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LOLITA REVISITED: CONTROVERSY, LANGUAGE AND IMAGE

Maria Clara Versiani Galery[1*]
[1]Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto, Ouro Preto, MG, Brasil

Abstract

The article proposes a reevaluation of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), considering the controversy surrounding the novel's theme: the sexual obsession of an adult man with a preadolescent girl. It questions whether the text is addressed to a male, heterosexual public. Furthermore, it shows how readership has shifted with the rise of feminist, gender and sexuality studies as it debates the relevance of the novel in terms of its formal choices. As such, the article considers Nabokov's exilic condition and adoption of English as a language for literary production, examining how these issues contribute to the development of *Lolita*, particularly with regard to the figure of its unreliable narrator. Additionally, two filmic adaptations are analyzed: Stanley Kubrick's (1962) and Adrian Lyne's (1997), taking into account representations of misogyny and narrative voice.

Keywords: *Lolita*; Unreliable Narrator; Feminist Critique; Exile; Cinema

[*] Holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama, University of Toronto, and conducted postdoctoral research at the Faculdade de Letras, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. Maria Clara is currently affiliated with the Graduate Program in Language Studies at the Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto. Her special fields are Shakespeare, cultural memory, and translation. E-mail: mclara.galery@ufop.edu.br. ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7098-2156.

Book burnings reflect both the respect and the fear: no one would feel impelled to burn an innocuous book.
Margaret Atwood

The opening images of Stanley Kubrick's filmic adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita display a close-up of a girl's dainty foot lowered into a man's hand, which sustains it as his other hand proceeds to apply nail polish on each of the toes, not before gently placing a small piece of cotton between them. Playing in the background, Nelson Riddle's lush piano score draws in the viewer. In this narrative frame, according to Greg Jenkins (1997), "no words are spoken, but the images, the movements, speak for themselves, and the film's guiding percept of obsessive love is promptly and convincingly set" (150). The delicate procedure shown on screen is erotic in its juxtaposition of an apparently innocuous act and the intimacy of the contact it implies between the couple. In Kubrick's adaptation, the scene is the most erotic portrayal of the relationship between Nabokov's pre-adolescent girl and her stepfather. It does not appear in the novel, but there is a correspondence between the sensuality of the gestures on screen and the book's poetic, equally sensual introductory lines: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of my tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth" (Nabokov 2000, Lolita 9). The images in Kubrick's film illustrate how Humbert Humbert, the autodiegetic and unreliable narrator of Nabokov's novel, is fixated on Lolita's body, monitoring its development and controlling her movements.

As the narrator states in the beginning, "She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock," (Nabokov, *Lolita* 9) conjuring a straightforward description of the twelve-year-old girl that becomes enslaved as a sex object. His wish is to preserve her as she appears when he first catches a glimpse of her, sunbathing in the backyard of a house where he is looking into hiring a room. From the beginning, it is not Lolita that Humbert sees, but the memory of his lost love, Annabel Leigh, the unconsummated childhood romance that prompted his obsession with certain young girls. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, are references to Edgar Allan Poe, particularly the poem *Annabel Lee*. But unlike Dolores Haze, whom Humbert calls Lolita, his Annabel was just a few months younger than the narrator. Both of them were teenagers who met while vacationing on the Riviera. Although they were, according to Humbert, "madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other" (12), the outcome of this intense erotic involvement was unfulfilled. As the narrator informs us, when he was on a Mediterranean beach, and ready to "possess" his "darling," they were interrupted by two bathers. And then, "four months later she died of typhus in Corfu" (13). Humbert claims to be trapped in the memory of this love, which becomes the psychological origin and justification for his obsession with young girls. This episode in the novel mocks Freud's theory of pathologies originating in childhood trauma, which Nabokov openly despised. It is where the narrator locates his fixation, described in the assertion that "[b]etween 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'" (16). Simultaneously a connoisseur of such beings and ensnared by their spell, Humbert attempts to gain the sympathy and acquiescence of his readers by means of the entrancing, poetic rhetoric he dominates in his memoirs.

Described by Martin Amis as "both irresistible and unforgivable," *Lolita* remains controversial, perhaps even more so today than when it was printed (Amis 2006). Initially published in France in 1955, the novel only came out in the United States three years later; in the United Kingdom, it was published in 1959. Although its subject matter disturbed various critics, the work became a best seller, praised by authors as disparate as Graham Greene and Dorothy Parker. Its most overt subject matter, the sexual obsession of a pedophile with his young stepdaughter, is unpalatable under any circumstances, arguably even more so in the age of movements such as Time's up and Me too, when many women have come forth to denounce sexual abuse and harassment. Yet Vladimir Nabokov's novel is a complex display of language, written in a confessional style, to be read by Humbert during his trial for murder. The narrator is skillful and persuasive, to the extent that, as Lionel Trilling affirms, "We find ourselves the more shocked when we realise that, in the course of reading the novel, we have come virtually to condone the violation it presents … we have been seduced into conniving in the violation, because we have permitted our fantasies to accept what we know to be revolting" (qtd. in Tamir-Ghez 2003, 18). But who is this "we" mentioned by Trilling? Does it refer to a masculine, hegemonic and heterosexual readership? Are women driven to respond to the text by identifying with the language of the dominant order?

