of both parents, and learns on this day, his own birthday, their ages. He comes to know something that seems to the four-year-old child to be a remarkable thing: his mother is twenty-seven and his father, thirty-three. At that precise moment, Nabokov marks the beginning of thought, which as it must be for all of us, thought allied with memory. Nabokov knew at that precise moment it was the idea of time that must be understood. Writing of this moment later, Nabokov uses words of epiphany:

I felt myself plunged abruptly into a radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time. One shared it--just as excited bathers share shining seawater--with creatures that were not oneself but that were joined to one by time's common flow, an environment quite different from the spatial world, which not only man but apes and butterflies can perceive. (21-2)

Time's appalling ironies for Nabokov produce no horror but a feeling of being uniquely linked to all that is around him. Humbert, however, wishes to stop time, to take his mental photographs of his adored Lolita, and sees only a narrow sort of beauty which blooms for a brief moment and then is no more. Nabokov writes this and yet wants his readers to know what he is trying to make us see should not be limited or held up for scrutiny and then made to fit some structure or formulaic thought.

Again, in Speak, Memory, Nabokov describes the uneasiness engendered in a close friend after seeing home-made movies taken immediately prior to his friend's birth. As a young child watching the film, his friend was hurt because he was literally not in the picture and because the cradle being made ready for the imminent arrival of the new baby seemed

not like the pristine bed for an infant but a coffin. Nabokov found this anecdote compelling and writes that he is not concerned with the void which begins and ends all life, but with the imaginative center which enables us to live in our lives and not succumb to madness born of the unknowability of life's meaning. For Humbert this imaginative center is the ability to create language, and this sets him apart from the other characters in the novel.

Poe's narrators also seek to create through language objects of timeless beauty. Poe's collection of women with their euphonious names merge in one's mind. Berenice had the teeth, Ligeia, the eyes, Eleonora, dwelt in the edenic world of the Valley of the Many Colored Grass, and Annabel lived only to love and be loved by the "lucky" narrator. Poe's women are evocative for their portrayal of deep desire and this desire goes beyond the sexual or erotic. These brilliant women engender in Poe's narrators the intense yearning for complete connection with some one or thing other than oneself. Poe's women, because they cannot exist in "real" time must always die. Humbert's darling, Lolita, will only be beautiful for a heartbreakingly short period of time and she too must die. Time for Poe and for Humbert is beauty's nemesis, and only through verbal photographs can the artist freeze the moment so that the past is rendered more touchingly and nostalgically lovely.

Poe's stories also show a willingness on the author's part to explore the world of doubles. Many of Poe's lovers are related in some way and look alike, with "William Wilson" being the most obvious of Poe's doppelganger tales. Doubles abound in Lolita as well. The running joke in Lolita has hapless Humbert confusing the ever-present Quilty with his lecherous Swiss uncle, so Humbert is never able to "truly" see or recognize Quilty as his own double. According to Green's thesis, Freud plays a large part in Nabokov's doppelganger tales, and Green posits that Freud is the foil against which Nabokov sets himself. In Lolita, Freud as narrative foil operates at one remove through the psychoanalyzed persona of Edgar Allan Poe. By making Humbert the willing victim of psychoanalytic thought, Nabokov exposes the overheated tone of the narratives that have come to be seen as the last word about Poe's personal reputation. Nabokov seems to be

saying with Lolita that it is too pathetically simple to look for root causes for one's obsessions, and the artistic working out of such obsessions should be the only thing that matters.

The temptation to analyze Poe through his characters is potent enough and the same could easily be said about Nabokov. Poe's women, as Camille Paglia writes, "have many names, but there is only one narrative, one voice" (573). Poe's major women, Berenice, Ligeia, and Morella, are "tall, beautiful, and strangely erudite" and through their artistic rendering, Poe demands "overt male subjection to female power" (Paglia 573). As we find with Lolita, there is no vulgarly written treatment of sex in Poe, and Paglia is right when she states that the erotic in Poe rests with the "paroxysms of suffering, the ecstatic, self-inflaming surrender to tyrant mothers" (573). Poe's narrators want the ultimate connection that goes beyond a sexual one; "Poe dreams of male eclipse by a muse-like female mind" (Paglia 573). Marie Bonaparte, who says that everything for Poe and his writing stems from the effect of losing his beautiful mother, essentially flattens Poe's words or at least robs them of their potency through such strict adherence to her notions of Freudian cause and effect.

Like Humbert, Poe's narrators are not concerned with "real women," and they experience women as simulacra who emerge as figures of pure and projected desire. Unlike Poe's narrators, however, Humbert cares nothing about connecting with another person on an exalted or intellectual plane. On the contrary, he is only interested in moments when he is able to secure Lolita for his personal delectation. Humbert tells us that he loves Lolita, and yet what he loves is the image of her he has projected from his tortured mind. He is narcissistically in love with the workings of his own mind.

Poe is well-known for his ghostly tales and we know that the female heroines of these tales must die, but these thrilling women come back to haunt Poe's heroes. Lolita too is a ghost story, for we must never forget fictional John Ray and his foreword to Lolita in which he discusses the untimely fate of the main characters in the novel to follow. Before the information given to the reader has had a chance to acquire any significant meaning, we

learn that Humbert has died in "legal captivity," fittingly enough, of a heart attack and Mrs. Richard F. Schiller died after giving birth, even more significantly, to a stillborn girl. One has to read the end of the novel to learn that Schiller becomes Lolita's married name. Nabokov's clues oblige the careful reader to retrace many steps or, in essence, come full circle. The reader, like Nabokov's characters, never knows the full story and therein lies much of the tantalization of the tale.

Lolita as a ghostly tale differs dramatically from those written by Poe since what Nabokov has written is an elaborate satire based largely upon Poe's work and reputation. Dr. Ray's foreword states that Lolita could be viewed as a cautionary tale designed to assist parents, teachers, and social workers guard against similar fates befalling other hapless "victims." It is also a cautionary tale in a manner Nabokov does not overtly address. Nabokov, through his character Humbert, dares the reader to find those certain keys or clues to the author's own psyche, while all the time, Nabokov has given thought to every angle, holds up every argument for scrutiny, and makes them seem unsatisfactorily facile.

Geoffrey Green, in Freud and Nabokov writes that not only did Nabokov carefully control the destinies of his characters, he also created his own public persona through his memoirs and extensive interviews. Green believes that only rarely in "modern literature can we find an example of an author so zealously and frequently commenting in interviews on a private life that he believes to be uninteresting" (21). Nabokov, like his character Humbert, states many times in various interviews that he really knew very few young girls and Nabokov even takes great pains to tell his reading public that his habits are most regular and even boring. Green writes that Nabokov seized on what Freud described as the "ideal fiction" which is "a normal ego," and this was done in "dreary opposition to the brilliant inventiveness in the novels" (22). Nabokov was masterful in his control of the interview process and insisted that all questions be submitted to him in written form and he would then write back to the interviewer with his responses. Nabokov's interviews seem to be the transcribed conversation between two people, but as Green points out, this is a fiction.

Nabokov tightly held on to the reins of his interviews and artfully rendered his responses in order that they had the sound of extemporaneous speech. It is Green's belief that through Nabokov's interviews, the author was constructing a fictive version of himself (38). "He crafted the image of himself in his interviews as he would a fictional character" (38). Green points back to Freud who said that he was only able to analyze himself "with the help of knowledge obtained objectively (like an outsider)" (Green 36). Freud, in essence, is saying here that we must "cultivate (or contrive) an objective self in order to come to know one's subjective self" (Green 36).

