Romantic Children, Brazen Girls?

An Exploration of the Girl-child's Representation in and around Nabokov's *Lolita* and Three Derivative Novels

by

Sandra Visser

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Supervisor: Prof. Meg Samuelson
Co-supervisor: Dr. Shaun Viljoen
Faculty of Arts
Department of English

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:……………………..
Date:…………………………...

ABSTRACT

Since 1995, three female authors have published novels narrating the events of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* from Lolita's point of view. What is it about the character Lolita that prompts writers to rework Nabokov's text? In an attempt to answer this question this thesis explores reader-responses to *Lolita*.

The grand narrative of girlhood is illuminated, and it emerges that, influenced by the discourse of Romanticism, girls' subjectivity in the Western world is governed by an 'innocent-or-corrupt' dichotomy. As a result, Lolita, who seduces her stepfather, Humbert Humbert, has been vilified by readers through the decades, so that very little further critical attention has been given to her representation in the text. However, in recent years rising concern over the representation of girls has seen renewed interest in *Lolita* from feminist quarters, with Lolita's non-representation being critics' main concern. These derivative novels work towards compiling a body of feminist criticism on *Lolita*. A secondary function of the derivatives is the restructuring of the grand narrative of girlhood: in other words, the erasure of the 'innocent-or-corrupt' dichotomy in favour of a wide range of conceivable subjectivities.

This is necessary because the sexualised images of girls in the media are in danger of representing girl-children as one-dimensional sexual objects. Both feminist critics and critical theorists are calling for a new form of resistance to these hegemonic media forms, so that a collaboration between the two fields seems useful. This thesis argues that the existence of the derivative novels point to the emergence of a new form of feminist resistance to the oppressive representations of advancing technological society.

Consequently, the thesis performs a reading of *Lolita* and three derivative novels to ascertain how the girl-child is represented. Issues of interest include the Romantic discourse of childhood, the representational practices of advancing technological society, and girls' agency. Finally, conclusions are drawn about the effectiveness of each derivative novel in terms of their contributions to both the *Lolita*-discourse and the feminist endeavour to restructure the grand narrative of girlhood.

OPSOMMING

Drie vroueskrywers het sedert 1995 romans gepubliseer wat die gebeure van Vladimir Nabokov se roman *Lolita* uit Lolita se oogpunt oorvertel. Wat is dit omtrent die karakter Lolita wat skrywers aanspoor om Nabokov se teks te hersien? In 'n poging om hierdie vraag te beantwoord verken hierdie tesis leser-reaksies op *Lolita.*

Die meesternarratief oor jongmeisieskap word blootgelê en dit kom na vore dat meisies se subjektiwiteit in die Westerse wêreld, onder die invloed van die Romantiese diskoers, regeer word deur die digotomie van 'onskuldig-of-korrup'. Gevolglik is Lolita, wat haar stiefpa, Humbert Humbert, verlei, oor die dekades heen deur lesers sleggemaak, sodat baie min kritiese aandag verder aan haar gewy is. Toenemende kommer onder feministe rondom die uitbeelding van meisies het egter in die afgelope klompie jare tot hernieude belangstelling in *Lolita* gelei, met die gebrek aan aandag aan Lolita se uitbeelding as hoofbekommernis. Die *Lolita*-verwerkings dra by tot die saamstel van 'n versameling van feministiese kritiek oor Nabokov se teks. Die sekondêre funksie van die verwerkings is die herstrukturering van die meesternarratief aangaande jongmeisieskap: met ander woorde, die uitwissing van die onskuldig-of-korrup digotomie ten gunste van 'n wye reeks denkbare subjektiwiteite.

Dít is nodig omdat die geseksualiseerde beelde van meisies wat in die media voorkom, die gevaar loop om meisies as een-dimensionele seksobjekte uit te beeld. Beide feministe en kritiese teoretici beywer hul vir 'n nuwe vorm van teenstand teen hierdie verdrukkende uitbeeldings, so samewerking tussen die twee is nuttig. Hierdie tesis doen dit aan die hand dat die bestaan van *Lolita*-verkwerkings bewys is van die ontluiking van 'n nuwe vorm van feministiese teenstand teen die verdrukkende uitbeeldings van die vooruitgaande tegnologiese samelewing.

Gevolglik analiseer hierdie tesis *Lolita* en drie verwerkings om vas te stel hoe die meisiekind uitgebeeld word. Sake van belang sluit die Romantiese diskoers van kindwees, die uitbeeldingspraktyke van die toenemend tegnologiese samelewing, en meisies as agente in. Uiteindlik word gevolgtrekkings gemaak oor die effektiwiteit van elke roman ten opsigte van hul bydraes tot beide die *Lolita*-diskoers en die feministiese poging om die meesternarratief aangaande jongmeisieskap te herstruktureer.

