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**Deconstructing the American Façade in Nabokov's**  
***Lolita*; a Tale of Decadence within a Memoir**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

Author: Albert Muñoz Varela

Supervisor: Andrew Monnickendam

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

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## CONTENTS

<b>0. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. The Dismemberment of Freud: Annabel Leigh the ghost .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2. Deconstructing the American Consumerist Machinery .....</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 - Charlotte .....	15
2.2 - Lolita .....	18
2.3 - Master-Slave Dialectic .....	21
<b>3. Dismantling the Dominant Discourse: the Death of the Author .....</b>	<b>24</b>
3.1 - Quilty .....	24
3.2 - Humbert Humbert .....	28
<b>4. Conclusions.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>37</b>



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## Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is a novel that requires no introduction whatsoever; since its publication in the United States in 1958, it has become a myth in popular culture. It has been read in a wide array of interpretations by different people and generations. Humbert has been condoned by some and condemned by others. In either case, he is presented as a complex and rich character whose voice paints the canvas that *Lolita* represents.

Before his trial for murder and paedophilia takes place –which will never happen– Humbert writes his memoir entitled “*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*” (Nabokov, 2006: 1), in which he tells the readers about his absolute love for Lolita, a 12-year-old girl-child that he categorizes as a ‘nymphet’. The thesis statement of this paper claims that this memoir is not solely Humbert’s recollections but also a critique and a deconstruction of post-Second-World-War decadent America. Humbert, as a European émigré, has a privileged position from which he is able to judge with more clarity an American society that has given its back to its foundational values of community, respect and decorous behaviour. Ironically enough, he will be the quintessential instance of American vice, deceitfulness and decadence through his process of Americanization.

Humbert criticizes this postwar America by means of *Lolita*’s main characters/caricatures: Annabel Leigh, Charlotte, Lolita, Quilty and himself. Through them he pretends to denounce to what an extent Americans depend on psychotherapy, are alienated by the advertisement culture; how uncultivated they are and how they (Quilty and Humbert, and people like them) take advantage of their social position, power and prestige to abuse children. Humbert cannot escape his own criticism and will end up portraying himself as the morally most wretched character in the novel.

**Keywords:** *Lolita*; Vladimir Nabokov; American Decadence; post-Second-World-War America; Psychotherapy; Consumerism; Master-Slave Dialectic; Power Abuse; Manipulative Narrative.





## 0. Introduction

As Humbert is both the narrator of *Lolita* and one of its main protagonists, it seems obvious that his act of narration displays Humbert the character's predilection for solipsism. (Schweighauser, 1999: 101)

Julian Connolly states on the very first page of his book *A Reader's Guide to Nabokov's Lolita* that "[...] *Lolita* is one of the most fascinating novels of the twentieth century." (Connolly, 2009: 1). One can agree with this opinion or not, but regardless of one's literary tastes and preferences, it is undeniable that *Lolita* is certainly a *rara avis*. Even when compared to other masterpieces of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, it still shines with unparalleled vigor and a unique light capable of piercing the readers' soul. Certainly, though, not all readers are comfortable with topics such as pedophilia, incest or murder; on the other hand, are not classics filled with wars, loneliness, despair, death, hunger, theft, treason and injustice? Enjoying reading Humbert's self-destructive voyage into madness through an untamed passion is a 'heart paradox'<sup>1</sup>, as Noël Carroll, following Aristotle, would argue. Furthermore, back in the sixties Leslie Fiedler claimed that "American literature is distinguished by the number of dangerous and disturbing books in its canon [...]" (Fiedler, 2017: 11), and that does not make it any less interesting or appealing. Moreover, "[a]lthough Humbert's pedophilia takes center stage for most readers of *Lolita*, it is in fact not sex but memory that plays the leading role." (Hasty, 2004: 228).

Its fame has transcended several barriers (moral, legal and generational) since its initial publication in France in 1955 and the United States in 1958 (Nabokov, 2011: 19),

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<sup>1</sup> Main concept in Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Terror* (1990); it refers to the simultaneous pleasure/aversion humans may feel when reading certain books in which horror, in any of its manifestations, is present.

where “[w]ithin a month, it had reached the top of the best-seller list, and it remained there for seven weeks.” (Connolly, 2012: 212). More often than not praised, but also acidly criticized, *Lolita* has imprinted its legacy in general culture to such an extent that the name Lolita is nowadays strongly linked to “a young girl who has a very sexual appearance or behaves in a very sexual way” (Cambridge Dictionary<sup>2</sup>). In the TV series *Californication*, freely based on Charles Bukowski’s life, Hank Moody has sexual intercourse with a 16-year-old woman: this affair is referred to as a “Lolita Rape Case” (WeGotThisCovered<sup>3</sup>). In music, artists such as Lana del Rey (‘*Lolita*’) or Alizee (‘*Moi Lolita*’) among many others have composed songs inspired by Vladimir Nabokov’s book.

In literary criticism, its fame has not been less noticeable: hundreds and thousands of scholars have turned their attention to Nabokov’s American *opera prima*, which is far from surprising taking into account the vastness of *Lolita*’s topics and their singular richness. Olga Hasty, for instance, claims that “*Lolita* is a novel about mortality and loss.” (Hasty, 2004: 228), while James Tweedie states that “[c]ritics have argued for the predominance of various genres within the novel –from the fairy tale to the romance to the fantastic[...]” (Tweedie, 2000: 153). Additionally, following Fiedler’s idea that “[...] [t]he American novel is pre-eminently a novel of terror.” (Fiedler, 2017: viii), one can argue that *Lolita* is certainly a gothic/terror novel where all people are but dead ghosts; Humbert is clearly the monster modeled after Dracula or Frankenstein, especially when considering that “[t]here is something very troubling in the satisfaction Humbert seems to take in his cruelty towards Dolly.” (Connolly, 2009: 110). *Lolita* is also a road novel, a detective story and, according to some early critics, also a piece of

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/lolita> on April 20th 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from <http://wegotthiscovered.com/tv/californication-season-4-11-the-supper-recap/> on April 20th 2018.

highbrow erotica. It is precisely this abundance of readings that has attracted so many literary critics, among other reasons such as its literary quality, its timeless importance or its adaptability to being constantly re-discovered and re-interpreted.

Most contemporary critics have shifted their focus towards *Lolita* and her suffering as a vulnerable child, trying to answer –for instance– whether Humbert is actually not only a pedophile but also a rapist (*Lolita* herself says in a tone that is hard to classify “Oh, you know [noisy exhalation of breath] – the hotel where you raped me.” (Nabokov, 2006: 229) ). This approach is instigated by Gender Studies and tries to give voice to a silenced *Lolita*. Is Humbert treating her as a prostitute when he says that she had to “[...] fulfill her basic obligations [...]” (Nabokov, 2006: 208)? Does it matter that he repents at the end, if he was constantly “[...] depriving her [...] of a general right.” (Nabokov, 2006: 211)? A brilliant and clear example of this shift in *Lolita*’s critical approach is illustrated by Philipp Schweighauser when he writes that “Humbert denies that *Lolita* is human and constructs her as a nymphet. As nymphet, *Lolita* is a demon who inhabits a world different from ours[...]