This idea of seeing "like an outsider" in order to know "what is inside" has significance in this study of Lolita. Nabokov did give many of his own personal characteristics to his character, Humbert and Humbert is also very much akin (in diction, in obsessional thought patterns) to Poe's narrators, and these narrators have been assumed to be extensions of Poe himself. Undergirding these multiple layers of identities would be Poe's ghost in the form of his lurid reputation, which resembles Quilty in the murder scene. Quilty, who keeps popping back up after being brutally shot, is much like Poe's troubled reputation which bangs upon the mausoleum door, takes on different shapes, and refuses to die. Green's thesis is such that, in Nabokov's world of doubles and doppelganger tales, "there is still another figure lurking behind all these doubles: the figure of Sigmund Freud" (77). Nabokov achieved a "link" with Freud because of his relentless attacks upon the "father of psychoanalysis." Green writes that Nabokov "insured that whenever his name was mentioned, it would conjure up the epithet, "he who hated Freud" (78). Nabokov's repeated denunciations of Freud seem to be more the the product of Nabokov's derision produced by the simplistic applications of Freud's work by analysts and literary critics. It could easily be argued that Nabokov's celebrated antipathy to Freud was positive proof of Nabokov's profound discomfort with Freud's work. Nabokov's heated denials of Freud's power and his lengthy, novel-long diatribe against Freud in Lolita could indicate that Nabokov believed Freud may have come alarmingly close to certain truths about the human psyche. Poe and his personal

reputation which had been given the imprimatur of objective and scientific fact based upon Freudian precepts, gives even more power to Green's observations about Lolita's author. "To ban Freud so vociferously is to give him substance, thing-ness, within Nabokov's world of textual things" (Green, 79). Poe, as the exemplar of what it means to have been reduced to a Freudian pulp, is the figure lurking on every page of Lolita.

Related to this are Shoshana Felman's words about the nature of the scholarship devoted to Poe. She notes that no poet "has been as highly acclaimed and, at the same time, as violently disclaimed as Edgar Allan Poe" (119). She believes Poe remains the "most controversial figure on the American literary scene" and states further that he may be the "most thoroughly misunderstood of all American writers" (119). Felman notes the contradictions and heated disagreements abounding in the scholarship devoted to Poe's work and writes about this: "It is my contention that this critical disagreement is itself symptomatic of a poetic effect, and that the critical contradictions to which Poe's poetry has given rise are themselves indirectly significant of the nature of poetry" (119). As we must for Nabokov, we must also tread carefully around Poe. Nabokov does not want to be "known" through his work and as for Poe, we must remember the Montresors' coat of arms in his tale, "The Cask of Amontillado," described as "a huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel" (276). For both Poe and Nabokov, the golden foot could represent their literary critics and biographers and the two writers could be seen in the serpent's role, with their teeth biting into their critic's heels.

Noting only the allusions to Poe in Lolita, while important, misses the point somewhat. The language is the first and foremost of importance in Lolita and there we should see another real influence of Poe upon this novel. Nabokov has aped Poe closely so that Humbert's style closely matches the style of Poe's first-person narrators, particularly William Wilson's. An examination of Poe's story, "William Wilson" will underscore how closely Humbert's recital of his background and education resembles Wilson's. Much has been

made about the murder scene between Quilty and Humbert as being a parody of the death scene between the two Wilsons, but less has been written about the similarities found in Poe's language and in Humbert's.

Poe's double tale, "William Wilson," becomes hilariously transformed by Nabokov's Humbert Humbert. Poe's narrator unsettles the reader, "let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson" (626). Humbert too has great fun in changing his name--often adding an Edgar when it suits him. Nabokov also toys with everyone else in the novel who can't seem to get Humbert's name right--Humbird, Humburg, Hummer, Hummerson are some of the variations upon a theme. In "William Wilson" and Lolita, identities shift and merge when it suits the main characters. Names or the act of naming gives the illusion, at least, that we are in control, and yet the narrator in Poe's story and Humbert in Lolita play with and change their names. The reader should remember that Lolita herself is known by a variety of names: Dolores, Lo, Dolly, and Mrs. Schiller. Humbert is fascinated by these variations and is thrilled to see the innocent "Dolores Haze" situated in alphabetical order in a list of Lolita's classmates. Nabokov delights in verbal punning and it is through his use of names, e.g. Rose Carmine or Blanche Schwarzman, where it becomes clear that for Nabokov, names are invested with totemic significance.

Poe, through his use of language, sought to impress his readers with a patrician air and we understand that Poe's description of Wilson's school-life is a study in desire and marked by the longings of dream and fantasy. Wilson remembers a "large rambling, Elizabethan house," "a misty-looking" English village, and a "vast number of gigantic gnarled trees" and in fact "all the houses were excessively ancient" (627). Wilson's diction is high-flown with the intent to indicate the aristocratic nature of the hero. Wilson, like Humbert, is fond of peppering his narrative with French phrases, e.g. "Oh, le bon temps, que ce siecle de fer" (Poe 629), and they use such language to set themselves apart from others who do not have such masterful control over their words. Wilson's whispering twin and Humbert and his double, Clare Quilty operate on parallel tracks. Wilson's double has been called his

conscience or the source for all possible goodness and they are in the story, polar opposites. At the end of Poe's narrative, the good twin is vanquished by the evil one, and yet the evil one remains cursed by the other: "In me didst thou exist, and in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou has murdered thyself" (641). Humbert and his double, Quilty, have a more complex dance to execute. Humbert admits that he has destroyed the spirit and blasted the childhood of Lolita, but is sure in his belief that Quilty was manifestly more evil than he. Jealousy becomes commingled with moral outrage in Humbert's fevered mind upon learning that it was Quilty to whom Lolita gave her earliest love. For Humbert this news became Quilty's death knell. Quilty is unable to believe that Humbert's intentions are to kill him, since Quilty knows that he and Humbert are more fundamentally similar than anything else and cannot believe Humbert has lost his sense of sophisticated humor.

Ironies pile upon ironies. Quilty is and had been impotent, and speaks to Humbert in the knowing tones of the cultured man who has had the means and desire to dabble in sexual arenas that we could euphemistically call "special." When Humbert decides he must kill Quilty, he becomes at that moment an American character, full of action based upon a Manichean belief in absolute good and evil. At that moment, Humbert dismisses the idea of there being in life those gray areas or situations of mitigating subtlety. Humbert had lost the pessimistic view of humankind and forgot about evil and original sin. He had become born again through love. Humbert reached his limit and not to seek revenge, nor to play the sophisticate's game, would be a sign that cynical European culture had prevailed. Humbert's revenge is patently ridiculous since he is as guilty as Quilty, or more so. Humbert has never been able to see the whole picture and his elaborately constructed identity molded by his brilliant use of language was not enough to win Lolita's love, nor was it enough to save himself. Humbert and Wilson are stylists from the same ridiculous school and they are, with their doubles, prismatic characters denoting different aspects of the same people. Where Poe is heavy handed with the ominous tones used by his character, Nabokov uses a lighter touch with Humbert and his own doppelganger tale. However, Humbert's use of trenchant satire

cannot mask the fact that although he loved Lolita, he knew she sobbed in misery every night. Humbert is constitutionally unable to see himself in the looking glass of Quilty's character.

At the beginning of this chapter, Nabokov's early sentiments indicating a fondness for Edgar Allan Poe were quoted from Strong Opinions. It is very easy to see how impressionable youth could be especially intrigued by Poe's ghostly stories and tales of grisly and premature burial. It is another thing altogether to read Poe as grown-up after having some adult relationships with which to compare and contrast with those found in Poe's stories. In the adult and quotidian world heavy drapery must be swept aside to let the light in, bills must be paid, and children must be brought screaming into the world.

Poe is very much an American writer who apes the writing of someone other and this other voice is that of the cultured European. Nabokov, on the other hand, is an extremely cultured European who is writing in idiomatic English using the stylistics of a character drawn from Poe's work. There is something meretricious in Poe's writing since it seems to have so much to do with wish-fulfillment and nothing to do with what we Americans like to think of as "real life." There is also an unmistakable air of sexual frisson about it. Poe declares vehemently that the most fitting subject for tragedy is the death of a beautiful woman. Death and dying for Poe are accompanied by much sighing, convulsing, and thrilling contortions. Such deaths have less to do with the charnel house and much more to do with the illicit darkness of the erotic. Poe's critics have tried to understand his special fascination with lurid themes and offered detailed explanations. Nabokov, who elaborately works from Poe's parameters in Lolita, seems to be warning his readers and critics not to accept explanations too easily won. Nabokov did give us, in Lolita, the death of a beautiful "woman" but would any of us call Nabokov's novel a tragedy? Nabokov seems to be asking his readers the question: can tragedy exist in the suburbs of America? Poe's theatrical eye designs stage sets for his stories and the reader is able to see, for example, Roderick Usher's lair: "the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of

the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies . . ." (Poe 233). In Lolita, there is no gorgeously decrepit house of Usher to fittingly frame scenes of horror, only homes filled with bland American kitsch. Humbert, upon entering the Haze home, is scathing in his assessment of the interior's appointments. He points to the front hall "graced with door chimes," a "white-eyed wooden thingamabob of commercial Mexican origin, and that darling of the arty middle class, van Gogh's 'Arlesienne'" (36). Humbert hates the "horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called "functional modern furniture" and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps" (37-8). He hates even more the "pinkish cozy, coyly covering the toilet lid" (38). Notice how Nabokov delights in the alliterative description of the last item--he has bested Poe certainly. Humbert derision is provoked at every turn: at the kumfy kabin motels, the tacky souvenir and gift shops, and by the "modern" pedagogical notions of the headmistress of Lolita's school ("the four D's: Dramatics, Dance Debating and Dating" (177)).