This paper proposes to address these issues and discuss other questions the novel presents to readers in the twenty-first century, debating the relevance of the novel in terms of its formal choices and themes. The article will attend to Nabokov's language and examine how some women have responded, as critics, to a rhetoric that shrouds the sexual violence conducted towards a young girl, showing how readership has changed with the rise of feminist criticism and sexuality studies. Moreover, the paper analyses two filmic renditions of *Lolita*, the adaptations by Stanley Kubrick (1962) and Adrian Lyne (1997), with the aim of exploring how the relationship between Dolores Haze and Humbert is represented on the screen; it will also discuss aspects of misogyny in the two films.

"Fancy Prose Style"

Apart from the brief Foreword to *Lolita*, written by the fictional and pedantic John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., the main narrator of the novel is Humbert Humbert, a European man in his mid-thirties living in the United States. He was born in Paris, but describes his background as "a salad of racial genes" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 9); and also mentions periods of time he spent in madhouses, both in Europe and North America. Humbert writes from prison, where he is being held for the murder of Clare Quilty, his antagonist and double. In the story he presents

his readers, Humbert claims to have been bewitched by Dolores Haze, a young girl he calls Lolita. He first saw her when she was twelve years old and became obsessed with her, for she reminded him of Annabel, his childhood sweetheart. Humbert married Dolores's widowed mother, Charlotte, in order to be close to and eventually have sex with his "nymphet," a term he coins to designate certain young girls. Upon the discovery of Humbert's intentions – Charlotte read his diary –, the mother became hurt, angry and crazed to the extent that she ran out of the house to mail some letters and was hit by a car. Charlotte died. Humbert then took unofficial guardianship and possession of his "stepdaughter", and left with her on an extended trip across the United States, where they stayed in motels and Humbert continuously abused Dolores. Their trip, taken in Charlotte's car, went on for an extended length of time, except for a brief interlude when the narrator worked as a lecturer at Beardsley College. Under these conditions, Lolita stayed with him for nearly two years, until she was able to escape, but only to fall into a trap devised by Clare Quilty, an older man who sexually exploited young girls in pornographic films. She eventually left him and married Richard Schiller, closer to her age and background. But Humbert traced her whereabouts a few years later, only to find her worn out and pregnant. He then realized that, although she had been "polluted" (278) and her looks had faded, he truly loved "his" Lolita. Yet she refused to leave her husband. The narrator then set out to find Quilty and kill him, whereupon Humbert was sent to prison. Dolores died while giving birth to a stillborn girl.

Behind this linear plot, the voice of the narrator is polyphonous, playfully ironic and self-reflexive. A frequently quoted line from the novel is "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 9). Indeed, it is difficult not to get caught up in Humbert's skillful rhetoric and Nabokov's artifice. The quote also points to the conflicting issue of ethics and aesthetics, as they appear in *Lolita*. Humbert's sophistication and artful narrative lure the reader into sympathizing with his obsession, glossing over the sordidness and violence of the relationship depicted: that of an adult male and a child. Embedded in this coupling, there are other binaries at work in the text of *Lolita*, such as the literary values of the jaded European man and the vulgar consumerism of the inexperienced North American pre-adolescent. Humbert also displays an ironic detachment towards the cultural landscape he encounters in the United States where, similarly to Nabokov, he was an émigré. Alike the author, the narrator writes in a borrowed language, intermingled with other tongues and private idioms.

In his post-scritpt to the novel, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*", Nabokov affirms: "My private tragedy, which cannot and indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammeled, rich and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English devoid of … implied associations and traditions" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 316-317). Humbert, not unlike Nabokov, struggles to express himself in a language that is not his mother tongue. As a "brand-new American citizen of obscure European origin" (105), the narrator must write in English, but he often turns to French or German to compensate

for his cultural estrangement. An interesting example of this interliguistic flux occurs when Humbert is talking to an acquaintance and he says:

> " … By the way, did she ever tell you how Charlie Holmes debauched … his mother's little charges?"
>
> Mrs. Chatfield's already broken smile disintegrated completely.
>
> "For shame," she cried, "for shame, Mr. Humbert! The poor boy has just been killed in Korea."
>
> I said didn't she think "*vient de,*" with the infinitive, expressed recent events so much more neatly than the English "just," with the past? But I had to be trotting off, I said. (290)

In the passage above, it is form rather than content that counts for the narrator, who is unable to go beyond grammatical form and grasp the message. Not being a native speaker of English, throughout the novel the narrator is engaged in self-translation and interlinguistic reflections. To him, language is never transparent, it is an object of reflection, interest and play. For instance, the word 'therapist' is broken down into 'the rapist', revealing his distrust of psychology (Nabokov, *Lolita* 113, 150). In this sense, Margarida Vale de Gato (2018), when describing the challenges she faced while translating *Lolita* into Portuguese, argues that the text's source language was not a brand of English that qualified as a "native language per se" (Vale de Gato 323), considering that English is neither the author's nor the narrator's native tongue. Vale de Gato also addresses the polyphonous nature of the text to indicate another problem, i.e., the lack of a single language with which the narrator could identify:

> Although we know that the narrator is trying hard to interiorize a preferred form of speech, "Lo's tongue" […], we do not really know … which is Humbert Humbert's first language, or whether he has one. We suspect not, precisely because of the numerous instances involving conceptual reflection, verbal transposition, and selective reproduction of more than one different language, not for the sake of realism of dialogue, but for rendering voice(s) that reverberate within the one who speaks." (325)

This struggle among different languages is an aspect of living in exile, of trying to establish an identity in a space between cultures, a situation experienced not only by the narrator, but also by the author. Despite having described himself as "an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where [he] studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany" (Nabokov, *Opinions* 26), Nabokov came from an aristocratic Russian family who went into exile in Europe shortly after the Revolution, in 1919. His father was assassinated in Germany and Vladimir stayed in Europe until 1940, when he moved to the United States with his wife. Before crossing the Atlantic, he studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, and lived in France and Germany, writing prolifically in Russian. He also was at ease with other languages and began to write in English after arriving in the United States.

George Steiner (1990) emphasizes the exilic condition of Nabokov's writing as the result of an imposed situation where the author was left with no choice but to build himself a "house of words" (10), as there was no other possibility of home. In a less abstract sense, it is interesting to note that, at a later stage of the writer's life, when the success of his books enabled him to move to Switzerland in 1960, he chose to live at a hotel. When interviewing Nabokov at the Montreux-Palace Hotel, where the author lived, Herbert Gold (2003) describes the impermanence of the dwellings, so characteristic of exile. Gold remarks on the linguistic imposition faced by the author of *Lolita*, pointing out that "[t]here is no doubt that Nabokov feels as a tragic loss the conspiracy of history that deprived him of his native Russia and that brought him in middle life to doing his life's work in a language that is not of his dreams" (196). From a more hopeful perspective, Eva Hoffman (1990) considers that "after leaving Russia, Nabokov wrote in several languages masterfully, but he was transposing the love of his first language to his subsequent ones" (62). In this manner, the author of *Lolita* tested the limits of syntax, experimenting with linguistic forms in a heightened and also unstable state. As Steiner sees it, Nabokov's movement between several languages turned the inter- and multi-linguistic situation he experienced into both subject matter and form of his work. They are inseparable; *Lolita*, as well as *The Gift* (his last novel written in Russian), are erotic accounts of the relationship between speaker and tongue. Exile thus forced Nabokov to act with "infidelity" towards his native tongue to the extent that the trope of incest, so dominant in Nabokov's work, is a dramatization of his lifelong devotion to the Russian language and the forced intimacy he had to procure with an adopted language, used for creation, translation, and retranslation (Steiner 18-19). In *Lolita,* the narrator's inappropriate relationship with his "stepdaughter" illustrates this complicated process of dominating the adopted language.

This movement between cultures is present in *Lolita* and reflects the plight of the narrator's condition in the New World. Although it would be an over-simplification to consider *Lolita* an allegory of Europe's relationship with America, John Haegert (2003) nonetheless indicates Humbert's "ambivalent role as an émigré hero, a wandering, ill-fated exile uneasily suspended between two conflicting sets of cultural values," those of the Old World, from where his earliest memories come, and those of the New World, where he seeks to reconfigure the image of Annabel, that has never ceased to haunt him (139). The imposition of the memory of Annabel upon Lolita is a form of "idealization", of "replicating his [European] past" and transplanting it into his present American life. This illustrates Humbert's situation in the United States, where "confronted with the raw material and 'imense profusion' of the land, he is impelled to reconstruct them in his own image, to impose his outworn idealization upon them; in the process, … he robs them of their native beauty and individual identity" (148). In this manner, not only Lolita but America are not seen for themselves nor acknowledged in their Otherness, but only insofar as they may be possessed by the narrator.

Lolita Solipsized

In the notorious episode where Humbert masturbates by rubbing himself against Lolita's legs, while sitting on the sofa, he describes entering "a plane where nothing else mattered" except his pleasure, and that "Lolita had been safely solipsized" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 60). She had become objectified, not seen for who she was outside the narrator's imagination, her personhood and Otherness denied. There is no symmetry of desire in the relationship between the two and Lolita only exists as a projection of Humbert's search for the loss of his Riviera youth memory, in an idealized and refined European past. Since he controls the narrative, Dolores is at the losing end. Humbert's dazzling prose is a process of self-creation through which he presents a self-aggrandizing past associated with the gentility of Europe. Lolita, on the other hand, is associated with the American consumer environment and its vulgarity: she was the one "to whom the ads were dedicated … who believed with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in Movie Love or Screen Land … " (Nabokov, *Lolita* 136). In Humbert's prose, as Rachel Bowlby (2003) declares, she is "subject[ed] to and made over in the image of a mass culture with which she has completely identified: and the narrator, far from representing the force of exploitation, can be associated with an aesthetic authenticity whose plausibility gives the novel its power because it distracts the reader from what would otherwise appear as simple assault" (161). This has earned Nabokov the accusation of having written an immoral book, in the sense that the narrator's prose entices the reader to side with Humbert or, at the very least, to be less harsh in judging him, due to the girl's brat-like behaviour.