Although I do honestly think that such an approach is definitely appropriate and faithful to the novel’s spirit, this paper is going to approach *Lolita* in a different light altogether. My thesis statement is that through three main characters (Annabel Leigh, *Lolita* and Quilty), *Lolita* represents Humbert’s critique of a decadent America. As he is about to be judged for murder and pedophilia, Humbert turns the roles upside down and becomes the accuser in a “[...]disturbing rewriting of America[...]

Thus, he is –ironically enough– in a higher, moral position to judge the other characters/caricatures of the novel, as well as himself.

This interpretation certainly is neither entirely new nor exclusively mine; Alvin Toffler told Nabokov in an interview in 1964 that appeared in *Playboy* that “[...] many critics have called the book a masterful satiric social commentary on America.” (Nabokov, 2011: 19). My critique will be based on a close reading of *Lolita*, hence not claiming that the author –Nabokov– tried to criticize contemporary America, but that it was Humbert who articulated these thoughts through his at-the-gates-of-death memoir. This does not imply that I will not sporadically mention the author, as Nabokov and Humbert greatly resemble each other (with the happy exception of pedophilia): they both hate popular music, play chess, write, came to the United States around 1940, are émigrés, come from ‘good old cultivated Europe’, loathe Freud ( “[...] let me say at once that I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud [...]” (Nabokov, 1966: 20) ), love playing with words, etc. However, I must insist, my approach solely takes Humbert’s perspective into account, being Nabokov’s allusions merely interesting facts or vague ideas that do not form the core upon which my reading is ultimately built.

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this paper is to approach *Lolita* as Humbert’s harsh critique of American decadence through three binary characters/caricatures that he so well portrays in his memoir. Nabokov stated that “[...] [he is] annoyed when the glad news is spread that [he is] ridiculing America.” (Nabokov, 2011: 19), since “[...] America is the only country where [he] feel[s] mentally and emotionally at home.” (Nabokov, 2011: 112). Certainly, he also mentioned that “[he is] very careful to keep [his] characters beyond the limits of [his] own identity.” (Nabokov, 2011: 12), which is evidently not true in the case of Humbert (again, except for pedophilia); this means that

one can never take for granted either Nabokov or Humbert's words, for they are always encrypted amidst complicated riddles. Notwithstanding, I think it is rather safe to believe that both Nabokov and Humbert love America; it is precisely because of that that Humbert (and by extension, Nabokov) criticizes it. The criticism is born out of love and care, since such a great country is heading towards a bottomless abyss.

This paper, thus, will be organized around three main sections, each being an analysis of a character/caricature in relation to the whole text. These three parts are tightly connected since they show three different but related symptoms of the disease America suffers.

The first section will be devoted to Annabel Leigh, supposedly Lolita's precursor and one of the main reasons why Humbert falls so profoundly in love with her. Annabel Leigh is a binary made up of the real Annabel Leigh and the invented one. While the former is of little importance in the novel, the latter corresponds to Humbert's demolition of the "Freudian Farce" (Nabokov, 2011: 98). Freud's psychotherapy seems to be the only cure for post-Second-World-War America, inflicted with extreme loneliness, pointless existence, void consumerism, lack of education and an existential vacuum of beliefs and principles. According to Teckyoung Kwon, "[i]n the history of twentieth-century literature, it would be difficult to locate a novelist who voices more antipathy towards psychoanalysis than Vladimir Nabokov." (Kwon, 2011: 67). He goes further and even suggests that the whole novel could be read as a parody of psychoanalysis (Kwon, 2011: 69). Clearly, Nabokov's rejection of Freud's theses was inherited by Humbert, who is constantly charging against them mainly by means of Annabel's ghost. By summoning dead Annabel to the plot –and to the "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury." (Nabokov, 2006: 7)– Humbert is mocking the reader who feels compassion for him after discovering that he could not avoid falling in love with Lolita

so desperately because of that early, doomed love. On a second level, Humbert is criticizing the decadent America that so anxiously needs psychotherapy to carry on with its life. When has this big nation become so weak? When its men and women so fragile?

The second section will deal with the binary Lolita/Charlotte Haze, who embody the immature-girl-child-America and the mature-woman-America. Lolita and Charlotte are the same being in two different temporal planes that coexist in the same spatial reality. Had Lolita lived enough, she would have become like Charlotte; had Charlotte been a teenager at that time, she would have acted like Lolita did. They were “to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster.” (Nabokov, 2006: 167). They represent the obsessive consumer upon which the American economy so heavily relies. They are no longer humans, with feelings and thoughts of their own, but solely consumers that will bend their will to any advertisement they happen to see. This part will also deal with the Hegelian concept of ‘master-slave dialectic’ that occurs between Lolita and Humbert, especially fertile if one interprets that the book is about “[...] the seduction of a middle-aged man by a twelve-year-old girl [...]” (Fiedler, 2017: 335). This shift of power between children/teenagers and fully-grown adults shows a twisted, fluid world of morals and principles. Moreover, the binary Lolita/Charlotte frontally clashes with Humbert in what regards culture, manners and taste. They represent either the pretentious America (Charlotte, whose French is “horrible”) or the lazy, dirty and uneducated America (Lolita, who “needs a bath” (Nabokov, 2006: 55) ). The motif of the banal magazines at their home and throughout the novel is in stark contrast with Humbert’s fine prose and rich literary allusions.

Finally, the last section will be articulated around the binary Quilty/Humbert, who embody the immature-boy-child-America and the mature-man-America. Although

the idea seems to be in virtually all critics' minds, it was Schweighauser who coined their relationship as 'dopplegänger' (Schweighauser, 1999: 102). Quilty could have been the novel's hero; the one who, like a silent ghost, follows Humbert and Lolita's trail and saves her from her monstrous kidnapper. Nonetheless, Quilty is solely interested in her participating in his "[c]razy things, filthy things." (Nabokov, 2006: 316), so when she 'said no' (ibid), he 'kicked her out' (ibid). Humbert, ironically Freudian, projects all his crimes, self-hatred and guilt onto Quilty to whom he will murder so as to try to get rid of his darkest, most evil part, failing miserably at feeling at ease afterwards. Hence, this part depicts the depraved America that lies hidden behind a nice, smiling face. Definitely, Humbert is to blame for too many monstrosities that cannot be pardoned, even if by means of his immaculate rhetoric many readers certainly feel certain empathy towards him. Quilty emerges as that recognizable celebrity that so many people respect and praise, ignoring his darkest and truest self.

My reading of *Lolita* as Humbert's deconstruction of America, showing that its façade is falling apart, does not mean that the writer of this paper neither fails to acknowledge Humbert's crimes nor tries to minimize them to its least expression. On the contrary, I explicitly maintain that everything that Humbert criticizes in his memoir is but a joke in comparison to the hell he made Lolita go through. For this reason, in the last section I will pay close attention to his 'dopplegänger' nature with Quilty, so he does not simply go scot-free by the end of this paper.