Nabokov takes pains to explain to his readers that Lolita is not anti-American (a charge that he said pained him more than charges about the book's immorality). ("On a Book Entitled Lolita" 315). Nabokov explains that he needed a "certain exhilarating milieu" and "that nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity" (315). He quickly asserts that "in regard to philistine vulgarity there is no intrinsic difference between Palearctic manners and nearctic manners" and that "any proletarian from Chicago can be as bourgeois (in the Flaubertian sense) as a duke" (315). Nabokov related that he chose American motels instead of Swiss hotels or English inns "only because I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights that other writers enjoy" (377). Of course, it is difficult to imagine there being many "kumfy kabin" motels in Switzerland or England. Nabokov is simply not to be believed here. In the America of Lolita, nothing is as it appears; everything that is worn, used to decorate a home, or thought about is derivative. Humbert's persona is derivative, too, of course, but the sources of his person spring from art and from what in Western culture is believed to be beautiful. Lolita's character, being the emblematic American, is

shaped by movie magazines and glistening advertisements. Lolita, however, is more than a comedic catalogue of American tackiness. Nabokov has written satirically about the very childishness of the American soul and how we must take great pains to turn our faces away from the darkness. Two times in the novel Humbert sneeringly wishes that all the walls in all the motels along all the interstates could be made of glass so that the squalid activities taking place there every single day and night could be made visible for everyone to see. Nabokov, through the chilling nature of his character Humbert, indicates he knew well the fundamental darkness in Poe's work. The satire which fills Lolita clearly shows how Poe's darkly romantic vision could not be supported in bland America.

Naomi Tamir-Ghez states that the reader witnesses in Lolita "the subtle art of an author playing chess against himself" (159). In Speak, Memory, Nabokov alludes to the crafting of a novel to a chess problem where the novelist "in a fit of lucid madness" sets for himself unique rules, certain "nightmare obstacles" that the writer must surmount" with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients" (159). Nabokov, the brilliant gamesman, must have hugely anticipated the fun he would have by moving Poe's moldering sets and ghoulish characters out of the shadows and into the American living room. Poe's characters were as fetishistic as Humbert, and we must remember Berenice's pearl-like teeth and Ligeia's eyes that would rival in size any of the most luminous Disney heroine. However, Poe's ghostly women were not real women, but the simulacra of something brewed within the hero's obsessive mind. Poe's women remain ciphers, for they never emerge as having lives apart from those lived in relation to the various narrators. In contrast, the female characters in Lolita are celebrated for their sheer American vulgarity. Where Poe's women are ethereal, Lolita and Charlotte are decidedly earthy. It is the contention of this thesis that Lolita and Charlotte are portrayed in such an unromantic manner because Nabokov believed that truly romantic figures cannot spring from American soil.

In the pages of Lolita, Nabokov lets the sun stream in and pulls Poe's heavy draperies aside, and yet the horror not only remains, the lives lived within those pages seem more

horrible. Instead of one of Poe's languishing and emaciated heroines, Nabokov gives us a gum-chewing Lolita and makes Humbert's passion real. Humbert's fetishes are a pair of Lolita's panties, her sneakers, and tattered comic books. Nabokov's brilliance is seen in these telling details. He set up for himself an enormous challenge--could he use the framework arranged by Edgar Allan Poe and make his hero a romantic one? Could he give us a love object full of bristling life, e.g. a real all-American girl and make her lovable? In a bizarre fashion, Nabokov succeeded too well. Through the writing of Edgar Allan Poe, one of America's most "problematic" writers, Nabokov wrestled with his contempt for Freudian thought and the vulgar derivativeness of American culture. Nabokov's dangerous world of the American suburb and interminable interstate highway vividly proves that the portrayal of the darkness of the human soul is not dependent upon dungeons, vaults, pits, or pendulums.

Chapter 3

Postmodernism and Lolita

This year (1995) marks the fortieth anniversary of Lolita's initial publication, so it seems fitting that the last chapter of this thesis contain a discussion about Lolita and postmodernism. Should Lolita be considered a postmodern novel at all? It will be argued here that Nabokov's extensive borrowing from both high and low culture, alluded to in the previous chapter, is a distinct hallmark of this writing style, and makes Lolita an early example of what we now call postmodern fiction.

The first part of this chapter will deal with this conflation of high and low culture as it is manifest in commodification. Lolita is a celebration of American materialism and grotesque acquisitiveness. In our days of lonely anomie many of us are suspicious of deeper truths, or the truths that cannot be seen or touched. Therefore, we opt for truth as it is manifest in the material world with its vast array of beautiful offerings. In Nabokov's American world of mid-century, such glittering snapshots of Lolita in wonderful clothes, on her bicycle, in her suburban home, and riding in her car, seem to shout, "I exist, I use things, I own things, and finally, I am something." In America, to become a consumer is to proclaim one's very existence. There is nothing within the pages of Lolita to suggest the privation and suffering endured in Europe and Russia during World War II. For Lolita and her mother, the past seems not to exist and as for Humbert, his past is intricately bound with his perpetual search for nymphet beauty. In Nabokov's world of Lolita, the words used to describe the objects of Humbert's intense looking expose the fragility of powerful desire. In this section, Rachel Bowlby's chapter about Lolita in her book, Shopping with Freud, will be used to examine the theme of commodification.

In the second part of this chapter, issues having to do with gender and motherhood will be discussed. In this postmodernistic period of retrenchment, feminism, with its subheading of issues relating to motherhood are being addressed in new ways. A quick examination of

relatively recent television programs indicates how problematic motherhood remains in popular thought and collective imaginations. The mother figure is often used as a trope indicating societal control and general repression. In a number of television shows, mothers are simply written out of the scripts so that sitcom hijinks may occur. Similarly, Humbert had to dispatch Lolita's mother in some way or the novel would have been short-circuited. Charlotte Haze has been too cursorily treated by past critics of Lolita. In order to form an image in our minds of Lolita, we must also know her mother. Women are powerful, alluring creatures and men have many good reasons to fear them and to be angry with them. The maternal matrix from which we all must be pulled is at once the edenic connected whole and the swamp which will enmire us all. We long to spring free from this maternal matrix just as fiercely as we long to return, and thus our lives are played out in this tension between these two points. Perhaps, in years past when their roles were more limited, some women were content to live within the strictures imposed upon them by society and biology. Perhaps these women did not try to gauge perpetually their level of fulfillment and personal happiness. Through scientific advances, we found we could tamper with nature, with our biology, and we believed this would bring us freedom and therefore contentment. It has not turned out to be this way. Many, perhaps most women, feel the pull towards motherhood, even though we know it is many times a trap comprised of unrelenting responsibility. Today, this responsibility is rarely shared among extended family and for most of us, the nuclear family must be self-sustaining. In our current culture we do much talk in celebration of family and sentimentally create impossibly unrealistic standards of harmony and physical beauty we feel compelled to meet. Charlotte Haze is depicted by Humbert as a monstrous mother who is eager to be rid of her child whom she perceives to be a nuisance and competitor. Charlotte's character is of pivotal importance in this novel and has cultural implications even now in our postmodern world.