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PREFACE

> *I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.*
>
> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

It is past two in the morning when my train arrives in Fargo, North Dakota, and the temperature is minus nineteen degrees Celsius. I have been travelling for a week, spending roughly 60 hours on the train, and the next afternoon I will cross the state line into Moorhead, Minnesota, to meet with Nancy Jones, author of the *Lolita*-derivative novel *Molly*.

I am tired and a little overwrought; being a paranoid South African and a woman, sleeping in hostels and using public transport seemed something of a gamble, so I have not had one night's uninterrupted sleep. My fear had filled me with a great deal of shame. Why should I be fearful, when others venture out into the unknown without the slightest quiver? What kind of feminist was I? But while preparing for the interview, it dawns on me: the fear does not matter now; I am here, at my journey's culmination. I am proud. This small town girl has made it across the vast expanse – not just from South Carolina, but from Saldanha, South Africa – and is thus redeemed.

At the interview, an extraordinary thing occurs. Two complete strangers talk for three hours straight about Lolita as if she were a mutual acquaintance, a flesh-and-blood person constantly looking over her shoulder to see if help will come from somewhere. Later we drive to a nearby Indian restaurant and continue talking. Then it is almost time to catch my train again and Nancy drops me off at the motel, where I flip through the channels on the TV to kill time.

I settle on a documentary about a subculture that centres on the alternative expression of femininity. In this cultural subgroup, the girls tattoo and pierce their bodies, dye their hair black and wear heavy Goth-like make-up. To them, this is the ultimate expression of femininity. The highest ideal of their group is to be chosen for the yearly calendar. They call themselves The Suicide Girls.

I marvel at how different these girls are from me. I envy their boldness. My fear of the unknown showed up my difference. On the other hand, I am struck by the familiarity which characterised the interview with Nancy. On the topic of girlhood, we wondered the same things, hated the same stereotypes, objected to the same generalisations – despite the fact that we had been born a quarter of a century apart, on two different continents.

Small wonder that the novel *Lolita* brought us together for a moment. It is a book that speaks to the pervasiveness of a certain ideal of femininity, a Romantic ideal of purity, passivity, muteness. It is an ideal which continues to affect the lives of girls and women, making their own bodies their enemy, paralysing them, condemning them to silent suffering. How shall we refute this ideal? Who will we be without it? Must we pierce our bodies and clothe ourselves in black to be different? Can we use our words to overwrite the past?

This thesis does not attempt to answer all of these questions, but they were some of its birth pains. Searching for the answers has taken me on journeys literal, academic and emotional, and my hope is that my thesis will assist others on *their* journeys – that it will provide some insight into the evocative nature of *Lolita* and our own cultural trappings.

INTRODUCTION

(Re)Reading *Lolita*: A Study of Reader-Responses

> *During my father's lifetime and thereafter, my family has been approached by a perpetual stream of artists from around the world – filmmakers, playwrights, composers, choreographers, a graphic artist or two – who had been inspired, moved, touched by Lolita. These suitors wanted to pay homage: to take the novel, filter it through a personal vision, and transform it into what the law of copyright defines as a "derivative work" – one that "recasts, transforms or adapts" something that has come before.*
>
> Dmtri Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled Lo's Diary"

> *It appears that when readers study literature – whether in their home language, or another – they are translating it, sifting it through their own knowledge, experience and biases.*
>
> Gloria Latham, "The Bookcase at the End of the Thesis"

> *Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. […] We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.*
>
> Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision"

Since 1995, three female authors have rewritten Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) from the young girl's perspective.[1] What is it about Nabokov's eponymous heroine that prompted these authors to take up their pens and start writing, nearly half a century after the novel's publication? This question inspired the current study when my own research towards writing a short story from Lolita's[2] point of view as an honours student led me to discover the *Lolita*-derivative[3] novels *Lo's Diary* by Pia Pera (1995, trans. 1999), *Roger Fishbite* by Emily Prager (1999) and *Molly* by Nancy J. Jones (2000). While the original question remains at the heart of my thesis, I will concentrate my discussion on reader-responses to *Lolita* and the representation of the girl-child.[4] This short introduction provides a plot summary of Nabokov's novel and serves to outline the research topic in more depth, pointing forward to the structure of the thesis as a whole, as well as to the content of the individual chapters.