## 1. The Dismemberment of Freud: Annabel Leigh the ghost

By giving her predecessor the name “Annabel Leigh”, which is itself derived from that of a fictional character, Humbert indicates that his very creation of “Lolita” is to a certain degree a literary or verbal creation, a product of the creative imagination, and not an animate sentient being with a consciousness, a will, or indeed a life of her own. (Connolly, 2009: 25)

In Nabokov’s *Lolita* Annabel Leigh is a twofold character/caricature. On one hand, there is the real one: young Humbert had a crush on Annabel, which serves him as a device to justify his love/lust for Lolita. He appeals to the readers’/jury’s sensibility so as to convince them that Lolita was for him a second chance that life gave him to reunite with his lost and dead love, Annabel. Certainly, Humbert manipulates the reader throughout the book by means of presenting himself also as a victim (someone who is suffering) and a shy, sensitive artist whose only purpose in life is to be with his muse Lolita. Nonetheless, he also distorts reality by means of summoning certain characters and portraying them in a specific way (as will be examined in the third section, regarding Quilty). The real Annabel Leigh, then, is a tool for Humbert to clean his damaged public image; after all, he “[...]is guilty of extreme narcissism and solipsism[...]

 (Connolly, 2009: 39). One could say that the (happy?) exception to him being solely interested in himself would be Lolita, but taking into account Nietzsche’s words, he who loves, loves but the feeling that the loved person generates in the lover, not the loved person *per se*. There is a crack in Humbert’s narrative to make us feel sympathetic for him since “[...]as he later admits, ‘Annabel’ is not a ‘nymphet’ at all, so it is not in that sense that she serves as a ‘precursor’ to Lolita[...] (Hustis, 2007: 91); which means that his love towards Lolita is not actually based on that ghost of the past, but on something else.

On the other hand, there is the fictional Annabel Leigh, the absolute ghost. This second nature of the same character has a different purpose: she is summoned into the story so as to mock Freudianism and psychotherapy, ultimately criticizing a decadent America that so heavily depends on ‘the cure of the mind’. This is the interpretation of Annabel Leigh that this paper is going to be mainly focusing on. Albeit the other interpretation may be interesting and fruitful, it would be of more interest in an analysis of Humbert’s mechanisms of improving his self-representation and façade throughout the book, which is not the main objective in this TFG.

The construction of Annabel Leigh as a character seems extremely simplistic and rather ‘lazy’. To begin with, she is named after Poe’s poem ‘Annabel Lee’ (PoetryFoundation<sup>4</sup>), which curiously enough deals with two young lovers in “a kingdom by the sea” (the previous title of *Lolita*) who were separated by the female lover’s sudden death, just like Humbert and Annabel. It is certainly true that Humbert said that he would change names and places whenever possible so as to protect Lolita and her privacy, save for her name because of emotional reasons, but choosing *precisely* that name for his infancy lost love is highly suspicious. Furthermore, why should he change her name given the fact that she is dead and gone, as well as from another continent? It does not make any sense, since no reader would have identified that girl.

Annabel greatly resembles Nabokov’s young crush Colette, which points to the fact that Humbert, as a narrator/author, must have invented Annabel modeling her after his own creator’s real past. Nabokov, in *Speak, Memory* writes:

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<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44885/annabel-lee> on 21st April 2018.

I found myself digging, one day, side by side with a little French girl called Colette. She would be ten in November, I had been ten in April. [...] But when I met Colette, I knew at once that this was the real thing. Colette seemed to be so much stranger than all my other chance playmates at Biarritz. [...]

During the two months at our stay at Biarritz, my passion for Colette all but surpassed my passion for Cleopatra. Since my parents were not keen to meet hers, I saw her only on the beach; but I thought of her constantly. (Nabokov, 1966: 149-150)

There is no need to be Freudian to see in these passages too many coincidences between Colette and Annabel. Just like a matryoshka doll, Annabel is fictionally created by Humbert who, at the same time, is invented by Nabokov, who wrote in *Strong Opinions* that all art is deception (Nabokov, 2011: 10).

Furthermore, when referring to her, Humbert writes that “Annabel was, like the writer, of mixed parentage” (Nabokov, 2006: 10), which might point to certain laziness on the part of the writer (Humbert). Instead of either describing a real character of his infancy or creating one, he builds her being based on himself, Lolita and poetry. On that very same page, he uses alliteration thrice so as to describe her: “**brown bobbed** hair”, “**long lashes**” and “**big bright** mouth”, which clearly are more poetic words than an actual description of an existing girl. Her literary connection with Lolita is no surprise, since Annabel was created based on Lolita and not the other way around as Humbert tries to make us believe: in this sense, Annabel’s mother was a Spanish maid (Nabokov, 1006: 14), just like Dolores is a Spanish name. Additionally, the last time that Humbert sees Annabel there are there a ‘pair of sunglasses’ (Nabokov, 2006: 12), which connects with the first time that he contemplates Lolita: “[...]from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses.” (Nabokov, 1006: 41). In fact, they are blurred into one when Humbert’s stream of consciousness freely speaks: “[...]Annabel Haze, alias Dolores

Lee, alias Loleeta [...]” (Nabokov, 2006: 189). This quotation gives us a clue about their shared origin. Annabel’s existence depends on Lolita’s.

Notwithstanding, why did Humbert feel the need to invent Annabel Leigh, and not only that, but leave several clues about her not existing at all in his memoir? He utilizes the fictitious Annabel as a character/caricature to mock Freudianism and criticize a weakened and depressed America. Undoubtedly, Humbert knows that psychoanalysis places most of its weight on childhood and the concept of trauma, and he wants to both take advantage of that and mock those who fall into his narrative tricks. This is why he states at the beginning of his memoir that “[he] grew a happy, healthy child in a bright world of illustrated books [...]” (Nabokov, 2006: 8), a statement that is aimed at confusing Freudians: how can he be such a grotesque monster if he has had a happy, normal infancy? He also writes that “[a]t first, [he] planned to take a degree in psychiatry as many *manqué* talents do [...]” (Nabokov, 2006: 14), disrespectfully laughing at the discipline. In fact, even before Humbert has a voice of his own, John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. suggests in the foreword that “[a]s a case history, ‘*Lolita*’ will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles.” (Nabokov, 2006: 3), which again reproduces the matryoshka doll structure (the criticism inside the criticism; the joke within the joke).

There are two particular passages in which Humbert ridicules Freudianism overtly in a postmodernist turn, tearing apart ‘the fourth wall’. The first one is “I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunning leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams [...]” (Nabokov, 2006: 36)”. In these lines, Humbert is explicitly stating what he is doing throughout the memoir: laughing at the expense of those who try to understand and classify him according to a

set of rules established by an Austrian doctor. He knows how they operate, so he can crash their system and direct them in any direction he wishes to, which is what he also does with his readers all throughout the novel. The second passage is when he writes that “[w]e must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father’s central forelimb.” (Nabokov, 2006: 245), which is clearly ironic and satirical. Humbert is mocking all those Freudian associations such as ‘gun=male genitalia’, ‘mother=son’s desired lover’ or ‘cigarette=(again)male genitalia’, as well as concepts just like the Oedipus/Electra complex, toddlers’ anal phase or ‘penis envy’.

Humbert deconstructs Freudianism by means of fictional Annabel Leigh so as to raise awareness of the pointless American lifestyle, its lack of a solid moral system and the bitter existentialism it eventually engenders. All characters in *Lolita* seem, one way or another, broken and empty: non-functional. Charlotte’s friends Jean and John Farlow seem to only exist as an extended organism that needs to be close to Charlotte so as to *be*. There must be something wrong with them if they did not notice Humbert’s intentions regarding Lolita (just like Charlotte, whose case is obviously far worse). Mrs. Pratt perfectly exemplifies this new decadent American society: as a headmistress of Beardsley school, she is more concerned about Lolita’s lack of social skills or her absence of sexual interest than about her grades and acquisition of knowledge. Certainly, she can be read as a funny and extravagant character, but nonetheless it is a rather sad example of what Humbert is criticizing.