The third part of this chapter will have as its main concern, the human body. Unlike Lolita who exists only in the pages of a book, our corporal selves exist in time and are

subject to wear and the inevitability of decline. In the hands of some writers, this equalizing process of decay is a rich source of comedy. In the hands of others, however, the inherent human comedy of decline must merge with tragedy. For some, like Nabokov's Humbert, the urge to fix the body in time and to revel in it becomes not just the libidinal concern of sporadic moments, but the culmination of intense artistic endeavor. It is Foucault who believes that we use narratives to ward off death (264). This warding off of death through art lies at the very marrow of Nabokov's Lolita. Nabokov's morality tale, if indeed Lolita could be termed that, is not optimistic about the narrative power to subvert the pull to the grave since every main character in the novel dies prematurely. Art, he seems to be saying, can save for us for a time, but the inexorable decay, the inevitable tug of the tomb, remains the vanquisher.

In the second chapter the doppelgänger tale of Humbert and Quilty was discussed and it was shown how Humbert and Quilty were like Poe's characters, William Wilson and his "good" twin who were two sides of the same individual. There is also the doppelgänger effect at work between the characters of Lolita and her mother, Charlotte. The distinct similarities and marked differences between the two will be examined in view of some of our present concerns about body image and aging. In our current climate, where bodies and the diseases to which they succumb have become textualized, Lolita serves as a reminder that such issues are not new. With its emphasis on form and aesthetic perfection, Lolita is a voyeuristic playing field where Humbert's hermetic images indicate the hierarchical manner in which we view degrees of beauty. Beauty, and the process by which we must train our eyes to see it, is an arduous, if delightfully compensatory, business. In this section, Camille Paglia's, Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson will be used in an exploration of how Western culture has come to perceive what is beautiful. To use Paglia's world view, the way we perceive beauty is anything but natural; it is the result of centuries of training our Western eyes to strip away everything that is extraneous or fleshily maternal. Despite the fact that Paglia's writing angers many feminists, she is probably

correct about the power of beauty and its magnetic allure. She also writes persuasively about the pagan nature inherent in our fascination with and celebration of youth. Humbert's personal adoration of the too-young Lolita is now operating throughout our culture and manifest daily in advertisement, film, and television.

It is also the contention of this thesis that such a character as Lolita would not exist today as she does in the pages of this novel. It will be argued in this chapter that a Humbert of today would never allow the junk food diet that Lolita delights in consuming because beauty is an exacting taskmaster to be served. Instead, today's Lolita would most probably be anorexic. Of course, this is entirely conjectural, but it does serve to illuminate a newer reading of Lolita. The novel was written not long after people had undergone enormous privation in Europe. There is no mention of the Second World War in Lolita, only the optimistic and subsequent gorging upon things here in America. We are seeing the sad end to that optimism at the end of the twentieth century. Such mindless consumption has exacted a cruel price. The playing fields today are the anorexic bodies of our daughters who so mightily resist maternal heaviness and that dreaded moment when they realize they will one day turn into their own mothers. For this section about eating, anorexia, and Lolita, the sources which will be discussed include Maud Ellman's The Hunger Artists and Hilda Bruch's The Golden Cage.

Within the pages of Lolita, the reader is treated to scenes of almost frantic acquiring of things. Humbert delights in picking out clothes and trinkets for Lolita, and Lolita must be mollified by having treats given to her daily. Nabokov frequently alludes to advertisements, quotes from popular teen magazines, and offers synopses of all the movies Humbert and Lolita watched while on their long journey. Nabokov is as well-versed in American low culture as he is with any European masterpiece. Fredric Jameson writes about the commodification of art and about how this relates to our postmodern milieu.

High modernism and mass culture then develop in dialectical opposition and interrelationship with one another. It is precisely the waning of their opposition, and

some new conflation of the forms of high and mass culture that characterizes postmodernism itself. (140)

Humbert devotes hundreds of words to descriptions of girls' dress sizes, contemporary books about child psychology, American motels, tacky tourist attractions, and a whole range of suburban rituals. These items are made to coexist with allusions to the best and brightest of Western civilization with the result being a postmodern conflation. Rachel Bowlby writes that "the America from which Lolita emerges is presented as a place of pseudo-values promoted through how-to books, movies, magazines, and consumerism of all kinds" (56). She states that this view of America is "consistently set against the authentic culture of the European outsider" (56).

Bowlby, who examines all aspects of consumerism, finds in Lolita much more at work than the divisions of "guilt and innocence, seducer and victim, and real love and perverse sexuality" (52). She believes that Lolita "stages a manifest clash between the literary values of Humbert and the vulgar, consumerly values of Lolita" and this conflict is sharply drawn as "the familiar opposition of the European visitor and the all-American girl" (52). Bowlby remains unconvinced about Lolita's status as victim and writes that "Lolita does not so much represent innocence and virginity" as "the crude embodiment of a different kind of victim: one subject to and made over in the image of a mass culture with which she has completely identified . . ." (52). Bowlby contends that Humbert is not entirely Lolita's exploiter or despoiler but a character who can "be associated with an aesthetic authenticity whose plausibility gives the novel its power, because it distracts the reader from what would otherwise appear as a simple assault" (52).

Lolita is the ideal American consumer and Humbert is careful to use extensive lists in order to convey her immature greediness:

If a roadside sign said: VISIT OUR GIFT SHOP--we had to visit it, had to buy its Indian curios, dolls, copper jewelry, cactus candy. The words "novelties and souvenirs" simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt. If some cafe sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were

ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster. (148)

Lolita is a child and is described as having a child's enthusiasm for that which is new. In our American culture, we delight in our own childlike qualities and demand for ourselves ever-changing novelties. Humbert relates how stymied he is at one point by Charlotte's bland Americanism which is comprised of implacability resulting from her being a fundamentally unthinking consumer of things and ideas. Americans are literally set upon the path of a postmodern feeding frenzy. Nabokov, being the quintessential outsider, must have perceived this meretricious consumerism which is and has been part of the American psyche. He witnessed our anxiousness to throw away anything resembling European culture or tradition in our yearning for things which are new, different, and classless. Bowlby writes about Humbert's vision of Lolita who was not yet a woman but already at twelve a "consumer" and how she represented for him "another version of this division between the purity of pre-womanhood and the baseness of consumption" (69). Unlike her mother who is wholly derivative and wholly a consumer, Lolita is a "narcissistic girl consumer, sexually neither pure nor mature . . ." (69). Lolita's personality has not been entirely subsumed by consumerism, not yet.

In a novel filled with descriptions of material things, it is the car which assumes iconic significance in Lolita. Nabokov saw into our souls and knew that the car would change everything about our lives. The automobile would give us mobility and our lives a transience which would make human relationships far more tenuous. Humbert and Lolita use Charlotte's car on their long journey and the significance of the car being Charlotte's will be discussed later in the chapter. Lolita would be an even greater celebration of American life if it had been written after television's grip had more securely taken hold. Everyday on our television screens we are confronted with a myriad of images which crystallize into intense desire and make us long for those things which we may never have. We are all consumers and we have learned to look at our world through Humbert's eyes. Our goal is to

possess those things which glitter with perfection, and we seek to create ourselves using standards of perfection which are impossible to meet. No one, not even the novelist or the photographer, is able to prevent the passage of time and therefore, perfection is always just out of reach. Nabokov saw into our American psyche, celebrated our child-like delight in acquisitiveness, and then made us witness the ensuing horror when the dream goes awry.

Terry Eagleton writes about this commodity fetish and its effect upon society:

To say that social reality is pervasively commodified is to say that it is always already "aesthetic"--textured, packaged, fetishized, libidinalized; and for art to reflect reality is then for it to do no more than mirror itself, in a cryptic self-referentiality which is indeed one of the inmost structures of the commodity fetish (152).

Humbert, who ridiculously and ruthlessly grapples with the meaning of life, knows that cars or other material things will not save Lolita or Charlotte. He later comes to the breathtakingly tragic realization that neither will the creation of art be enough to infuse his life with true meaning.

Charlotte and Lolita are both depicted in terms of their American rapaciousness. However, Nabokov is particularly satirical in his treatment of Lolita's mother. Instead of portraying someone of generosity and kindness, Charlotte is shown to be grasping and all-consuming. Charlotte's role as the matriarch in this novel has not been given as much critical attention and is more often than not, alluded to in terms of the stereotypical suburban matron. Charlotte's function in the novel is vastly more important than that of a stock character. It is Charlotte who is at once the one person most similar to Lolita and the one who is, according to Humbert, the most different. To understand Lolita, then, one must investigate the mother.