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[1] I refer here exclusively to the derivative novels discussed in this thesis. It is possible that other, lesser known derivative texts exist, especially since *Lolita* seems prone to inspiring derivative works.

[2] While "Lolita" is the name given to Nabokov's girl-child, Dolores Haze, by the narrator, Humbert Humbert, it is the name by which the character is most commonly known and by which most critics refer to her. For the sake of coherence I will also refer to her as such. I recognise that the use of this name has the potential to continue the distortion of the character that has become so common in criticism on the novel, but I trust that my efforts to bring the original character back into focus will counteract any such effect.

[3] I use the term 'derivative novel' to refer to texts that owe their existence another text in the that their plot *derives from* the original text.

Lolita is the story of middle-aged European scholar Humbert Humbert's obsession and sexual relationship with his 12-year-old stepdaughter, Lolita. The novel is presented to the reader as Humbert's prison memoir, written while he is awaiting trial for the murder of Clare Quilty, a middle-aged playwright with whom Lolita runs away when she is 13. Through writing the memoir Humbert wishes to ascertain or "fix" the "perilous magic of nymphets" (134). In his effort to determine the origin of his attraction to Lolita, Humbert begins his narrative by recounting how, at age 13, he fell in love with a girl his own age, Annabel Leigh, one summer at the Hotel Mirana on the French Riviera, where he grew up. Constantly under the watchful eyes of their parents, Humbert and Annabel are unable to consummate their love, "unable to mate even as slum children would have so easily found an opportunity to do" (12), and shortly after the end of summer Humbert learns that his beloved has died.

In his adult life Humbert fixates on "nymphets" and leads a double life, outwardly conforming to societal conventions, but inwardly consumed by illicit lust. He tries to quench his thirst for young girls by turning to youthful prostitutes, but to no avail; he is in and out of sanatoriums and eventually marries the child-like Valeria, hoping that the comforts of a home and wife will keep his desire in check. The marriage ends in divorce when Valeria leaves him for another man, and Humbert emigrates alone to

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[4] I use the term 'girl-child' throughout the thesis to refer to children who are girls. While Humbert also refers to Lolita as a girl-child on the first page of the novel, linking the term to the sexualised designation 'nymphet', I use the term simply for its emphasis on both the gender and age of the individual under discussion. To my mind the word 'nymphet' can be defined, following Nabokov's novel, as the particular type of girl who catches the paedophile's eye, while 'girl-child' is more general and refers to any girl of a certain age.

America, where he continues to suffer under his sexual desires. After another bout in a sanatorium Humbert decides to settle in the New England town of Ramsdale as a lodger in the home of the impoverished McCoos. Upon his arrival in Ramsdale, however, Humbert learns that the house where he was to board has burned down and he is directed to the home of the widow Charlotte Haze, who has a room to let. When Humbert sees her 12-year-old daughter, Dolores, he is immediately smitten, for in her he sees the reincarnation of Annabel Leigh. He nicknames her Lolita.

After Lolita is sent away to summer camp Humbert marries Charlotte, who has fallen in love with him, in order to gain more access to Lolita. He contemplates murdering Charlotte. Immediately after discovering Humbert's secret diary recording his obsession with Lolita, a distraught Charlotte dashes across the street to mail some letters, is hit by a car and killed instantly. Humbert fetches Lolita from summer camp and embarks on a year-long road trip with her, initially telling her that her mother is seriously ill and in hospital. At a hotel, The Enchanted Hunters, Humbert first tries unsuccessfully to drug Lolita in order to molest her, and then takes advantage of her ignorance in sexual matters when she "seduces" him by engaging him in childish sex play. He repeatedly has "strenuous intercourse" with her and thus initiates the sexual abuse that continues for almost two years, not only on the road, but also when they settle in the town of Beardsley and Lolita returns to school.

During this time he bribes, cajoles and threatens the child into sexual submission. In Beardsley Lolita is cast in the school play, written by the handsome Clare Quilty. Lolita, having idolised this celebrity since meeting him at the age of ten, falls in love with Quilty. She tricks Humbert into taking her on another road trip, during which she plots and schemes with the playwright to escape from Humbert. Lolita succeeds, but is thrown out by Quilty after refusing to participate in the making of a pornographic film.

Humbert tries to find Lolita, and when she writes to him a few years later to ask for money he finds her pregnant and married to Richard Schiller. After learning that Lolita had originally left him for Quilty, Humbert tracks down Quilty, shoots him, and is soon arrested. In prison he composes "Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male" while awaiting trial. After Humbert's death from coronary thrombosis and Lolita's death in childbirth at age 17, Humbert's prison memoir, as stipulated in his will, is published.