More often than not, even the same geographical America seems pointless and futile; it is in this sense that Humbert wrote that “[they] had been everywhere. [They] had really seen nothing.” (Nabokov, 2006: 199). The hotels they go to are anonymous and void; the culture of *laissez-faire* has been imposed. No one really tries to ascertain whether Humbert is actually Lolita’s father or tutor. Had any of them made a couple of

telephone calls, Humbert would have been caught at the beginning of his *road adventure*. Notwithstanding, the only thing Americans seem to care for in the novel is money. As long as Humbert pays, nobody will bother whether his version is true or fallacious. The novel is full with places where lax morals are the rule: the school Lolita attends (as mentioned earlier), as well as the camp she went to and had sexual intercourse for the first time. Television/magazine advertisements or the poster featuring Quilty that Lolita had in her room are also illustrative examples.

This vortex of vice has led America to lose its fundamental values of moral integrity, sense of community and respect, turning a solid society into a fluid one. As many will feel isolated, vulnerable and utterly lost, the Freudian monopoly to cure depression, anxiety and disorientation will become firmly established. Certainly, Humbert does not attack Freudianism on behalf of its role as medicine/doctor for the mind, but because of its intrinsic nature as farce. It was Nabokov (although it could have been Humbert) who stated in *Strong Opinions* that

Freudism and all it has tainted with its grotesque implication and methods appears to me to be one of the vilest deceits practiced by people on themselves and others. I reject it utterly, along with a few other medieval items still adored by the ignorant, the conventional, or the very sick. (Nabokov, 2011: 20).

Thus, rather than a cure for psychological problems, psychoanalysis is regarded in *Lolita* as one of the reasons why they actually exist and keep on doing so.

Hence, Humbert declares war on Freud, as Kwon suggests in his article. He creates fictional Annabel so as to mock Freudianism and raise awareness about to what an extent it has become indispensable in American society. Cunningly, he simultaneously takes advantage of and frontally attacks it. On one hand, “Humbert’s disdain for psychotherapy emerges through the insertion of a space when he argues that

Lolita's previous sexual experimentation absolves him of his crimes." (Tweedie, 2000: 156), which implies that he is consciously manipulating his readers, who are familiar with psychotherapy, to empathize with him. On the other hand, he openly confronts Freudianism as he witnesses an empty America that has given up on its foundational values and beliefs, thus creating a *vice paradise* that he both abhors and loves. Humbert's critique is obviously biased: while he dismantles both Freudianism and American decadence, he takes advantage of them so as to achieve two of his goals (be accepted by the readers despite his crimes and freely traveling with Lolita without too many suspicious eyes noticing them). One must remember at all times that he is constantly trying to steer the reader towards his solipsism, and being –as he surely is– a very clever person, he will certainly achieve that if one's guard is not up. It is in this sense that we can understand reading *Lolita* as the development of a chess game in which the reader has to confront Humbert's Machiavellian tactics and deceptions, ultimately emerging victorious.

## **2. Deconstructing the American Consumerist Machinery**

Each of the Americans Humbert encounters constructs their identity and view of the world according to the images of normalcy provided by advertising [and] mass culture [...] (Brand, 19987: 14)

Charlotte and Lolita, mother and daughter, represent in Humbert's criticism of America the new mass-produced average middle-class society that solely defines itself by means of how much they (can) consume. As it was suggested before, they are not – literally speaking– two separate beings, but a twofold character/caricature. Lolita represents what Charlotte would have been like had she been a careless teenager in those times, and vice versa. According to Brand, “Humbert can only have the illusion of possessing Lolita by spending a great deal of money to buy things for her. When Lolita becomes, in this process, a commodity, Humbert becomes a consumer.” (Brand, 1987: 19), which would imply that even though he criticizes American consumerist culture, he ends up being ‘another brick in the wall’. This section, though, will deal exclusively with Charlotte and Lolita.

### **2.1 - Charlotte**

Charlotte Haze embodies the mature-woman-America whose life is under the tutelage of advertisements; she does not have a will of her own, nor is she a free agent who does what her spirit tells her to. Her being is reduced to what the television, the radio or the magazines manage to seduce her to think. Humbert writes that “[s]he was, obviously, one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality but never her soul[...].” (Nabokov, 2006: 39). She is, hence, described from the beginning as a simple woman who, nonetheless, tries



to exteriorize that she is well read and even profound. He also mentions condescendingly that she “thinks she knows French” (Nabokov, 2006: 47), mocking her attempt to sound educated and sophisticated. Charlotte’s home is “[...]that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair[...]" (Nabokov, 2006: 40). In *Lolita*, magazines are –probably– the most important motif: they are omnipresent in the narration and they represent, both for Charlotte and Lolita, the *basse culture* that frontally clashes with Humbert’s *haute éducation*.

Humbert certainly loathes Charlotte not only for what she represents, but also since she is Lolita’s guardian. His dislike of her is even greater due to the fact that he has to marry her and ‘fulfill his basic matrimonial duties’ so as to remain close to his truly beloved one, Lolita. As readers, thus, the only access that we have to Charlotte and her mind is through biased descriptions that Humbert provides, which means that one can only comment Charlotte as a character/caricature from Humbert’s point of view. He mentions that Lolita’s “detested mamma” (Nabokov, 2006: 54) likes too much being on the phone all day long having irrelevant conversations (ibid.): she is portrayed as a busybody, a chatterbox and a lazy woman who does not seem to do anything in her life, save for gossiping and buying whatever she is *recommended* to. She is also presented as an intransigent believer; Humbert comments that “[...] if she ever found out [he] did not believe in Our Christian God, she would commit suicide.” (Nabokov, 2006: 83).

Interestingly enough, once they are married “[...]she started to ‘glorify the home.’ ” (Nabokov, 2006: 86), which in this context means that she started buying new furniture and whatnot so as to create a new and better home, precisely what a consumerist society would urge her to do. Again, she is not herself when taking decisions, but always a puppet moved by the strings of the new capitalist dictatorship that was being born in post-Second-World-War America. She believes that she can only

improve her home by means of buying new items; everything is simplified to acquiring more and more material goods endlessly.

Charlotte can be read from different perspectives. As a narrative device, she is Lolita's guardian and represents the bridge between Humbert and her daughter. He must seduce and marry her so as to gain access to his nymphet. As a person, she is a widow that has to deal with a difficult teenager with whom she does not get along; she is somebody that happily opened her heart to Humbert so as to find love, care and protection. As a caricature of the American consumerist culture, she is someone that has given up her true self so as to live a simpler and more planned existence based on the accumulation of useless material goods. This is the reading this paper is interested in since it reflects yet another symptom of the American decadence. While America constructs a narrative in which it presents itself as a democratic country free of kings and tyrants, advertisements have penetrated all homes and people's minds, thus building a new kind of dictatorship where every consumer (not people any longer) feels the pressure to be constantly purchasing new and better material goods so as to ignore how empty they actually are. Even if Humbert also falls in this trap trying to seduce Lolita with clothes and money, he criticizes this new pointless consumerism. This is why Brand in her paper on American Consumer Culture states that "[t]he clearest and most obvious example of Nabokov's satiric treatment of the standardizing pressures of American life is his characterization of Charlotte Haze." (Brand, 1987: 15).