One of the main challenges presented in reading *Lolita* is the discernment between the author's and the narrator's voice, for readers sometimes conflate Humbert's perspective and his morals with those of Nabokov, despite the Russian author's rejection of the notion of (im)morality in his writing: "… it is not *my* sense of the immorality of the Humbert-Humbert-Lolita relationship that is strong: it is Humbert's sense. *I* do not give a damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere" (Gold, his emphasis 196). Enticed by the narrator's rhetoric, some readers and critics are led into accepting his arguments. In other words, they find themselves aligned with Humbert, accepting his desire, even cheering him on. Sharing the narrator's subject position, they become aligned with a masculine and misogynistic perspective. Analogous to the camera of mainstream cinema analyzed by Laura Mulvey (1984), the narrator's rhetoric frames the vision of the reader, who takes pleasure in possessing the objectified Other, the "safely solipsized" Lolita. The defining self is male and straight; as Mulvey explains, his determining "gaze projects its fantasy on the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (366). Thus, the reader sees the young girl through the frame of Humbert's controlling prose, which subjects Dolores Haze to his obsessive fantasy.

Set on defending Nabokov and his "morality", Nomi Tamir-Ghez argues for the differentiation between authorial and narratorial perspectives, affirming that the Russian author "ensures that Humbert's arguments are not airtight and

that enough incriminating evidence leaks out" (Tamir-Ghez 18). This argument advances the question of the girl's voice, almost silenced but not quite, for although Humbert controls the language that tells the story, Tamir-Ghez claims that Nabokov makes him "disclose some of the suppressed information and in strategically foregrounded points" (Tamir Ghez 24). A noteworthy example is the passage, at the end of Part One, when the narrator tells his readers that, the night after he first had sexual intercourse with Lolita and told the girl of her mother's death, "at the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 142). Another is when Humbert contemplates their road trip across the United States, only to conclude that the "long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to [them] than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night – every night – the moment [he] feigned sleep" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 176). These two passages briefly and compellingly convey Lolita's pain and lack of possibilities, indicating her subjectivity beyond Humbert's fantasies and solipsism.

When concerns with gender violence are at the forefront, critics – particulary those aligned with a feminist perspective – have raised important issues. Rachel Bowlby points out that, "in the wake of feminist criticism, the question of the relations between literature and pornography and their inseparability from a more general cultural misogyny has become less easy to ignore or to relegate to a quick, dismissive paragraph," especially in view of how such writings promote or belittle violence against women and children. Ethical issues cannot be ignored or separated from aesthetic ones, as if the text were "operating in its own world apart from the real one" (Bowlby 157-8). Feminists call attention to the necessity of reframing the issues of violence and sexuality as they appear in Nabokov's novel. Elizabeth Patnoe (1995), for instance, points out that Lolita, according to dictionary definitions, appears as a "seductive" or "a sexually precocious young girl," rather than a "molested" one. Patnoe further argues that "the Lolita Story and its discourse have become an ongoing and revealing cultural narrative, a myth appropriated in ways that validate male sexuality and punish female sexuality" (84). In her teaching experience of the novel, Patnoe observed the students' different reactions to the text and noted how their responses varied according to gender. Nabokov's narrative technique makes it difficult for some students to detect Humbert's unreliability and see beyond his rhetoric; in some cases, the female reader finds herself summoned to participate with the perspective of the narrator. She is required, in other words, "to identify against herself" (Patnoe 85). The reading experience of *Lolita* can be difficult and even traumatic to some students, including women who have undergone the experience of sexual abuse.

Rebecca Solnit (2015) is upfront in her declaration that Nabokov's novel is "about a white man serially raping a child over a period of years" (Solnit). But the victim's suffering is kept in the background, unlike what happens in works such as Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. When the reader is a woman,

how can she not relate to the centrality of rape in *Lolita*? According to Solnit, the rape of young girls is "omnipresent" not only in literature, but also in real life and this "can have the cumulative effect of reminding women that we spend a lot of our lives quietly, strategically trying not to get raped, which takes a huge toll on our lives and affects our sense of self" (Solnit). These words render the violence contained in the novel in terms much more concrete and urgent than those expressed by Robert Alter (2021), who affirms that "[w]hat may be at issue for readers of *Lolita* in the twenty-first century is how to regard the book in an age when our culture has become so conscious of the sexual exploitation of children and women, young or otherwise" (Alter). Here, Alter was reacting to directly to Solnit's view; his words imply that in the past sexual violence towards children and women was not taken as seriously as it is today, when women have become more vocal and assertive about their bodies and sexuality.

So how is *Lolita* to be read in the present? Against the grain, intertextually and dialogically, affirms Linda Kauffman (1992), who insists on a feminist stance as she examines the absence of a woman's voice in Nabokov's text. Interestingly Kauffman defends that the afterword written by the author, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita,*" is as much a part of the novel as its foreword by the fictional John Ray. With the exception of the first edition, the afterword has been included in every subsequent one, as well as in many translations. Humbert's narration is thus sandwiched between Ray's moralistic introduction to Humbert's writing, and Nabokov's defense of literature as "aesthetic bliss" in the afterword. Yet, in the same way the author of *Lolita* impersonates Ray's pedantic and high-minded justification for the book, Nabokov also impersonates himself at the end of the novel, when he presents his views on art.