This story of broken trust, illicit lust and obsession was designed to elicit a strong reaction, as an overview of the novel's history will show. From the outset, my study followed an approach based on reader-response theory on account of my concern with the apparently causal relationship between reader-responses to the original novel and the existence of the derivative novels. Reader-response theory posits that "[m]uch of the story takes place not on the page but in the mind of the reader, who will, in any case, bring a particular perspective to bear on the text and will read it in terms of that perspective" (Turco 164). Such an approach suggested itself almost organically, since it was my desire to alter classmates' negative responses to the novel that prompted the idea to produce a derivative short story. When we read *Lolita* as part of an honours module, the sexual abuse depicted in the novel, together with the narrator's claim that the 12-year-old Lolita initiated a sexual relationship with him, disturbed some members of my class so much that they could not bring themselves to finish reading the novel and/or appreciate what I consider to be its artistic brilliance. It was my hope that a first-person narrative depicting the young girl's experience of her own awakening sexuality would serve to displace the ideal of female (sexual) innocence, the transgression of which was, it seemed, partially responsible for detracting from a more holistic view of the text. To my mind, the text deliberately and self-consciously plays on the reader's assumption that Lolita is sexually innocent as part of its literary technique, but the ideal of children's (especially girls') sexual innocence seemed to be too entangled with my classmates' moral convictions for this device to be effective.[5]

My subsequent discovery of the three derivative novels suggested that the representation of Lolita has been a contentious matter in the greater literary arena as well. However, preliminary research indicated that literary criticism on the topic of Lolita's representation is limited and, when present, is often subject to the same kind of prejudices which I perceived to shape my classmates' responses to Lolita's character – prejudices arising from cultural preconceptions regarding girls' sexuality (or lack thereof).

As a consequence of these preconceptions, some critics dismiss Lolita's characterisation as a seductress as an attempt by Humbert Humbert to absolve himself of his crime, rejecting the idea that a 12-year-old girl could or would act in such a brazenly sexual manner.[6] Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* for instance, condemns the attempts of those critics who *do* portray Lolita as anything other than innocent; for her, "Lolita belongs to a category of victims who have no defence and are never given a chance to articulate their own story. As such, she becomes a double victim: not only her life but also her story is taken from her" (41). Even those critics who choose to assign some blame to Lolita treat her as one would a naughty puppy, using words such as "brat," "moppet" or "little monster" (Nafisi 40), thus undermining the suggestion of agency in Nabokov's depiction.

Conversely, the Lolita of popular culture is overwhelmingly portrayed as brazen and devoid of morality, a sexual hedonist wholly removed from the plain of normative female sexuality. This representation of Lolita, as an act of caricature, contributes towards the construction of innocence as the ideal, implying that sexual awareness and/or autonomy in girls is sordid and unacceptable. Ultimately, however, whether Lolita is depicted as saintly or depraved, both representations are distortions of Nabokov's original character.

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[5] Following Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative, this thesis conceives of femininity as a "gendered illusion" sustained by "bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds" (415).

[6] The reaction of various critics will be elaborated upon in more detail in Chapter Two and Three.

Consequently, since the concept of subjectivity[7] reveals the discourse(s) in which a subject is positioned as the chief determinant of meaning, it emerges that the girl-child is caught in a custodial tug-of-war between various discourses. The challenge to the feminist scholar is to reposition the character Lolita within the text *Lolita*, pulling her clear of other discourses that impose meaning on her. Therefore, this thesis aims to show that the *Lolita*-derivative novels contribute toward repositioning the Lolita-character, primarily by giving the character a voice in their capacity as first-person narratives, but also, indirectly, by drawing renewed attention to the girl-child in the original text.

In the process, it is revealed that Nabokov's 1955 novel addresses themes currently at the quick of debates within Girlhood Studies – debates concerning the implications of girls' representation and the ideological constructions of girlhood sexuality. Nabokov's novel exposes the difference between reality and representation, but also problematises this distinction through his narrator's inability to discriminate between the two. The derivative novels similarly unsettle the concept of representation by taking the reader into the mind of the Lolita-character, thus undermining the representational power of one-dimensional categories of girlhood. Furthermore, these novels, written at the fin de siècle, contribute to latter day discourses on the implication of representational acts in the post-feminist media age, specifically those concerned with the sexualisation and/or oppression of young girls.

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[7] Following poststructuralist notions of the subject, I conceive of subjectivity as constituted through those discourses within which a person is positioned at any one moment.