## 2.2 - Lolita

The very same moment in which Humbert has a voice of his own, just after the short foreword, he summons his muse through one of the most remembered and celebrated lines in the novel: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.” (Nabokov, 2006: 7). This wonderful evocation is full of poetry and love, passion and talent; it clearly shows the genuine love Humbert feels towards Lolita (or at least, that is what he wants us to think). Nonetheless, the fact that she is his muse does not prevent him from using Lolita as a character/caricature through which Humbert criticizes a decadent America blinded by extreme consumerism, laziness and ignorance. Lolita –being part of the binary Lolita-Charlotte– represents the immature-girl-child-America, which is why “[m]any early critics sided with Humbert and took a dim view of Dolly Haze (Dorothy Parker, for one, called Dolly ‘a dreadful little creature, selfish, hard, vulgar, and foul-tempered’)” (Connolly, 2012: 213). Despite the fact that early critics’ readings might have been slightly male-centered (even if written by women), it is undeniable that there exists a huge “[...]distinction that Humbert sees between the high culture of his educated European background and the low (American) culture embraced by Charlotte and Dolly[...].” (Connolly, 2009: 155).

To begin with, Humbert criticizes the character/caricature of Lolita, just like he did when referring to Charlotte, because rather than being a free agent with a will of her own, her mind is contaminated and colonized by magazines and television advertisements. In this sense, when Humbert is toying with the idea of kissing her at Charlotte’s home, he writes: “I knew she would let me do so, and even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches.” (Nabokov, 2006: 52). Lolita would have kissed Humbert with her

eyes shut because she had seen it too many times on TV or at the movies; hence she would be emulating the famous actors and actresses of the big screen, who not always are as nice as they are thought to be, as we will see regarding Quilty in the next section. Lolita's life is steered by manipulative advertisements, which take all the decisions she should be taking for herself. The following quotation perfectly illustrates this consumerist alienation that Lolita suffers throughout the novel:

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 café 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. (Nabokov, 2006: 167)

Just like her mother *had* to buy any new piece of furniture that was announced on television or recommended in a magazine, Lolita *had* to go to the places she had seen advertised; she *had* to buy whatever was new, different or slightly original. Thus, Lolita does not choose freely what she wants, but desires what she has been told to; one could argue that even her ‘masculine ideal’ (originally Quilty) is imposed since he represents at the same time the power of advertising and the attraction of Hollywood and fame.

Lolita is also an egotistic, spoiled girl-child who is able to use others so as to accomplish whatever she desires. According to Fiedler, “[...] it is the naïve child, the female, the American who corrupts the sophisticated adult, the male, the European.” (Fiedler, 2017: 335). When Humbert picks Lolita up from *Camp Q*, she asks him after having kissed him: “Say, wouldn’t Mother be absolutely mad if she found out we were lovers?[...] we are lovers, aren’t we?” (Nabokov, 2006: 128). At this point, Lolita does not know about her mother’s death, but when Humbert tells her that “[her] mother may have to undergo a very serious operation” (Nabokov, 2006: 129), she brutally ignores

his words and simply commands him to go to a candy bar (Ibid.). Even if she is a teenager who, as such, might be more selfish or insensible, it is unforgivable that she does not care for her mother, especially when she is the only family she has left.

She also represents the failure of this new post-Second-World-War America at teaching its citizens how to raise children properly. Humbert plans to drug Lolita to sleep –a twelve-year-old girl-child at that time– in the first hotel they go to so as to have sexual intercourse with her without her consent (or plainly, he plans to *rape* her). Notwithstanding, and always according to his own testimony, “[...] it was [Lolita] who seduced [him]” (Nabokov, 2006: 150). Before he lets the readers know that he “[...]was not even her fist lover” (Nabokov, 2006: 153), Lolita asks him: “[y]ou mean, [...] you never did it when you were a kid?” (Nabokov, 2006: 151). On top of that, she had had at least one lesbian experience with a friend of hers. Humbert portrays and criticizes an America that has normalized this sexual behavior amidst girl-children, while at the same time he takes advantage of that and is the actual perpetrator.

Humbert, then, uses the character/caricature of Lolita so as to denounce American decadence in what concerns the alienation of its society under the tutelage of colonizing advertisement, youngsters’ selfishness and girl-children’s early and uncontrolled access to sex. This does not mean that Lolita is to blame for everything: one should remember at all times that “[she] was an orphan. [She] was a lone child, and absolute waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult had had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning.” (Nabokov, 2006: 158), who on top of that “[...]had absolutely nowhere else to go.” (Nabokov, 2006: 160). As mentioned earlier, the fact that Humbert criticizes American decadence through certain characters/caricatures does not exculpate him from his crimes: he raped Lolita and deprived her of the normal life she should have lived.

### 2.3 - Master-Slave Dialectic

The master-slave dialectic is a key and fruitful concept in Western philosophy that can be useful when describing the two-fold relationship between Humbert and Lolita. It was developed by Hegel in his 1807<sup>5</sup> book *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Mehmet Skerci, “[...]the relationship between lordship and bondage can be described as a complicated relationship.” (Sekerci, 2017: 149), in which desire is the main motivation (Ibid.). More importantly, “[...] [master and slave] find themselves in this struggle in order to reach the level of self-consciousness.” (Sekerci, 2017: 151), which implies that only one of them can be free and rule. Here a paradox arises: whoever rules cannot be free since s/he needs *the other* –the slave– to rule; the ruler becomes useless without the slave while the slave learns how to survive on their own. It is regarding this incompatibility between ruling and freedom that Skerci writes that “[i]t is true that [the master] wins the game of life and death and becomes master but dependency to the slave makes the master less advantageous than the slave [...]” (Sekerci, 2017: 152).

In the context of male-dominant America in the late 40’s, one is led to believe that a relationship between a middle-age man and a twelve-year-old girl-child would be simple and straightforward, with explicit rules of domination. Nonetheless, *Lolita* offers the readers two realities of this relationship that are in constant tension throughout the book.

The reality in which Humbert is the master and Lolita the slave seems the more logical one because of the age gap, which also implies that they play the roles of a

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<sup>5</sup> Date taken from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Phenomenology\\_of\\_Spirit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Phenomenology_of_Spirit) (retrieved on 30th April 2018).

(pseudo)father and a (pseudo)daughter. Here, Humbert exerts his authority as master ruling over Lolita and her self-consciousness. Since he had “[...] to keep [his] pubescent concubine in submission [...]” (Nabokov, 2006: 167), he was never free. Lolita, on the other hand, knew that “[t]he master is a figure who must be served if the slave wants to survive.” (Sekerici, 2017: 152), which is why she acted as commanded and pleased him. Hence, even in the passages in which Humbert seems to be in charge of the situation, he needs Lolita so as to keep on being the master. This dependency made him fragile, or in his own words: “[b]ut I was weak, I was not wise, my schoolgirl nymphet had me in thrall. With the human element dwindling, the passion, the tenderness, and the torture only increased; and of this she took advantage.” (Nabokov, 2006: 208).