Ray declares his hope that Humbert's writing will serve the moral purpose of instructing parents, educators and social workers on applying themselves "with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 6). Nabokov, on the other hand, detested the idea of art having a utilitarian purpose. In the afterword, he asserts he is "neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 314). Furthermore, for him "a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords [him] what [he] shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss" (314). As Kauffman sees it, the sophisticated reader, who dismisses Ray's pompous tone of morality and self-righteousness, will tend to side with Nabokov's view of art being separate from life, unaware of the trap set up by the author (48). In this manner, Nabokov's defence of art is an extension of Humbert's creed, which justifies his enjoyment and worship of nymphets. As the narrator claims, "You have to be an artist and madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame aglow in your supple spine … in order to discern at once … the little deadly demon among the wholesome children" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 17). The foreword and afterword of the novel are therefore "mirror images" and "distortions"; they are monologic takes that "seduce us into reading Humbert's narrative in a way that minimizes the

viewpoint of a bruised child and foregrounds Humbert's obsession" (Kauffman 59). But Humbert's obsession is not with the girl, it is with his own body and in Lolita he only sees a projection of his narcissism. He is not in love with her; rather, he annihilates her in the pursuit of his own desire.

Reading against the grain also involves an analysis of Humbert's role as stepfather, which makes his abuse of Lolita incestuous. Apart from his masturbatory fantasies, Humbert was only able to have sex with the girl after he became her stepfather. In this manner, the American fixation with the façade of the nuclear family is criticized; as Kauffman claims, "the novel systematically exposes the relentless familialism of American behavioral science and psychology, with its obsessive insistence on 'normalcy' in the nuclear family. By conflating that familialism with the clichés of romantic love, both ideologies are grotesquely defamiliarized" (Kauffman 70). Interestingly, Nabokov complains that one of the things that had hurt him the most in the criticism of *Lolita* was the accusation that the novel was "anti-American" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 315). This accusation targets something deeper than his representation of the "philistine vulgarity" of the cultural landscape of the United States, for it includes Nabokov's parody of core American values. In spite of the author's declared affinity with his adopted country, he left it for Switzerland as soon as he was able to afford to live there. In the afterword to *Lolita*, he additionally affirms that apart from the novel's theme, there are two other topics that are "utterly taboo" for most American publishers: "a 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" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 314). This critique of North American values indicates the relevance of the author in this century, despite the troubling misogynism in his representation of women in *Lolita*.

Lolita on Screen

How is *Lolita* shown on screen? Nabokov's novel was adapted twice for the cinema and thirty-five years separate these filmic renditions from each other. The first took place in 1962, directed by Stanley Kubrick; the second, by Adrian Lyne, came out in 1997. The adaptation of a novel to the medium of film presents several challenges, considering that the language of these two media are very distinct from each other: whereas the novel relies on words for its narrative, the language of cinema is primarily visual, it is the camera above all that tells the story. Considering the unreliability of the narrator as a central problem of *Lolita*, the question that arises is whether filmmakers are able to deal with this issue accordingly. Also noteworthy is the long history of the cinematic camera's fetishistic exploitation and eroticization of women's bodies, in close-ups and fragmentation of images, reproducing the logic of the phallocentric order. This is problematic for the adaptation of Nabokov's novel, concerned with the obsession of a middle-aged man over the body of a young girl, an appealing topic for the erotic and phallocentric gaze of the camera.

For the first filming of *Lolita*, Nabokov wrote a screenplay which has been published separately. But Kubrick used only bits and pieces of the author's version, retaining, however, enough of Nabokov's original screenplay so that the Russian author's name could appear in the final, black and white film. In Kubrick's adaptation, *Lolita* begins and ends with Quilty's death, a death not shown to the viewer, who hears the shot and sees a bullet hole that pierces a framed painting, which shows the portrait of a young girl. As part of a mainstreaming process to get past the censors, Lolita is no longer twelve but fourteen years of age and she is played by Sue Lyon. James Mason is cast as Humbert and the relationship between the older man and his young stepdaughter is somewhat normalized, appearing more like a story of love at first sight, with the sole discrepancy being that the girl is barely in her teens, while her lover is a man approaching middle age. This occurs especially due to Kubrick's lack of reference to Humbert's adolescent romance with Annabel Leigh and his resulting fixation with nymphets. Describing the pair embodied by the actors of Kubrick's film, Susan Bordo (1998) states: "Take the gum out of her mouth and she and James Mason are a pretty attractive couple". The resulting effect is that "a story originally told from the edge of a moral abyss is fast moving towards safer ground" (Jenkins 1997, 40). Furthermore, unlike the body of Nabokov's pre-adolescent twelve-year-old Lolita, Lyon's is that of a fully developed young woman, who does not look like a child and their coupling does not make the viewer think of a man having sex with a prepubescent girl.