Like the figure in Marcel Duchamp's famous painting, "Nude Descending a Staircase," Charlotte Haze is introduced in the novel as she emerges from the second story of her suburban home. Humbert's first glimpse of her reveals not the whole, but metonymic bits and pieces: "Presently, the lady herself--sandals, maroon slacks, yellow silk blouse, squarish face, in that order--came down the steps . . ." (37). Humbert's description of her face with its

"shiny forehead" and her "plucked eyebrows" reminds him of a poor imitation of Marlene Dietrich (37). In fact, there seems to be nothing genuine about Charlotte at all, as revealed in Humbert's immediate summing up of the lady's person. In their minute or two of polite talk, Humbert is able to deduce from her "polished" words the influence of her attendance at book clubs "or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul" (37) and he decides she had no thought which was not culled from the pages of popular women's magazines.

From the first moments of their meeting, Humbert also is acutely aware of Charlotte's sexual designs upon him and he, in essence, becomes her prey. Charlotte tries everything within her power to trap Humbert while Humbert works even more assiduously to lure Lolita into his own trap. This strange "family" dynamic is best and most comically witnessed when the three of them are claustrophobically imprisoned in Charlotte's car. The automobile dominates Lolita much as television and computers have come to dominate more current fiction. Charlotte's car remains, even after her premature death, the symbol of her hovering and maternal presence. The family car enables Humbert to escape with Lolita and to travel practically unnoticed through almost endless stretches of America. Just as the appointments in Charlotte's suburban home represent the derivativeness of her character, the car, which has become the insistent symbol of American life, represents in Lolita both freedom and womb-like imprisonment.

Besides the scenes in the car, the cinematic scope of Nabokov's writing is lucidly present in those early entries in Humbert's diary where he is trying to fix for us, his readers, the precise sun-flecked color of Lolita's suburban life. Everything that is light and airy is used to describe Lolita, while terms to describe Charlotte are decidedly earthy and imbued with a marked dreariness. From an upstairs bathroom window in the Haze house, Humbert spies Lolita "taking things off a clothesline in the apple-green light behind the house" (41). He writes in his diary that her "every movement" in the "dappled sun plucked at the most secret and sensitive chord of my abject body" (41). These scenes with their rush of light and

color are crucial since they indicate that wherever there is sun and revealing light, there must also be shadow, hidden darkness, and maternal heaviness.

In the cloying writing of Humbert's diary, where he plots and plans for those moments when he may be alone with Lolita, there is the implicit subtext of Charlotte's plotting and planning to seduce Humbert. Besides this example of parallel plot-lines, Humbert tries to discern how Charlotte and Lolita are alike. He alludes to the similarities in their two names and at one point Nabokov has Lolita and Charlotte actually appear as doubles: "To my intense disappointment she came with her mother, both in two-piece bathing suits, black, as new as my pipe" (42). Humbert sees only the swim-suit clad Lolita and, aside from using Charlotte as counterpoint to her daughter, is rendered unable to gaze at anything else. In this diary entry of Humbert's where he describes how it feels to look at Lolita in her black, two-piece bathing suit, he confesses that he could actually devour her with his eyes and that when she arranged herself on her stomach to sun-bathe she was "showing the thousand eyes wide open in my eyed blood . . . the seaside of her schoolgirl thighs" (42). Charlotte's request for a light for her cigarette spoils Humbert's masturbatory voyeurism. She becomes a comic foil since it is the poor woman's belief that she is, or at least should be, the object of Humbert's ardor. In this novel replete with double images, Humbert is unable to see Charlotte, and Charlotte cannot see her own daughter. Both Charlotte and Humbert are locked within their own narcissistic brand of solipsism.

Humbert refers to Charlotte as generic "mamma," "mother," or "mother Haze" in a voice petulant with sarcasm. He delights in playing with her, and is adept at keeping her on the brink of success in order to come ever closer to securing his quarry. Humbert dreams of Lolita who is delightful to him because she embodies certain dualisms: "this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures" (44). This particular mixture turns poisonous with age and we see how Charlotte's attempts at sophisticated French and artless charm are

not enough to offset her own "eerie vulgarity" and for Humbert Charlotte becomes "the obnoxious lady" (55).

In the context of postmodern discourse where old systems are being studied in new and non-binary ways, we are coming to newer realizations concerning the old notions of women symbolizing the natural world and men the cultural world of rational thought and science. These notions no longer serve us particularly well. In Lolita, Humbert is the embodiment of the Enlightenment man; he is cultured, and all of his faculties are trained to perceive the aesthetic ideal. Yet, we must not lose sight of the fact that Humbert is also tortured, obsessed, and aberrant. He represents a twisted version of Western culture where rationality is made to serve absurd ends. Humbert elaborately constructs a hierarchy and establishes that Lolita must occupy the very pinnacle of it with everyone else placed below her. Charlotte, because she is fundamentally so similar to her daughter and yet so appallingly different, is given a lowly place in Humbert's scheme, and this place becomes the one where his words dry up and become choked with angry sarcasm. Charlotte's clothing is described, as is her house, her choice of reading material, her sagging skin, her car, and the contents of her closet. These possessions of Charlotte's are as banal as Lolita's comic books and packs of chewing gum. Yet, where Lolita is concerned, Humbert's throat relaxes and his words and images flow freely with ardor.

Humbert tries to do that which may not be done because he tries to tame nature and through his writing attempts to make time stand still. Lolita must not turn into a Charlotte. In Charlotte's car he hopes to outrun time by being in perpetual motion. On Humbert and Lolita's insane journey, each of their stops, chosen unsystematically from the automobile association tour book, is hoped to be as worthwhile as its inviting advertisement. Very little of life lives up to its optimistic billing. Humbert, our erstwhile and unreliable narrator, tries to convince the reader that Charlotte Haze is grasping and portrays her in monster-like vignettes. Humbert wants the reader to despise Charlotte as much as he does. She is shown to be a wholly unsympathetic mother and yet she is indicted only because she has terrible

taste and because she cannot be Lolita. However, we, the readers, are supposed to adore Lolita even as she scratches herself or picks her nose. Nabokov is sneakily telling us that everything is indeed relative.

As the novel's maternal figure, Charlotte has several key scenes which have been written by Nabokov using the humor and rhythm of situation comedy: the trip to Hour(our)glass Lake, married bliss, and death. As in Virginia Woolf's, To the Lighthouse where the inconsistencies of weather play havoc with fervently anticipated plans, the weather in Lolita personally tortures Humbert by delaying his plans for a day at Hourglass Lake. Humbert, as Narcissus, ardently supplies himself with fantasies about the myriad of delights which will accrue to him by having Lolita so near to him and to a body of water. For Humbert, the first trip was not a success and was marked by disappointment because Lolita brought a friend and played apart from him and Charlotte. His next trips to the same lake occurred during his "honeymoon" period with Charlotte. The last one made to the lake is the most significant and will be discussed here.

Their trip begins by Charlotte's telling Humbert of her plans to send Lolita to a boarding school. Charlotte literally wants her daughter written out of the story or erased from the picture. Humbert realizes that in Charlotte he is dealing with an unknown quantity and cannot brutalize this woman the way he did his European wife, Valeria. He confides to us about his mode of operation in the old days when he simply would have grabbed Valeria's wrist until she capitulated on the argued point. However, things were different with Charlotte and Humbert confesses that "Bland American Charlotte frightened me" (83). He does not know what to do with Charlotte and he believes she has some basic and instinctual sensitivity regarding Humbert's disingenuousness which makes him redouble his efforts to appear the loving and subservient husband. Humbert is convinced that Charlotte would perceive the duplicity in his words or "distinguish at once a false intonation in anything I might say with a view to keeping Lo near" (84). To Humbert, Charlotte represents instinctive force which seeks always to preserve itself: "She was like a musician who may be

an odious vulgarian in ordinary life, devoid of tact and taste; but who will hear a false note in music with diabolical accuracy of judgment" (84). For Humbert, Charlotte represents the maternal figure as monster.