The more the book progresses, the clearer it becomes the second reality of their twofold relationship, which is the most interesting for this paper. Because of Humbert’s fragility and dependence on Lolita, she ends up emerging as master and Humbert as a slave. Lolita is the one who finally seizes the power; she is in the position of blackmailing Humbert, of making him jealous and who decides when and what to do. Nonetheless, the very same master-slave nature is dangerous; even if Lolita seems to have the upper hand she still needs Humbert’s money. Furthermore, she is afraid of him physically. Humbert does not spend too much time describing this darker nature of his since, as we already commented, he is a skilled manipulator who wants the readers to feel sympathy towards him and hence be absolved of all his crimes before his darkest hour comes. When Humbert discovers that his former girlfriend –Valeria– has cheated on him, for instance, he writes: “[...] I decided I would limit myself to hurting her very horrible as soon as we were alone.” (Nabokov, 2006: 30). Additionally, one must never

forget that he murdered Quilty; regardless of how despicable he is, it is a premeditated crime.

Humbert criticizes through this twofold relationship he had with Lolita a decadent America in which parents have no control over their sons and daughters (likewise Charlotte loathed Lolita's behavior and wanted to send her to a military school, far away from her and her new husband). As happens with most of his criticisms, Humbert is biased when attacking this new generation of youngsters, teenagers and adolescents with too much liberty and no obligations (immortalized, for instance, in *The Catcher in the Rye*). Humbert resents this new reality since he wants to have full control over his nymphet.

Hegel's master-slave dialectic is still vigorous and productive nowadays: the relationship between Humbert and Lolita can be explained (and better understood) by means of it. None of the realities are fully stable since the position of the master implies a heavy dependence of the slave. This is why Lolita's life is a tragedy; even if it looks like she has the upper hand in the relationship, the brutal truth is that she is still too young to be on her own and she has no one apart from Humbert, whom she despises and at the same time needs so as to survive.



### 3. Dismantling the Dominant Discourse: the Death of the Author

Nabokov wants us to recognize Humbert's crimes in their every dimension. (Connolly, 2009: 49)

Quilty and Humbert represent a twofold character/caricature of post-Second-World-War depraved America. While Quilty embodies the immature-boy-child-America, Humbert emerges as its counterbalance: he is the mature-man-America. Although Humbert is a European émigré, he undergoes a continuous process of Americanization as the plot develops (as suggested by Simonetti). They are the two sides of the same coin, but unlike the binary Lolita-Charlotte, they do coexist in the same spatio-temporal plane. It is certainly not gratuitous when Humbert writes that “[...] [Quilty] swept by me in a purple bathrobe, very like one I had.” (Nabokov, 2006: 335) when they met at Quilty's mansion/lair for the first and last time. Both are pedophiles who place their pleasure high above the victim's suffering, the only difference being that Humbert has the leading, dominant discourse since he is the one in charge of writing the novel. At the very end of the book, Humbert states in a postmodernist way that “[o]ne had to choose between [Quilty] and H.H. [...]” (Nabokov, 2006: 352), which implies that the existence of one excludes the other.

#### 3.1 - Quilty

The first explicit reference to Quilty appears early on in the novel: “Quilty, Clare, American dramatist. Born in Ocean City, N.J., 1911.” (Nabokov, 2006: 33). Despite the fact that this reference is short and rather simple, it gives important details to the reader who revisits *Lolita*. To begin with, he is presented as an “American

dramatist”, hence an artist just like Humbert. He was born in Ocean City, which is highly ironic if one remembers that the novel was going to be called *The Kingdom by the Sea*. Last, but not least, he was born in 1911 while Humbert was born in 1910. Furthermore, one could argue that the name *Clare* is yet another connection between them as it sounds French and Humbert was born in Paris. In such a short excerpt, they are presented as very similar (same age, same literary sensibility). Not much later on in the book, Humbert tells his readers that “[he is] said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush.” (Nabokov, 2006: 46). Obviously, this “actor chap” is none other than Quilty. This will be one of the reasons why Lolita, at the beginning, feels attracted towards Humbert: because of the resemblance he bears to Quilty. Thus, even in their physical appearance they are similar. This *doppelgänger* relationship is made evident when Humbert exclaims that he is finally “[...] free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy [his] brother.” (Nabokov, 2006: 281).

As Humbert tries to track him down and punish him for having *stolen* ‘his Lolita’, as well as for having caused her so much pain (just like he had been doing systematically), the reader comes to know more about Quilty. The reader learns that he is a pedophile and was “almost jailed once” (Nabokov, 2006: 314). Since Humbert intends to murder him, he needs to justify the crime he is going to perpetrate; the reader must loathe Quilty and sympathize with Humbert’s murderous intentions. Humbert has to completely destroy Quilty’s façade as a public person. Thus, he carries on with the implacable dismantling of his persona: Quilty is portrayed as “a complete freak in sex matters” (Nabokov, 2006: 307) and as a tyrant who considered that his friends were his slaves (Ibid.).

The closer the climax of his death is, the more Quilty is referred to in a harsher way: Humbert calls him a “[...]semi-animated, subhuman trickster who had sodomized

[his] darling[...]" (Nabokov, 2006: 337). Humbert's manipulations are successful and the readers are willing to agree with Brand: "Quilty is the monster, the debased image of Humbert himself[...]" (Brand, 1987: 20). Moreover, it is not only what Quilty does or did, but what he fails to do. He is an accomplice of Humbert's perverse and endless road-trip with Lolita; Quilty only 'rescues' Lolita so as to use her in his pornographic films. Quilty goes a step further in turning Lolita into a commodity: apart from sexual pleasure he wants to earn money and fame by forcing a minor to participate in an adult movie. Or, in Connolly's words: "[t]ragically, Quilty does not really care for Dolly as an individual, and he loses interest in her when she refuses to participate in his porn films." (Connolly, 2009: 64).

As Humbert physically approaches the spot in which the murder is going to take place, "[...]the reader is reminded of the beastliness of his obsession, a beastliness he shares with his sinister *alter ego* Quilty, whose house on "Grimm road" (292) Humbert terms "the beast's lair" (274)" (Schweighauser, 1999: 107). Yet again, Humbert follows the tactic of justifying to the jury he is constantly addressing why Clare Quilty deserved to be murdered. When Humbert enters Quilty's mansion/lair the narrative is radically transformed: Quilty is portrayed as someone extraordinarily grotesque and crazy who lives in an Ivory Tower. The whole scene is ironically Freudian. On one hand, Humbert seems unable to kill Quilty because his gun has jammed and the bullets simply fall onto the floor, harmlessly. This image connects with the comments that some psychiatrists had made of his behavior. They wrote down that he was potentially homosexual and sexually impotent. On the other hand, Humbert projects all his self-hatred, all the guilt he feels for the pain he has caused to his beloved Lolita and all his anger onto his *alter ego*. Hence, by murdering Quilty he is trying to eradicate his darkest, most sinful part. The scene –once its comical side is removed– represents a spiritual cleanse. Humbert

needs Quilty's physical corpse to come to terms with himself, admit his crimes and show willingness to fix all his errors. The idea that impregnates the whole scene is that "[...] death *is* redemption [...]" (Leslie, 2017: 111).