In the first two chapters, I look closely at the factors influencing responses to *Lolita* and the relationship between reader-responses and the publication of the derivatives. The publication of the derivative novels can be attributed to two main factors. While it is not my contention that these two factors function in complete isolation from one another, I do find it useful, for the sake of coherence, to elaborate on each in a separate chapter.

Thus, Chapter One concerns itself with the derivative novels as response to the transformation of the Lolita-figure in the critical and the public arena. I provide an overview of *Lolita*'s reception, pausing to explore the nature of and reasons for the distortion of Nabokov's character. I argue that historically, influenced by the discourse of Romanticism, young girls in the United States (US) have been idealised as innocent and asexual, both in literature and in life. *Lolita* thus presented its readers with a dilemma as it afforded the girl-child sexual autonomy. In response, in order to keep the national mythology intact, readers either elevated the character to sainthood, or relegated her to the category of 'bad girl' – a marginal category, grotesque and unreal. Further distortion of the Lolita-figure took place during the marketing campaign for Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *Lolita*, and more recently in feminist criticism, where it is symptomatic of efforts to eradicate the practice of victim-blaming in instances of rape.

Chapter Two slots into a larger discourse on the dynamics of gender-based oppression. Lolita's apparent voicelessness in Nabokov's novel, together with the traditional pairing of victimhood and passivity, inspire feminist critics to dismantle myths about rape and sexual abuse. Furthermore, the increasing concern over the sexualisation of girls in the media and about girls' autonomy situate the *Lolita*-derivatives within cutting-edge feminist debates of the day, suggesting that these novels constitute part of new forms of resistance to the oppressing conformity of advancing technological society.[8]

The remaining chapters of the thesis are devoted to textual analysis of *Lolita* and the three derivative novels. Chapter Three contextualises Lolita within the postwar US and the modernist tradition, while Chapter Four explores how the oppression inherent in conformity blinds Humbert – and the reader – to the 'real' Lolita. Subsequently, Chapter Five traces Lolita's resistance to Humbert, which has hitherto been neglected. It becomes evident that Nabokov's girl-child is not presented to the reader as either an ill-intentioned femme fatale or a diminutive saint; rather, the novel shows how a curious young girl falls prey to a sexual predator in the course of exploring her budding sexuality. Lolita escapes, in part, by hiding within the stereotypical representations of youthful femininity, which she actively uses to mask certain aspects of her true identity from Humbert. This feat is facilitated by the high levels of conformity that characterise advancing technological society. The reader is only able to distinguish between Humbert's representation of Lolita and that of Nabokov once the ideological syllogisms that lace the novel are uncovered and pulled apart.

Chapter Six explores the representation of the Lolita-character in *Molly* and *Lo's Diary,* both novels that present the reader with the fictional diary of Lolita Haze. These two novels are grouped together on account of their shared genre and comparable fidelity to the original novel's plot. Chapter Seven constitutes an examination of *Roger Fishbite,* Emily Prager's parody of *Lolita*, which follows a similar plot to *Lolita*, but which creates entirely new characters and sets the story in the 1990s. Throughout these chapters, the authors' representations of the Lolita-character are compared to that of Nabokov, commenting on the significance and efficacy of each re-presentation.

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[8] I use the term "advancing technological society" to denote the consumer driven, technologically advancing US society from after World War II onwards. According to Paul S. Bayer et al., by the end of the 1950s, "60 percent of American families owned homes, 75 percent cars; and 87 percent at least one TV. […] With just 6 percent of the world's population, the United States produced and consumed nearly 50 percent of everything made and sold on earth" (647).

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Ultimately, in its engagement with the representation of the Lolita-character in Nabokov's novel and in the derivative novels, my thesis illuminates the grand narrative of girlhood. The factors which shape girlhood subjectivity in Western cultures is revealed and it emerges that this subjectivity, seated as it is in the dichotomy of 'innocent-or-corrupt', is oppressive. Feminists thus aim to restructure the grand narrative of girlhood, a task which can only be accomplished through the in-depth examination of our own preconceptions about girl-children. With this thesis I hope to contribute to that effort.

CHAPTER ONE

Sugar and Spice, and All Things American?