It is Theodore Dreiser and his American Tragedy to whom Nabokov owes the brief narrative outlining Humbert's tortured thoughts about drowning Charlotte while visiting the lake. Humbert reflects upon the ease by which he could hold her under the water's surface "(she was a very mediocre mermaid)" but at the last moment, "But what d'ye know, folks--I just could not make myself do it!" (87). Even as he is plotting her death, Humbert takes the time to notice "the gooseflesh of her thick thighs" and the "glossy whiteness of her wet face," her "pale lips," and her naked convex forehead, and the tight black cap, and the plump wet neck"(86). The thought of holding onto her flesh long enough so that he could drown her is acutely distasteful for Humbert who longs for the days when more aesthetically pleasing ways of murder could be had. Humbert whines that in "our middle-class nosy era" one has "to be a scientist if you want to be a killer" (87).

Earlier in the chapter Humbert revealed that he had to consume alcohol in order to make love to Charlotte and that by drinking he could fantasize about Lolita while doing so. "I would manage to evoke the child while caressing the mother" (76). Humbert's disgust with Charlotte's physical and maternal body is the disgust of the aesthete and this disgust is not Humbert's alone but is evident in the seductive advertisements which dominate American lives. Camille Paglia makes elaborate points about the mother being the embodiment of the natural world and believes that American society, "a society enamored of the future," will "sweep away the mother because she is the past, the state of remaining" (572). Paglia also writes that "America is a land of transients and transience, of movement to and across" (572). Humbert hopes that he may outrun the prying eyes of the too-inquisitive and that he may prove victorious over Charlotte.

Humbert views Charlotte as devouring and vampire-like: "by my marrying the mother of the child I loved I had enabled my wife to regain an abundance of youth by proxy" (77).

Humbert believes that because of Charlotte's rich satisfaction at being married and admired, she began to glow with vigor, but her physical state arouses only repugnance in Humbert. Humbert resists being devoured by the maternal and despises Charlotte whose identity has been constructed by slavishly copying images drawn from American popular culture. The married life of Charlotte and Humbert is a rich satire on the power of advertising. In Charlotte's "depressingly bright kitchen" she would look lovingly at her new husband as they sat together in their "cute breakfast nook," "(simulating that Coffee Shoppe where in their college days Charlotte and Humbert used to coo together)" (77). It is Charlotte's house which must be redone and refurbished and the home yields to Charlotte's keen ministrations, "I [Humbert] could almost feel the wretched thing cower in its reluctance to endure the bath of ecru and ocher and putty-buff-and-snuff that Charlotte planned to give it" (77). Notice Nabokov's satiric and postmodern listing of all the household chores that Charlotte is galvanized into doing: "washing window shades, waxing the slats of Venetian blinds, purchasing new shades and new blinds, . . ." "She dabbled in cretonnes and chintzes; she changed the colors of the sofa, . . . and she rearranged the furniture" (77-8).

The words Humbert uses to tell us about Charlotte tell us much about him and his terror of women. She is "large," "Big Haze," "she of the noble nipple and massive thigh," and her hair "carefully dyed" is "sterile to my sense of smell and touch." Humbert admits at one lucid point that Charlotte is "well groomed and shapely" for after all she "was Lolita's big sister," but admits that he could not adhere to this image for long when Charlotte's aging physicality asserted itself in Humbert's mind's eye: "this notion, perhaps I could keep up if only I did not visualize too realistically her heavy hips, round knees, ripe bust, the coarse pink skin of her neck and all the rest of that sorry and dull thing: a handsome woman" (72). Humbert, ever the ardent student of photography, "tom-peeped" through Charlotte's photo-album in his attempt to glimpse in these "wan little windows" bits of Lolita in youthful pictures of her mother. Despite these pictures and Charlotte's "pitifully ardent, naively lascivious caresses," Humbert could only hunger for the "nymphet's scent" and it was in vain

when he sought this in his marriage bed with Charlotte. During such passionless sex, Humbert alludes to himself as an animal "bay[ing] through the undergrowth of dark decaying forests" (77). Charlotte, as mother and devourer of vigor, is loathsome to Humbert. She is appalling to him because she is not and cannot be an aesthetic ideal.

Nabokov's description of Charlotte's death is black comedy. The car, this time a neighbor's, acts as the *deus ex machina*, as it runs into her while Charlotte rushes to mail a letter written in fury to expose Humbert and the nefarious plans he has made for himself and Lolita. Nabokov is subversive in his humor since the engine of Humbert's fate truly has one. As Pandora, Charlotte could withstand her curiosity no longer and forcibly opened Humbert's writing table and this "raped little table" reveals Humbert's singing diary. In one thrillingly clear moment, she was made to see herself through the cruel lens of Humbert, who as possessor of the coldly aesthetic Western eye, reduces her to an animal. Charlotte reads from the diary, "The Haze woman, the big bitch, the old cat, the obnoxious mamma, . . ." and warns him that "you'll never see that miserable brat again" (96). Like Poe's women who return from the grave, Charlotte's presence after her death is keenly felt every time Humbert mentions her car.

Humbert's stated goal is to capture the "perilous magic of nymphets" and this aesthetic search for beauty must be rendered into words; "Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with" (32). Beauty is a troubling subject and will probably be destined to be so eternally. That which is beautiful for one, may not be for another, and too many of us know that beauty is undemocratic and very seldom fair. Humbert's misogynistic loathing of Charlotte and her mature face and figure is particularly disturbing these days when political correctness looms large on college campuses and "lookism" is being decried. Advertising images are purely Humbertian in their hierarchical positioning of the young and boyishly slender women on the top rung of desirability's ladder.

Camille Paglia writes with verve about Western civilization coming under the sway of the rational and empirical, and exemplified in what she calls the Apollonian. Camille Paglia

states that the "Apollonian eye is the brain's great victory over the bloody open mouth of mother nature" (50). Furthermore, she believes that "beauty is our weapon against nature" (57). Paglia writes that it is beauty as opposed to nature by which "we make objects, giving them limit, symmetry, proportion. Beauty halts and freezes the melting flux of nature" (57). Paglia describes how the ancient Greeks saw adolescence and "formalized it in art" (15). "Greek pederasty honors the erotic magnetism of male adolescents in a way that today brings the police to the door" (15). While *Lolita* is not an adolescent boy, this section is still apt, for Humbert sets out to do what the Greek sculptors did to carve away every bit of extraneous flesh and to deliver to our eyes the sight of unchanging perfection. Paglia writes that "the beautiful boy represents a hopeless attempt to separate imagination from death and decay" (118). Humbert's *Lolita*, who is all "rose and honey" with "lips as red as licked red candy," is perpetually young in Humbert's verbal photographs. Paglia writes in very similar terms about "the beautiful pink-cheeked boy," who, like *Lolita*, "is emotional vernality, spring only. He is a partial statement about reality. He is exclusive, a product of aristocratic taste. He feels the superfluity of matter, the womb of female nature devouring and spewing out creatures" (117).

If *Lolita* could be considered only a "partial statement about reality," then Charlotte must be the other and horrible part. If Humbert is able to perceive the beautiful exclusively in *Lolita*, then he only is able to perceive Charlotte as beauty's opposite. She shows the unmistakable signs of aging with its concomitant indicators of eventual decay. Humbert, the aesthete, who, to use Paglia's phrase, "lives by the eye" (60), has constructed for himself a structure or identity by which he views the world around him. With *Lolita* perched precariously at the top, Humbert delivers for his readers not just love's exultation but its stinging pain as well. Paglia, who extols the violence and disruption caused by uncontrollable sexual longing, could be describing Humbert in this passage about how the aesthete transforms inchoate sensations into art:

The eye elects a narcissistic personality as galvanizing object and formalizes the relation in art. The artist imposes a hieratic sexual character on the beloved, making himself the receptor (or more feminine receptacle) of the beloved's manna. The structure is sadomasochistic. Western sexual personae are hostile with dramatic tension. (121)

Humbert tries to bend nature and prevent time's cruel business with the results emerging as laughably tragic. While Humbert's tastes are not "normal," is it possible to live in our cultural world today and not become caught up with what it means to "live by the eye?" Paglia alludes to Denis de Rougemont who writes that "Western love is unhappy or death-ridden" (121). She also talks about our current culture where images of allure seem to burn themselves upon our minds' eyes:

The sexual and psychological deficiencies of Judeo-Christianity have become blatant in our time. Popular culture is the new Babylon, into which so much art and intellect now flow. It is our imperial sex theater, supreme temple of the western eye. We live in the age of idols. The pagan past, never dead, flames again in our mystic hierarchies of stardom" (139).