While we have, in the novel, the narrator's rhetoric to coax the reader into siding with his view, only the images and sequences in the film forward the narrative. Mason's Humbert comes across as a fastidious and restrained stepfather, in contrast to other characters in the film, who are more straightforward in their sexual insinuations. According to Kubrick's producer James Harris: "we wanted [Humbert] to be the only innocent person in the piece" (Corliss 1994, 32). This is a far cry from the unreliable narrator constructed by Nabokov. In Kubrick's adaptation, nothing challenges his version. The film is also given a circular structure, beginning and ending with the murder of Humbert's double, Clare Quilty. As Robert Stam (2005) sees it, this "change generates a shift in genre from erotic confession to murder mystery," downplaying the sexual component of the novel (230). Quilty, who appears in the novel as a haunting shadow, less a character than a list of references and hidden clues, is brought to the foreground.[1] Played by Peter Sellers, he is turned into a comic figure who dominates the scenes in which he appears, pushing forward the narrative of pedophilia and incest. His sexual insinuations are humorous and entertaining, but they also carry a tone of menace, as they threaten to expose Humbert, leaving him clearly uneasy. But Kubrick's insertion of performances by Sellers playing Quilty, simultaneously comical, sinister and absurd, dilute the unsettling aspect of the incestuous relationship between Humbert and Lolita. Seller's diverting presence on screen glosses over the narrator's disturbing sexual obsession with a child. Although Kubrick's Quilty is very different from the character in the novel, Alfred Appel argues that "Kubrick is at his best, and nearest to the spirit of Nabokov (…), when

he is able to blend farce and terror. Peter Sellers accomplishes this brilliantly in the role of Quilty. Whenever Sellers is on the screen, the film is 'Nabokovian' in its own right" (Appel qtd. in Księżopolska 2018).

Quilty's presence in Kubrick's adaptation is indeed a quilt of various impersonations. Apart from the playwright playboy figure who shows up at Lolita's high school dance accompanied by the aloof and elegant Vivian Darkbloom – whose name is an anagram of Nabokov's –, Quilty assumes many other guises. As a guest who claims to be a police officer staying at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, he approaches Humbert at the verandah in the evening and compliments him on having such a "normal looking face," while implying there is something suspicious about him and the "lovely, pretty girl" who checked in with him. This is before the consolidation of the first sexual intercourse between Humbert and Lolita, and Humbert is clearly uncomfortable by this encounter with someone who says he represents the law. At a later scene, the mercurial Quilty, or rather Sellers, unexpectedly appears in Humbert's house as Dr. Zemph, a psychologist who persuades Humbert to allow Lolita to participate in the school play. Dr. Zemph is played as a caricature, with a heavy German accent. He asks Humbert whether Lolita had been instructed in the "facts of life" and says that she seems to suffer from an acute "repression of the libido," before threatening Humbert with a quartet of psychologists who would come and investigate "the home situation," something which could be taken to a "higher level of authority" if Humbert does not comply. Upon positing these threats, Humbert is convinced to let Lolita participate in the school play, where her bond with Clare Quilty is strengthened and marks the beginning of her escape.

The misogynous rendition of Charlotte Haze, Lolita's mother, is a troubling feature of Kubrick's *Lolita*. Misogyny towards older women is the other side of the coin, as far as Humbert's obsession with young girls or "nymphets" is concerned. As in the novel, Charlotte is represented unsympathetically: a frivolous middle-class woman whose aspiration to sophistication and romantic fantasies appear ridiculous. Shelley Winters plays Charlotte as a nagging, frustrated and annoying woman; arguably, she appears in a more negative light in the film than she does in the novel, where she is described as a woman in her mid-thirties, with "quite simple but not unattractive features of a type that may be defined as a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich," although she is placed among the sort of women "whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 37). She emerges in Kubrick's version eager to attract Humbert, while remaining faithful to the memory of her late husband, whose photograph and ashes are preserved in the bedroom. Charlotte's bizarre death, which puts Lolita within Humbert's reach, is celebrated by Mason's Humbert, shown enjoying himself in a bathtub while having a drink. Shortly before her death, Humbert exercises his rhetoric of persuasion by gaslighting Charlotte when she discovers his diary, in which he refers to her using derogatory terms such as "the Haze woman, the cow, the obnoxious mamma." When Charlotte reads out from his

diary, and confronts him, leaving the room in a fury, he shouts: "It's so easy to explain, it's a hallucination, you're crazy, Charlotte!"

Michael Wood (1993) considers the misogynous and insidious treatment of Lolita's mother as a form of advancing the "pedophile's case for his vice: little girls are not just little girls, they are *not adult females*", stressing the notion of the pedophile's inability to relate with mature women (185, his emphasis). Charlotte's characterization underscores the fact that both the novel and the film configure an identification with a masculine perspective. Stam clarifies this:

> While conventional morality would have had us side with the exploited mother and sincere wife Charlotte, the structure of the film and the dynamics of the performances lead us to empathize with Humbert. Not unlike the novel's murdering protagonist, we too begin to see Charlotte as an annoying obstacle to a liaison that we (*sic*) as spectators desire as well. (240).

Furthermore, unlike the novel, where Nabokov makes his unreliable narrator disclose underlying clues to Lolita's suffering, nothing of the sort appears in the film.