Why Lolita Went Rogue

> *We are, it seems, homo narrans: humankind the narrators and story tellers. Society itself may be seen as a textured but seamless web of stories emerging everywhere through interaction: holding people together, pulling people apart, making societies work. […] [T]he metaphor of the story […] has become recognised as one of the central roots we have into the continuing quest for understanding human meaning. Indeed, culture itself has been defined as 'an ensemble of stories we tell about ourselves'.*
>
> Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*

How do we make sense of *Lolita*? This is by no means a rhetorical question; in embarking on a study of Nabokov's novel it is easy to feel like one of the "young women" Humbert, the narrator, describes as being "caught and petrified in the overflow of human knowledge" in the "Beardsley College library" (189). The novel is densely packed with intertextual allusions and is considered a testament to Nabokov's love of literary games and puzzles, a characteristic that complicates the novel's interpretation considerably.[9] Reflecting (and sometimes further hampering) readers' ongoing quest for greater insight into *Lolita* is the haphazardly spun web of interrelated criticism and interpretations in which the novel is enmeshed – a Google search of "'Lolita' AND 'Nabokov'" yields 537, 000 (and counting…!) results. However, since the scope of the present study is necessarily too limited to embark on a fully-fledged enquiry into the plethora of voices represented in what I will call the *Lolita*-discourse,[10] the discussion in this chapter will be restricted to those voices that are most obviously implicated in the transformation of the Lolita-figure, and those that shed light on the connection between responses to *Lolita* and the existence of the derivative novels.

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[9] Calling Nabokov "one of the major game-players of our era", David Larmour states that Nabokov's novels have frequently been regarded as "self-reflexive linguistic games" that prompt the reader to "chase down allusions" and "look up references" (4). Trevor McNeely draws attention to the fact that the author himself repeatedly referred to the novel as a "riddle", stating that "this inference obviously has important implications for its interpreter" (182). This aspect of the text is partly responsible for the wealth and diversity of the criticism the novel has elicited, since it overtly invites a close study of the novel.

In order to facilitate an understanding of the ways in which readers' responses have contributed to the transformation of Nabokov's girl-child from literary character to mythical figure, this chapter provides a concise overview of the history of the novel's reception. *Lolita* is discussed as a textual site where art and morality converge, and it becomes apparent that, to a great extent, the novel's transgression of moral boundaries at the time of its publication triggered the Lolita-figure's transformation. Ultimately, I argue that the sexually innocent girl-child constitutes a symbol of US nationhood, with the result that *Lolita*, as a work of art that subverts the ideal of girlhood innocence, was subjected to a process of literary sanitization, leaving the US's national mythology intact.

Lolita's acceptance came about, in large part, through the disavowal of Nabokov's Lolita-character as a representation of normative American girlhood. This initial metamorphosis that Lolita underwent has led to the production of the derivative novels, which function as counter-narratives to the oppressively dominant *Lolita*-discourse. Thus each derivative, through yet another transformation, directs the reader away from distortions of Lolita and back to the original character in the text.[11]

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[10] I use the designation "*Lolita*-discourse" throughout to refer to the collection of voices that surrounds Nabokov's novel. The term is inclusive of both high and popular culture texts.

[11] It is, of course, possible that readers of the derivative novels may rely on these texts alone for a clear picture of the 'real' Lolita, but hopefully serious *Lolita* scholars will be more circumspect. Chapter Three includes a brief discussion on the potential of the derivative novels to stand on their own as emancipatory texts in discourses on the representation of girls.

A History of **Lolita***'s Reception*

The history of *Lolita* indicates that the novel has become an important cultural text in the US. However, as a cultural text the actual novel is only half the story; the rest is constituted by the mythology that has developed around it. Barbra Churchill summarises the extent to which its imagery has become ingrained in culture: "[t]he Lolita image has so pervaded popular consciousness that even those who have never read the book usually know what it means to call a girl 'Lolita'. The moniker 'Lolita,' translated into the language of popular culture, means a sexy little number, a sassy ingénue, a bewitching adolescent siren" (2).

Commenting on the complex legacy of Nabokov's novel, Ellen Pifer observes that "[t]he history of *Lolita* […] is nearly as bizarre as the story related in its pages" ("The *Lolita* Phenomenon" 185). As the fictional memoir of a paedophile, *Lolita* attracted attention and controversy from the outset, causing *People Magazine* to comment in April 1958: "Never in the history of publishing has a book caused such a rumpus" (qtd. in Boyd 380). While the novel was initially published, and then banned, in France, it did not meet with any legal action in America, and attempts to limit its distribution only increased sales: "On September 17 the Cincinnati Public Library banned *Lolita* – and the next week the novel reached the top of the best-seller list" (Boyd 367). Such was the controversy surrounding the novel that the Texas town of Lolita debated changing its name to Jackson (Boyd 375). While the efforts of Graham Greene and other prominent literary figures soon helped the novel to shed much of its reputation of indecency, it remained contentious, with the putative depiction of the novel's twelve-year-old female protagonist, Dolores Haze (Lolita), as a wanton seductress often at the heart of the furore.