It is the contention of this thesis that Nabokov, the expatriate, was supremely able to look at American culture, and simultaneously celebrate and abhor the grotesqueries of advertised images. *Lolita* and *Charlotte* are cultural derivatives at play in Humbert's Babylon.

Published in the mid-fifties, when American optimism must have been scaling its heights, *Lolita* is eerily accurate in its portrayal of America as a consumer heaven. Humbert delightedly tells his audience about his shopping forays and lovingly describes each of the adorable outfits he has purchased for Lolita. Humbert avidly reports on her candy, soda, and malted consumption, her voracious appetite for comic books, the many pieces of sports equipment she has in her possession, and the contents of her girl's bedroom. Nabokov must be slyly suggesting that with so many things, so much materiality, one's identity or questions about one's very existence wither in the face of so much evidence that one is truly there. This materialism is what we must be coping with here in America as our century winds its way down. Humbert is also particularly keen about comparing everyone, himself included,

to the perfection which is represented by Lolita. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, Humbert frequently alludes to himself as apelike, as being unusually hairy, and revoltingly bestial. This is in marked contrast to his descriptions of Lolita who has no extraneous flesh and virtually no hint of possessing the incipient rot of ultimate mortality. Even though Humbert is crucially aware of time's passing and the implications of that fact upon the duration of Lolita's nymphethood, Lolita remains a figure out of time, and every picture he gives us of her is a photographic still which freezes the perfect moment. Only later in the novel does the reader become aware that those frozen moments of perfection have exacted a desperately cruel toll. Lolita knows herself to be utterly trapped and sobs alone every night. Charlotte Haze is minutely compared to her daughter and what similarities there are between the two become grotesque when in Charlotte's possession. Humbert is particularly excoriating about Charlotte's fleshiness and her assertive female energy. He admits freely to his readers that Charlotte's vigor repels and frightens him. For Humbert, Charlotte represents the ultimate and implacable obstacle standing in his way of having Lolita in his sole possession. Charlotte's attempts to remove Lolita--in essence to erase her from the picture--arouses in Humbert a desperation which almost makes him a murderer much too early in his story.

It is interesting to muse upon the direction that this novel might take had it been written now instead of mid-century. The incest taboo is certainly still intact even as other pieces of our social fabric show fraying signs of wear. Media reports about child abuse have become the daily and standard fare in newspapers, television news, and in that new hybrid of news and entertainment, the 'infotainment' shows. Teachers are being admonished to never touch a pupil lest a disgruntled student or parent misconstrue a teacher's friendly hug as something darker. It is the contention of this thesis that the Lolita of the mid-1950's who is last seen "hugely pregnant" would be today's anorexic girl. Nabokov's Lolita is a study in commodification; a great gorging upon things to buy, see, and to eat. Because of its distinctly anti-historical perspective, Lolita illuminates a particularly American attribute

celebrating an unflagging childlike optimism having as its basic tenet the idea that life is infinitely perfectible. Consuming is the manifestation of this terrific optimism and we have become a nation of shoppers. Humbert describes Lolita's voracious appetite for food, especially sweet fruits or other desserts: "Lolita was served an elaborate ice-cream concoction with synthetic syrup. It was erected . . ." (115). Nabokov's phallic imagery is pronounced here. There is still gorging going on here in America, but for a certain class of girls who seem to be more sensitively tuned than most, the feeding frenzy has stopped. These young women, like Humbert in Charlotte's car, wish fervently to make time stand still.

Maud Ellman, in her book, The Hunger Artists, makes the following point: "it is impossible to say which is the greater agony: to be unfed or to be unheard" (112). She quotes Borges, and this passage resonates in a discussion about Lolita and American consumerism:

The world we live in is a mistake, a clumsy parody. Mirrors and fatherhood, because they multiply and confirm the parody, are abominations. Revulsion is the cardinal virtue. Two ways (whose choice the prophet left free) may lead us there: abstinence or the orgy, excess of the flesh or its denial. (112-3)

We do not hear Lolita's "voice" in this novel. She is only occasionally allowed to cut through Humbert's elaborate prose style to label something trenchantly, as when she sums up their situation, "the word is incest" (119). Humbert knows nothing of her mind or thoughts and sees her only in erotic flashes of metaphor and metonymy. Humbert and Lolita must establish themselves and therefore, to use Borges' scheme, Humbert chooses the orgy. Their journey is a whirlwind of tacky motels, volumes of food, and disappointing roadside attractions. Humbert literally feasts upon Lolita's body while he haggles and barter for her sexual favors.

About the pathos of Lolita's situation, Humbert is understandably reticent. The power of these poignant glimpses of Lolita as she is snared in Humbert's trap is heightened because there are so few of them. In the last sentence of the first section, Lolita, who after being told that her mother was dead, comes sobbing into Humbert's room for consolation. Humbert,

full of crooning menace says, "You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (142). In a later scene, while looking at a "hazy blue view" of a mountain pass, Lolita recognizes a friend and her family. Humbert describes her as she realizes who these fellow tourists are: "with Lo, in a hot, happy, wild, intense, hopeful, hopeless whisper--"Look, the McCrystals, please, let's talk to them, please" (157). This picture of Lolita filled with joy at the sight of this family, symbolizing stability and normality will be the last glimpse of her as a child. In every scene thereafter, Lolita is warily poised for her own survival because Humbert has trapped her body and soul. Hilda Bruch, in her book about anorexia, entitled, The Golden Cage, writes about what an excessive concern "with the body and its size, and the rigid control over eating" must signify. She believes that these are "late symptoms in the development of youngsters who have been engaged in a desperate fight against feeling enslaved and exploited, not competent to lead a life of their own" (x). Lolita has great power over Humbert, while at the same time, she has absolutely no power to change her own situation. When she "escapes" with Quilty, it is only to discover baser regions of a hellish existence. Bruch writes of an anorexic patient and about her terrifying and "continuous fear of being "not human" and the terror of "ceasing to exist"" (12). This patient related that at times, "I feel full of my mother--I feel she is in me--even if she isn't there" (12). The pregnant Dolly Schiller, old at seventeen, escapes from Humbert's sadistic gaze, but dies while giving birth to a stillborn baby girl. Lolita was not allowed to exist or to have a voice.

Humbert delights in his descriptions of Lolita of eating, as though the pure sensation of taste is all that remains constant for her. Our current Lolitas are refusing their food; turning their backs to sustenance. Ellman believes that far from being a personal concern stemming from individual psychology, anorexia is representative of something far greater in our society. "The anorectic, starving in the midst of plenty, has become the enigmatic icon of our times, half heroine, half horror. Her emaciated form belongs to a collective economy of images, symbolizing not only her own malaise but that of the community at large" (Ellman 2). How many women today share Humbert's predilection for the slim, preadolescent form,

with its small breasts and narrow hips? Ellman writes that the female saints "deprived themselves of food to discipline their sexual desires" and that this differs from the motivation of current dieters who "starve to mortify [their] fat" (2). She believes that "the social stigma against women's sexuality has now transferred itself to women's fat with unabated persecutory intensity" (7). Humbert loathes Charlotte's heavy hips and thighs and his acute disgust, according to Paglia, "indicates some misalignment toward or swerving away from the maternal" (97). When Humbert describes Lolita's tennis attire and her "adorable apricot shoulder blades with that pubescence and those lovely gentle bones, and the smooth, downward-tapering back . . ." (231) he is describing statuary or advertisement, not a living creature. Ellman writes of the effect these nagging images have for women in our culture:

Heavier with projections than with flesh, she siphons off this guilt, desire, and denial, leaving her idealized counterpart behind: the kind of woman that one sees on billboards, sleek and streamlined like the cars that she is often used to advertise, bathed in the radiance of the commodity. For the thin pubescent body, phallically firm, has assumed a kind of prophylactic value in contemporary culture, warding off the dangers of overproduction." (3)

Even as Humbert traps and exploits Lolita, some of us have ceded power to Humbert and revile ourselves as he reviles Charlotte. Humbert only desires the slender girl who is free of any suggestion of maternal flesh. Humbert's desires have been turned into a commodity used everyday in advertising's milieu.