Nonetheless, even if Quilty certainly is a despicable human being, the fact that Humbert murders him neither atones for his earlier sins, nor justifies him taking his life out of vengeance and hatred. A desolate Humbert explains what he felt right after he committed the crime: "[f]ar from feeling any relief, a burden even weightier than the one I had hoped to get rid of was with me, upon me, over me." (Nabokov, 2006: 347). This represents Humbert's second important defeat in the book, the first being Lolita's escape and the last his death/suicide, which at the same time closes and opens the narrative of the novel.

Quilty is *Lolita*'s villain, just like Humbert is. The reader may absolve Humbert for his crimes because his –after all– true love towards Lolita, while Quilty is executed, forgotten and becomes the ultimate unforgivable one. Regardless of Humbert's gradual –but constant– attempt to dismantle Quilty's façade, Quilty actually is an abhorrent human being who abandons Lolita in her darkest hour while he could have saved her much earlier from Humbert's perversions. Because of his reputation (he appears in advertisements and is a somewhat famous person/artist), he is a deceiver. He takes advantage of his position so as to gain access to girl-children such as Lolita (one must remember that he "had been almost jailed once" (Nabokov, 2006: 314), so it was not an isolated case). Furthermore, unlike Humbert, he did not feel anything for her, he did not care about her at all: he merely treated and regarded her as a commodity with which he could become even richer and more famous. Quilty represents the depraved America that hides behind a nice façade and a big smile. One can easily associate him with public figures such as Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby or Roman Polanski.

### 3.2 - Humbert Humbert

Up until this point, Humbert has been the only dominant voice articulating *Lolita*'s discourse/critique. The only other voice in the novel is that of "John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.", which is at the onset of the book only because its author had died. By the author, I am referring to Humbert, the very same who wrote "*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*" (Nabokov, 2006: 1). Humbert affirms that he wrote his memoir not to "save his head", but his soul by seeking shelter in the "refuge of art" (Nabokov, 2006: 352-353). Nonetheless, my thesis statement suggests that Humbert was at the same time portraying and criticizing a decadent America through some of the novel's main characters. When he opted to dismantle Quilty as a pervert and a deceiver who took advantage of Lolita and abandoned her, Humbert exposed his true self since he is Quilty's *alter ego*. At that very same moment, he became a character/caricature of the same America he was criticizing. Not only did he emerge as Quilty's *doppelgänger* (and hence a pedophile, a pervert and a deceiver), but also as a manipulator, a murderer and an extremely selfish person whom the readers should loathe.

One of the few reasons why some readers who are aware of his manipulative narrative do not despise him is because his love towards Lolita seems purely authentic.

In fact one might argue alongside Rita Bergenholtz that

The greatest irony in the novel is the transformation of an eroticism which begins by violating the principles of the society in which it occurs, into a love which meets the highest requirements of the humanist traditions, in showing itself not to be Time's fool'. (Bergenholtz, 1995: 232)

Nonetheless, the very same Humbert who passionately writes: " – 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." (Nabokov, 2006: 316), is the one who only six pages onwards recognizes

that “[...] nothing could make [his] Lolita forget the foul lust [he] had inflicted upon her.” (Nabokov, 2006: 322). Still, the worst is yet to come: only a couple of pages after that, he writes one of *Lolita*’s most devastating lines. A desolated, shattered Humbert discloses: “I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind [...]” (Nabokov, 2006: 324). This confession, when added to every time Humbert narrated how silly, vulgar or tiresome Lolita was for him, makes the readers realize that what he really and truly loved about her was her nymphet condition, her body and the sexual pleasure he could obtain from it. He did not care to know her better, he did not enjoy her company as a human being and he did not gave importance to her feelings, dreams or aspirations. Humbert solely tried to have her under control by means of buying everything she wanted, of pointlessly going to ‘new’ places while lying and obsessively controlling her.

Although Humbert wants to manipulate his readers and make them think that towards the end of the novel he had some kind of epiphany in which he discovered how important Lolita truly was to him –as well as how badly he treated her– it is yet another of his tricks. Humbert makes explicit reference to Lolita and “[...] her sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment [he] feigned sleep.” (Nabokov, 2006: 199), just like he describes her as if she were “[...]a small ghost of somebody [he] had just killed.” (Nabokov, 2006: 158). Additionally, he had planned to drug her to sleep so as to take advantage of her: he planned to rape the person he supposedly loved that much. Certainly, “[...]Nabokov gives us more than enough material to understand and pity Dolores’s suffering, so the text cannot be said to advocate or justify Humbert’s acts.” (Rodgers, 2011: 108). Therefore, either Humbert does not love Lolita at all but simply desires her sexually or he does not know how to love her properly since he cannot care

for anyone who is outside his solipsism. *Lolita* follows the American tradition in which “[...] the villain is [...] not the husband but the father.” (Fiedler, 2017: 120).

Even if *Lolita* is clearly the main female character whom Humbert hurts, one should never forget about Charlotte. She was genuinely in love with him and he used her so as to gain access to Lolita. Humbert the character/caricature is –just like the narrator– a manipulator who does not mind using people so as to obtain whatever he desires. For him, everyone is but a tool to achieve his goals. In fact, one could argue that Charlotte’s death is metaphorically attributable to Humbert and his treason.

Finally, Humbert is a murderer who planned to take Quilty’s life and executed his plan. As mentioned earlier on, Quilty is –without a shadow of doubt– a repulsive character, but is it not Humbert even worse for murdering him? After all, Quilty had hurt Lolita far less than he had; even Humbert acknowledges this fact when he tries to give voice to Lolita’s thoughts and writes: “*He* [Quilty] broke my heart. *You* [Humbert] merely broke my life.” (Nabokov, 2006: 318). There is a parallelism between this murder and Ahab’s desire for vengeance and death towards Moby Dick; Fiedler beautifully expresses it: “And does not the man who tries, does not Ahab [Humbert] become, in his alienation, his sultanism, his pride, his blasphemy, and diabolism, finally more monstrous than the beast he hunts [Quilty]?” (Fiedler, 2017: 385). This quotation, even if it is not about *Lolita*, fits perfectly: in the process of accumulating hatred and planning his revenge, Humbert becomes a darker character than Quilty, especially when considering all his other crimes.

Humbert Humbert is a character that one may feel sympathy and pity for until one discovers his cunning narrative tricks and manipulations. When his façade is torn apart, his truest self emerges. He has been criticizing post-Second-World-War decadent America throughout the novel, but ironically enough he is the quintessential

character/caricature of American vice, deceitfulness and decadence: the worst and the least justifiable character in *Lolita*. Perhaps he did not die “[...]of coronary thrombosis, on November 16, 1952, a few days before his trial was scheduled to start.” (Nabokov, 2006: 1), but thought alongside Werther that “[...] suicide is the noblest of all actions, a revolutionary gesture [...]” (Fiedler, 2017: 112) and took his own life in prison so as to atone for some of his sins. In fact, by killing Quilty he did commit suicide in a metaphorical way; hence, it is not far-fetched to propose that Humbert, after having written his story, realized that he was the most sinful of all his characters and thought that his own death would be poetic justice. After all, it is much too ironic that he died due to heart problems when he finished writing the memoir in which his heart was shattered into pieces because of his beloved Lolita’s absence.