The impetus behind *Lolita*'s popularity is of a complex nature, as the explanations offered by various critics show. Boyd attributes "*Lolita* […] becoming a household word and a regular subject of jokes by television hosts like Steve Allen, Dean Martin, and Milton Berle" to the media hype surrounding the novel, but does not pause to explain why the story of child abuse should become "a regular subject of jokes" (93),[12] except to mention that Nabokov was distressed by the public's light-hearted response to his character.[13] Graham Vickers relates the prevalence of jokes about *Lolita* to the scandal caused by the novel more explicitly than does Boyd when he says that, instead of being subjected to an "obscenity trial" in America,

> the book became the butt of endless jokes and cartoons. Again America was absorbing something controversial into its popular culture instead of subjecting it to a witch hunt. Mainstream comedians all had a Lolita gag, the unspoken basis of the joke being that *Lolita* was a dirty book. Milton Berle, Bob Hope, Steve Allen, Dean Martin and the rest all cracked wise, although only Groucho Marx's parodic gag wears well: 'I put off reading *Lolita* for six years, till she's eighteen' (52).

Gary Fine and Todd Bayma suggest that "[t]he bad-girl stereotype proved an easy target for reviewers making comic points" (204). Vickers's explanation of the basis for *Lolita* humour, together with that of Fine and Bayma, suggests that comedy provided an outlet for subversive commentary on society's scandalised responses to Nabokov's novel.[14] Thus, it seems that *Lolita*'s popularity is in part due to its transgressive nature.

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[12] Boyd further notes that "[t]he process of vulgarization would ultimately lead to such horrors as the life-size Lolita doll with 'French and Greek apertures' advertised in the mid 1970s" (93). The marketing of this Lolita sex doll is especially alarming, since it seems to signify a total shift away from the recognition that the girl-child is a victim, to an attitude which conceives of her as a passive sex object to be 'reincarnated' and toyed with.

[13] One Halloween a child of eight or nine came to Nabokov's door for candy, decked out by her parents in a Lolita costume and wearing a sign with Lolita's name around her neck. This was before the film was made, and it prompted him to say that he "'would veto the use of a real child. Let them find a dwarfess'" (Boyd 373-4).

[14] A study of *Lolita*-humour could potentially contribute to a more in-depth exploration of the novel's reception. While the scope of my thesis does not allow for such an endeavour, this project would be in

Lolita's infamous beginnings contributed to the wealth of attention – critical and otherwise – the novel received. It is my contention that it was set up, by the controversy surrounding its publication outside the US, in such a way as to elicit either an unambiguously positive or negative response from the readers, critics and reviewers who encountered it. When *Lolita* was released in the US on Monday, 18 August 1957, and reviewed in twelve Sunday newspapers the day before, a third of the reviews were unenthusiastic, "puzzled, taxed, peeved, irked, or outraged"; the other eight responded positively (Boyd 364). Elizabeth Janeway of the *New York Times Book Review* called it "the funniest book [she] had ever come on" and dismissed some readers' qualms about what they saw as the novel's pornographic nature, saying that she could "think of few volumes more likely to quench the flames of lust than [*Lolita*'s] exact and immediate description of its consequences" (qtd. Boyd 364).

The next day, Orville Prescott maintained the opposite in the *New York Times*, proclaiming that "it is repulsive … highbrow pornography" (qtd. Boyd 364). Brian Boyd's overview of the history of *Lolita*'s publication confirms that the chief question with which readers of the novel were confronted at this time was whether the novel should be considered pornography or art. In summary, Boyd attributes the ongoing polemic surrounding the novel to its ability to enchant and disgust the reader simultaneously. He posits that

> *Lolita* will never cease to shock. Seesawing wildly from emotion to emotion, it jolts us off balance line after line, page after page. A case study in child abuse, it also manages against all the odds to be a passionate and poignant love story. Humbert exalts Lolita with the utmost delicacy and fervor, and he exploits her with the utmost determination (227).

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line with and contribute an interesting perspective to feminist concerns over the light-heartedness with which the public have commonly regarded the Lolita-figure – as a gag.

Boyd's commentary here functions as a useful summary of the central issues that have haunted criticism on the novel.

Despite the complexity of the *Lolita*-discourse, there exists some measure of partisanship within it, some sense of a line dividing the scholarship into two polarised categories: one focusing on the novel as a work of art, the other preoccupied with *Lolita*'s moral content. Christine Clegg's overview of critical responses to *Lolita* supports this argument.[15] Clegg posits that the novel "generates a debate about the relationship between aesthetic form and sexual content" which "demand[s] that critics declare their allegiances" and suggests that the "problem of where critics place themselves in relation to the question of morality and art is central to the unfolding of the critical history of *Lolita*" (12).