Sometimes life imitates art. Sue Lyon's death in 2019, at the age of seventy-three, attracted the attention of journalists and also of some scholars, concerned with the cinema industry's predatory sexual exploitation of young actors. Lyon became identified with the role of the nymphet, which briefly made her a star; her sexualized image was, according to Sarah Weinman (2020), the "beginning of an undoing similar to the one Nabokov's nymphet endures". In the article "The Dark Side of *Lolita*," Weinman interviewed Michelle Phillips, a friend of Lyon's, who said that the actress revealed that she had lost her virginity to the film's producer, James Harris. At the time, Lyon would have been fourteen years old, while Harris was thirty-two. Back then, the romance between the two was dealt with by entertainment magazines as a conventional relationship, despite the huge age difference between them.[2]

When Adrian Lyne's version of *Lolita* was announced in the late 1990s, with the fifteen-year-old Dominique Swain playing the role of the nymphet, Lyon looked back at the time she worked for Kubrick and declared: "My destruction as a person dates from that movie. *Lolita* exposed me to temptations no girl of that age should undergo. I defy any pretty girl who is rocketed to stardom at 14 in a sex nymphet role to stay on a level path thereafter" (Lyon qtd. in Weinman).

Lyne's filmic adaptation was completed in 1997 and was released in Europe, where it encountered some controversy over the issue of pedophilia, especially in Germany, where there was a move to boycott it (Wood 183-4). The film's distribution in the United States was complicated due to the exposure in the media of high-profile sexual abuse and violence cases, but it was finally screened on the television cable network Showtime. Jeremy Irons, whose filmography had previously included sexually complex roles, such as in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), *Dead Ringers* (1988), and *M. Butterfly* (1993), was cast as Humbert, conveyed as a melancholic, tormented and scholarly

European living in America. As Lolita, Swain offers a more infantile version of the nymphet than Lyon: a pretty girl with a lean body who could be a sloppy brat with no boundaries, but also charming and vulnerable. With a lively personality, she dances, reads comics and misbehaves, sticking gum over Humbert's writing papers, putting her feet over his eyes while he's driving and being maddeningly mischievous in other ways. The focus of her childish sensuality is drawn to her face, especially her mouth: she is given a retainer she removes for kissing, thus signaling an abandonment of her childhood; she wears red lipstick when she wishes to appear grownup, as when dining with Humbert at the Enchanted Hunters hotel; she smiles at Humbert with a milk moustache above her lips, sitting in front of the open refrigerator; and also suggestively eats a banana in the car while he is driving.

More manipulative than Lyon's interpretation of the pre-adolescent, Swain's Lolita seems to be an accomplice rather than Humbert's victim. In Lyne's film, as in Kubrick's, Lolita is fourteen years old. Her childishness is accentuated in costume: she wears shorts, frills and ribbons. As Wood sees it, "[t]he effect, curiously, is to make her look like an older girl … disguised as a much younger one, something like Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*, only sexier and sunnier and faster" (186). This is an interesting comment, considering that in the novel, before he arrived in America, Humbert had his lovers dress as if they were much younger, so they could give him the illusion of being pre-pubescent girls.

Unlike Kubrick, who makes no reference to the Annabel Leigh episode, Lyne provides brief scenes of Humbert's youth romance in soft pastel and hazy colors, as if glimpsed through the filter of memory. The young actress playing Annabel, Emma Griffiths-Malin, is more sexually forward than the boy. When the two escape to an isolated shed near a beach, she stands up, raises her dress and pulls down the old-fashioned pair of knickers she is wearing, with blue ribbons inside the laces. There is a shot of young Humbert removing the ribbon from the laces. This piece of fabric is used to metaphorically connect Humbert's memories of the past to the present, tying Annabel's image to Lolita's. There is a scene of adult Humbert writing on his journal, after he had left Europe and moved to Charlotte's house in America. He is shown using the ribbon, which he apparently kept throughout the years, as a bookmark to the pages where he registers his thoughts, while glancing at Lolita through the window of his room. It is a brief, yet poetically rendered image of how young Annabel never left his mind, tying the girl of his youth to the one in the present.

Although Lyne's adaptation was viewed by various critics as being more 'faithful' to Nabokov's book than Kubrick's, Susan Bordo raises serious points about that. In her view, the novel presents a "brilliant, precise, non-demonizing but unsqueamish dissection of pedophilic desire" (Bordo 1998). But Lyne's film treats the girl as the cultural archetype that Lolita has since become, representing a sexually aware child, rather than one subjected to abuse. Bordo draws attention to the scene in the film in which Lolita is found by Humbert with lipstick smeared over her mouth, suggestive of an encounter with another lover while he had gone

out. Crazed with jealousy, he climbs on top of her for rough and angry sex, while she laughs perversely, as if enjoying it. Indeed, even when Humbert rapes her in desperate, furious passion, she seems in control of the situation. Bordo argues that, apart from this moment, "there is not a single scene in Lyne's movie in which Humbert is portrayed as the initiator of erotic relations with her" (Bordo 1998). Instead, it is the girl who approaches and provokes him, she is the one who runs up the stairs before going to summer camp and jumps on him, wrapping her legs around his pelvis, before kissing him on the mouth. Also, she unties the drawstring of his pajamas before they have sex for the first time. Lyne even portrays Lolita and Humbert on a rocking chair, Lolita on his lap, reading a comic book. After a while, she throws her head back in abandonment, as if having an orgasm. This is a sharp contrast from the novel's description of the 'Frigid Queen', who never once vibrated under Humbert's touch (Nabokov, *Lolita* 166), of the "typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a newspaper, as indifferent to [his] ecstasy as if it were something she had sat upon, a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis racket, and was too indolent to remove" (165). Lyne does show Lolita crying at night, after being told her mother had died, when she comes to Humbert for comfort. Yet this scene, as well as another when Humbert hears Lolita crying. into her pillow at night, is less impactful than the sexually charged ones.