Are women looking at themselves through Humbert's gaze? Female models must be thinner and thinner in order to find work and to portray the feminine ideal. A young Marilyn Monroe, the quintessence of womanly beauty in the fifties, would be told to lose weight if she wanted to work today. Monroe had undeniable curves and a voluptuous fleshiness indicating sexuality. Feminine slenderness is prized today because it heralds innocence and asexuality. Is that why so many of us push ourselves away from the table? Is that why so many of our white, middle-class daughters refuse to eat? Are they refusing to put on that

maternal flesh which will eventually destroy their very sense of themselves as being lighter than air or being free? One of the jobs that Humbert had was to write copy for perfume advertisements and with his command of the language of desire and subliminal allure, he must have been a master. Humbert's tastes and fetishes, manifest through words associated with advertisement, have become for a certain class of women in our American society, the very standards to which they rigorously adhere. Humbert's exacting gaze has been internalized by so many of us and by so doing, Humbert's cruel solipsism has become the whispering of our own inner voices. If on some days we can feel ourselves free of that unblinking gaze, the Humbertian world view vigorously asserts itself and we know that trying to circumvent the invidiousness of time's passing is all vanity. To strive for perfection seems perfectly American, but how high do we keep moving the bar on the high hurdle? Too many of our country's young women are opting to starve themselves, prompted in part by the vast number of stories printed about people coping with anorexia and because of the prevailing ideals of beauty residing with those who are slender. We should be asking ourselves why so many women are becoming anorexic. An examination of Lolita will shed some light on this situation.

"Lolita," the very name has entered our American lexicon. Most recently one has only to remember the travesty downstate and the made-for-TV-movies. The fifteen-year-old, Amy Fisher or "Long Island Lolita," her adult boyfriend and his beleaguered wife caught the country's imagination and proved how viscerally charged is the image of a too-young girl brazenly going after the adult male. Just this week (early May, 1995) the headline in a New York City daily paper trumpeted the return of a fifteen-year-old "Lolita" and her thirty-five-year-old gym teacher after a Nabokovian odyssey. The gym teacher has been hailed as a rescuer by some and an abductor by others. A remake of the film, Lolita, is planned for next year. Those who have never read Nabokov's book or who read it forty years ago forget that Humbert's Lolita was not all that seductive and much younger than a fifteen-year-old, modern American teen-ager. Lolita may have "seduced" Humbert, but what she really

thought she was teaching Humbert was some delectable childhood activity unknown to the adults of the species. However, people who have never read Nabokov's novel know the type of girl being talking about when someone is dubbed a "real Lolita." Lolita still resonates in our society.

Ironically, Humbert's Lolita didn't need to behave seductively for him to be aroused, because her presence alone was enough to do that. Every movement she made evoked for Humbert the most excruciating charm. For how many children would this represent some Edenic world of utter connectedness and for how many young girls would it be worth starving themselves so that this world would never be lost for them? In the first chapter, there were allusions made to the scenes of fondling by Nabokov's wealthy Uncle Ruka of his young nephew. How intoxicating must it be for such a young person to know that for another individual, one's existence is simply enough for all desire to be answered? For how many of these young people does it become a lifelong quest to search for those moments again and how troubling must it be if such moments hinge solely upon physical perfection? We are seeing the sad results of such quests in our American culture.

There is every indication in our culture, where commodification has assumed proportions undreamed of by earlier generations, that there will be ever-increasing attention paid to aesthetic ideals. Ellman posits that underlying the "rhetoric of self-improvement in America" lies something more sinister, which is the "drive to self-destruction, just as its narcissism masks a deeper nihilism" (10). Humbert, as ultimate narcissist and consumer, seems to be in a position of arbiter of taste as we approach the end of this century. Bruch sees the whole illness of anorexia as "an effort to make time stand still, not to grow but to go back to childhood size and functioning" (70). Humbert wants to "fix" onto something and to get his descriptions right. In order for him to describe precisely the "perilous magic of nymphets," time must remain static. Because time cannot stand still, the element of loss is always palpable in Humbert's prose.

The reader knows that Humbert's mother ("picnic, lightning") abandoned him by dying, so too, did Lolita's mother. Charlotte's death effectively cut Lolita off from anything resembling her former existence. Ellman alludes to the Lacanian interpretation of anorexia and writes that he sees the disease as "an apostrophe addressed to the absent or begrudging breast of infancy" (53). He "argues that the breast as the primordial object of desire yields either something or nothing" (53). Humbert and Lolita, both essentially motherless, formed a tortured family tableaux, where Humbert could feast upon Lolita without interference from the mother. Humbert hates even the limitations posed by nature: "My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys" (165). In her efforts to deconstruct anorexia, Ellman tries to establish what it is we do when we eat. She says that "in eating, we consume the flesh of others" and that by trying to divine the thoughts of others or "in telepathy, we eat their thoughts" (56). She writes that telepathy "subverts the privacy of minds" and that eating "subverts the privacy of bodies; for both reveal the presence of the other in the haunted house of subjectivity" (56). Ellman goes on to relate that our thoughts and identities are intimately tied up with what we consume, with what we are fed: "If our thoughts are not our own, nor is our flesh, what we eat is always foreign to ourselves." Eating then confounds the limits between self and other, and it is partly to protect these limits that Americans have grown so vigilant about their diet" (56). Humbert admits that he knows nothing about the workings of Lolita's mind, but he knows everything about what she consumes because everything on which she subsists is given to her by him. Humbert violates Lolita and then stuffs her to the brim with food.

Nabokov's Lolita, in conclusion, is a rich source book about many of the ways postmodern, middle-class, American women detest themselves and about how certain men detest women having maternal flesh. Included in an April 1995 issue of Newsweek is an article about differences between white and African-American girls regarding attitudes about body image. The article clearly shows that images of perfection vary. Evidently, the white

girls are forever searching for ways to become thinner and thinner, while their black counterparts believe their voluptuous padding is womanly and are proud of it. The white girls stated their opinions that for a narrow band of time in their youth, their mothers could be considered pretty or attractive. However, the black girls, who were asked the same question, believed their mothers became more lovely with time and repeatedly mentioned the importance of having the right attitude. Slenderness or having "hips no bigger than those of a squatting lad" (*Lolita* 22) has become the hallmark of beauty in Western culture. We must ask ourselves why Humbert's exacting requirements have come to dominate in an almost hegemonical fashion the advertising images designed to evoke the most intense desires.

In our quest for unattainable perfection, we long for the youthful face and limbs Humbert describes Lolita as possessing. The adoration of youthful slenderness does seem to be the result of patriarchal societal structures. Yet this desire to be perpetually youthful and boyishly slender is a deeply insidious desire and a very complex one. Patriarchal constructs of beauty are undeniably standard fare in our everyday lives, but we must ask ourselves why so many women try very desperately to refashion themselves using the aesthetics of these constructs. Humbert's diary, which Charlotte reads, is only too accurate and contains what many of us think as we look into our own mirrors. Humbert's deep fear of Charlotte seems to be a deep fear of being swallowed up by a mature woman--a woman with flesh on her bones. Our daughters are starving themselves so that they don't turn into us; so that they too will not be swallowed up by maternal flesh and the wrinkled skin that will be their own inevitable betrayal. It could be cogently argued that patriarchal ideology is solely responsible for its control of women by dissemination of aesthetically exacting and repressive media images. An argument could easily be made that images of feminine beauty emanate from deeply rooted patriarchal constructs and are imposed upon women. The fundamental question which should concern us now is about why many women feel compelled to internalize these images and then revile themselves. In this chapter, with its focus upon Charlotte and Humbert's descriptions of her, it was shown how Humbert sees too

minutely and too unforgivingly. Humbert's predilections now dominate the world of advertising which lures all of us into the merciless world of consumerism. Humbert, who has asked his readers throughout the book to pass judgment upon him, sadly muses upon the efficacy of creating art from the horrible. Nabokov's Lolita is wildly funny, but there is a catch in our laughter and in that "catch" must lie the art.

Alas, I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, whatever lithophanic eternities might be provided for me, nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her. Unless it can be proven to me--to me as I am now, today, with my heart and my beard and my putrefaction--that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art. To quote an old poet:

The moral sense in mortals is the duty

We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty. (Lolita 283)

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