#### 4. Conclusions

*Lolita*'s vitality, complexity, and human depth continue to entrance its readers, both those who are approaching it for the first time and those whose copies of the novel are well-worn from repeated rereadings. (Connolly, 2009: 51)

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is a highly influential and vastly commented novel both within the literary criticism sphere and in popular culture. It was first published in France in 1955, and in 1958 in the United States. The book can be read as a road trip, in line with Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), as the diary of a pervert pedophile; it may be a piece of highbrow erotica, as many tried to point out, or the recollections of an artist's lost love, among many other interpretations. Regardless of how one chooses to approach *Lolita*, the book seldom leaves the reader indifferent or unchanged.

The thesis statement around which this paper has been built is that *Lolita* can be interpreted as Humbert's critique and deconstruction of post-Second-World-War decadent America through its main characters/caricatures. Humbert does not loathe America *per se*, but what it has become, which is what he criticizes throughout the novel. This postwar America is selfish, uneducated and amoral; it has grown blind due to extreme consumerism and it has unleashed its worst demons: pervert pedophiles such as Quilty –or Humbert himself– hide behind a nice façade and take advantage of their position in society. Additionally, America has lost its foundational values of community and solidarity, of moral rectitude and faith; instead, Americans have found their new God in vice and perversion, in money and consumerism. This situation has led Americans to a nihilistic existence whose only cure seems to be Freudianism, a set of beliefs that Humbert openly rejects and mocks.

The first character/caricature that we analyzed was Annabel Leigh. Contrary to what Humbert tries to make the readers believe, she was modeled after Lolita so as to give his readers a reason why he felt so profoundly in love with Lolita. The main reading of Annabel in this paper points at the fact that she is not a real character, but one created by Humbert's mind so as to manipulate the reader. His objective is twofold in doing so: on one hand he is trying to rationalize his falling in love with a 12-year-old girl-child; on the other hand, he is mocking Freudianism at the same time that he takes advantage of it. Since Humbert knows that his readers are familiar with Freud, he appeals to the notions of 'trauma' and 'infancy' so as to "scientifically" explain his love towards Lolita and to ridicule the readers who fall in his trap for believing in the "Freudian Farce" (Nabokov, 2011: 98). Humbert ultimately uses Annabel Leigh as a fake character so as to give visibility to America's dependence on psychotherapy, and what this fact implies: a lonely, broken and lost society.

The second section dealt with the binary Charlotte/Lolita. They represent the extreme consumerism, as well as the *basse culture* that clashes with Humbert's *haute* European education. Charlotte merely buys what is advertised on the television, while Lolita only goes where she is *recommended* to. Charlotte, once married, wants to improve the marital home and she does so by means of acquiring new furniture and goods. Her only notion of progress and fulfillment is materialistic. Lolita, the other side of the same coin, is vulgar and selfish, rude and temperamental. When she is told that her mother is seriously ill, she does not care about it and simply commands Humbert to go to a candy shop, while playing 'the lovers' with him. He denounces the colonialist/invasive use of advertisement, which are everywhere and at all times: on television, in the magazines that populate *Lolita* or on the road. Moreover, Humbert portrays America as non-educated and vulgar. Even in an academic context (Beardsley

School for Girls), people do not seem to seek knowledge, but they are solely interested in learning how to date boys or how to engage in social relationships.

The final part was devoted to exploring the relationship between Quilty and Humbert. Quilty is the American deceiver, the child molester who hides his perversion behind his public image as an artist. He could have saved Lolita from Humbert, but instead he only turned her into a commodity and tried to make her appear in his pornographic films. Being Humbert's *doppelgänger*, Humbert kills him so as to atone for all his crimes, which he finally acknowledges. It is when Humbert deconstructs Quilty that he is exposed as yet another character/caricature of his own memoir. Humbert, the moment his readers learn how he has been systematically manipulating them, emerges as the darkest character. The only argument he held (that he did everything he did because he was madly in love with Lolita) no longer seems credible: had he truly loved her, he would not have stolen her infancy and her right to develop as a normal person. Needless to say that he would not have raped her either.

*Lolita*, thus, is a memoir in which its main character criticizes a decadent America only to discover that he is part of the same vice he was attacking, as well as being responsible for Lolita's psychological torture, isolation and sadness. After having realized that and completing his memoir, Humbert commits suicide (either metaphorically or literally).

The main limitation of this TFG has been to take into account solely Humbert's solipsist narrative and to argue that he built a critique of decadent American society through it. There is, though, an exemption right at the beginning of this paper. It was suggested that Humbert could have been lying to us by creating the character of Annabel Leigh. Certainly this is the most obvious and clearest instance of Humbert

making reality up. Thus, the main limitation revolves around the fact that Humbert's memoir was taken as a more or less faithful reconstruction of the facts that support *Lolita*. The narrator, for example, could have fallen in love with a seven-year-old child instead of a twelve-year-old girl-child: the only evidence of Lolita's age is given by Humbert and he could have lied so as to water down his crime (even if both cases are immoral, the former is far worse). The very same foreword, signed by John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., might have been written by Humbert under a pseudonym, which would open unlimited possibilities, among them the fact that he is still alive or that he had had no trial at all. Humbert could have murdered Charlotte and then write that a car hit her and took her life tragically. If one takes a skeptical position about his narrative voice, which is absolutely legitimate in this case because of his tendency to deceive and trick the readers, the possibilities are endless and as inventive as one's imagination allows. Nonetheless, once one begins being suspicious about every comma, every description and every action, literary criticism becomes an imagination game rather than a serious academic task. Because of this I chose to "believe" Humbert and built my theses around his narrative, taking it as the closest evidence to the truth, which proved to be the lesser evil.

In a further research I would very much like to deepen in how Humbert's manipulations actually work. Throughout this TFG I have been mentioning the idea that Humbert tricks and deceives the readers so as to present himself as a more likeable character. He tries to justify his obsession towards Lolita, he gives reasons why he murdered Quilty and he even acknowledges all the pain he has caused to this beloved Lolita. Time and again he portrays himself as a lonely, shy and intellectual artist with whom the readers might feel identified. I think it would be very interesting to

understand how he does so, by means of which tactics and strategies. Are they plot-related? Are they, perhaps, exclusively linguistic? Is he appealing to emotions rather than rationality to be judged?

Expanding the criticism by means of analyzing the two movie versions of *Lolita* (1962 and 1997) would surely be enriching. Each version gives special attention to certain details that the other does not do in such a way. Just like every reader reads the novel in a different light, each director appropriates the story through an experience that he or she will eventually give shape to, allowing the spectators to critically consider the work with different eyes.

I would also like to take a feminist/Gender Studies approach so as to understand Lolita –and *Lolita*– better: her silences and her suffering. Moreover, I believe that Humbert would also be an interesting character to be analyzed from a feminist perspective: how he exerts control over Lolita, how he uses his physical superiority to intimidate her or how he, just like Quilty, treats her as a mere commodity.

Additionally, I would find interesting expanding my criticism to other Nabokov's novels such as *Invitation of a Beulah Girl*, *Invitation of a Beulah Girl*, *Invitation of a Beulah Girl*; a task that I hope to carry out next year by writing the MA's TFM. Exploring other American novels in which a decadent America is portrayed would also be of great interest to me: understanding where and how the notion of 'decadence' started and how is it understood by different writers such as Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, John K. Toole or Charles Bukowski, to name but a few. Certainly, carrying out research on the literary history of the notion of decadence in America would be a thrilling topic given the fact that I dared to start a doctorate.

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### **Filmography**

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