Melanie Griffith is cast as Charlotte, rendering her with a touch of glamour and elegance, smoking cigarettes and speaking with an affected diction, which can be irritating, especially when she unsuccessfully nags her daughter into doing household chores. She competes with Lolita from the start for Humbert's attention, but is consistently defeated by her daughter. Otherwise, this Charlotte is tougher than Shelley Winters' and remains so even after she dies: an interesting image is when her dead body is uncovered on the street for Humbert to identify it. Her eyes are still open and seem to give Humbert an incriminating look, from which he retreats.

Quilty, whose presence is so dominant in Kubrick's adaptation, appears much less in Lyne's, where he is played by Frank Langella. His face is often partially obscured in the scenes where he appears; an exception is the sequence of Humbert's final confrontation with him and of his murder, which is bloody, explicit and grotesque. When Humbert arrives at Pavor Manor, Quilty appears wearing an open robe, his penis exposed and limp. He is camp and non-threatening, but gross to an extent that the film viewer might question what Lolita could possibly have seen in him, whose unkempt appearance sharply contrasts Irons' handsome Humbert. Quilty's death is messy and long drawn: Humbert shoots him several times and blood falls everywhere. Whereas in Kubrick's film Quilty plays a very central role and even steers the narrative of incest, in Lyne's adaptation of the novel he appears somehow irrelevant. According to Wood, the later film is "Humbert's movie; he can suffer enough without Quilty, as long as he loses Lolita one way or another; and Quilty seems to have staggered in from the novel merely to die": the garishness of his murder seems to belong to another film (Wood 187).

Whether Lyne's version is "Humbert's movie" and Kubrick's is Quilty's, what cannot be denied is that the two adaptations differ significantly from each other and are entertaining in their own right, but neither do justice to the complexity of Nabokov's novel in terms of its unreliable narrative and his complicated relationship with language and exilic condition. Instead, they privilege a notion of tantalizing sexual precocity embodied in an attractive girl. In both films Lolita is shown to be manipulative; she's aware of Humbert's desire for her body and is willing to use it to control him. It is he, however, who is in charge of the situation and takes possession of her life. As in the novel, Dolores's subjectivity is trivialized and she has little agency or voice over her own destiny, defined by the men with whom she becomes involved. The portrayal of Charlotte is also problematic: while the young girl appears as a temptress, the desire of the mature woman is presented as an annoying obstacle to the attainment of the actual erotic object, a pre-adolescent with no will of her own.

Kubrick's film ends with the image of a painting of a young woman wearing an old-fashioned hat, which evokes Humbert's first vision of Lolita, sunbathing in her mother's garden, wearing a two-piece bathing suit and a large straw hat. The portrait is pierced by bullet holes on the cheek and neck, signaling her destruction. Lyne's ending, on the other hand, includes Humbert's reflections as he looks over a green valley, partially reproducing the text of novel: "What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, […] I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 308). These lines acknowledge Lolita's stolen childhood, her unheard voice and lack of determination over her life.

Lo's tongue

"[T]he reader will notice what pains I took to speak Lo's tongue," declares Humbert (Nabokov, *Lolita* 149). Lolita is, however, spoken for in the novel that bears her name. Robert Alter wrote that Dan Franklin, one of the most celebrated book editors in the United Kingdom, told him he would not publish *Lolita* if the novel were submitted to him in the present (Alter 2021). Considering the *Zeitgeist* of the first decades of the twenty-first century, where the politics of gender and sexuality are at the forefront, it is not difficult to understand Franklin's position, in the sense that publishing a novel about the sexual exploitation of a child today would undoubtedly lead to backlash. But the issue raised here is hypothetical. *Lolita* was published and its cultural impact cannot be denied. It raises the topic of sexual violence and pedophilia in a controversial manner, presenting it through the perspective of a skillful, albeit unreliable narrator, who seeks to align the reader to his side. Although the novel is set against a multi-layered textual background, where the narrator's relation with language and the cultural landscape of the United States engages the reader's attention, its manicured violence towards Dolores Haze must not be downplayed. It is a novel to be read against the grain, considering what it reveals about the context in which

it was produced, one of misogyny and also of displacement. Nabokov's exile fostered an experimentation with language which, as Steiner points out, reflect his dislocation, rendering his work extemporaneous, but also profoundly of our time (Steiner 21). Equally important is the perspective of feminist readers, who, without censoring the novel, critique the text and offer readings which assert its relevance, exposing the fissures within the narrator's "fancy prose" and Nabokov's artifice. The book's not for burning, nor is it for censoring or cancelling. It is to be read and discussed intertextually, against the backdrop of literary and cultural concerns, highlighting the struggle of voices and textures around and within.

Notas

1. For a fascinating discussion of how Kubrick expands the presence of Seller's Quilty on the film to play a game with the viewer, please see Irena Księżopolska article, "Kubrick's Lolita: Quilty as the Author."
2. The manipulation of Lyon's image by the film industry was not unlike that of actors such as Shirley Temple or Tuesday Weld, who were "reduced to overtly sexualized objects in film and media by male producers" (Fenwick 2021, 1798), thus enabling a pedophilic gaze and eroticization of the child's body.

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