James Phelan's observations, after having taught the novel in two separate seminars, confirm the prevalence of this dichotomy in readers' responses:

> People in both groups […] had very strong but very different reactions. Some thrilled to Humbert Humbert's cleverness, fancy prose style, and ability, in the prefatory words of John Ray, Jr., to use his "singing violin to conjure up a tendresse". Others found the experience of reading the book to be painful and resented being asked to be exposed to the perspective of a paedophile, regardless of his stylistic brilliance (130).

This account of teaching *Lolita* is a common one, often related in critical work on the novel – indeed, my comparable experience in a classroom where I was a student, which I recount in the introduction to this thesis, inspired the current study.

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[15] Clegg's book is a useful source for tracing trends in *Lolita* criticism. Each decade since the novel's publication is treated separately. However, Clegg's text contains a number of small yet worrisome misquotations and factual errors that call its accuracy into some question.

In "Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita, and the Creation of Imaginary Social Relations", Fine and Bayma shed light on why, despite the now widely recognised solipsistic nature of Humbert's narrative and the lack of voice it affords Lolita, readers have tended to vilify her. According to Fine and Bayma,

> a striking phenomenon of literary (and media) culture is the unexamined belief of audience members that they 'know' the fictional characters to which they are exposed. Identification is central to an audience's appreciation of a fictional work. […] In interpreting characters, audiences draw from their typifications of similar persons in their society, asking what makes sense, given what they know about human behaviour (195).

This theory of "parasocial interaction" (195) serves to bridge the gap between 'reality' and fiction in pointing out the similar processes through which we make sense of real people and fictional characters. As such it provides more insight into the heated debate *Lolita* has elicited: through the treatment of the character as a "living figure" (195), the significance of a character's representation is amplified and made more personal, evoking a more emotional response. One would expect this effect to become even more pronounced in response to a text such as *Lolita*, which exacts a moral reaction from the reader.

This reading of *Lolita*'s reception goes a long way toward explaining how a novel now recognised by critics such as Patnoe, Kaufman, and McNeely as about sexual abuse could have been classified as a love story by 1950s critics such as Lionel Trilling, and how Lolita could come to represent the archetypal child seductress in the public mind. With reference to negative characterisations of the girl-child, Fine and Bayma argue that "[u]ltimately, the discrediting portrait of Lolita painted by many reviewers is not an objective recreation of the character portrayed in the text but an interpretation of teenaged girls based on reviewers' personal and cultural knowledge and projected onto this young girl" (199). Consequently, this phenomenon "reflects a strong resonance with a contemporary cultural stereotype [of the 1950s], the teenage 'bad girl'. This stereotype made it easier for critics to describe Lolita as a known and knowable person" (198).

Fine and Bayma also posit that when a work of fiction challenges moral codes it is necessary for proponents of the text to emphasise its literary nature in order for it to be accepted by the public (196). This certainly accounts for some measure of *Lolita*'s acceptance in the US. In anticipation of a possible negative reaction to his novel, Nabokov and various of his literary connections attempted to ease *Lolita* onto the American literary scene "with the careful garnering of substantial critical support" (Clegg 11) to ensure that it would be recognised for its artistic merit first and foremost. By emphasising the literary nature of the text, its perceived capacity to represent the 'real' was weakened and, as a consequence, its perceived transgression of society's moral codes was lessened.

Another reason for *Lolita*'s apparent acceptance is located in the novel's potential to be interpreted metaphorically. This allows for the customary relationship between the 'real' and the representational to be disavowed completely, making the text 'safe'. In other words, what is seen, on the natural level, as the story of a grown man's infatuation with and abuse of a young girl, becomes a metaphor for something entirely different, such as "Old Europe debauching young America" (Nabokov 314) or Nabokov's "love affair with the romantic novel" (316), as Nabokov remarks in his afterword to *Lolita*.. In this way, the reader is relieved of their perceived obligation to consider the novel in a moral light.

Notwithstanding the ways in which a text can be made acceptable, a segment of the readership seems to have remained unaffected by the process of sanitisation, as evidenced by the persistence of a clear division within the *Lolita*-discourse. For some readers, in other words, the transgression of moral boundaries proved to be too jarring, so that they rejected the novel outright. This can be attributed to the fact that, in the aftermath of World War II, concerns over sexual crimes escalated and child sexual abuse came to be recognised as a "serious social problem" (Fine and Bayma 197).[16]

Renewed Interest in Lolita

In the US, growing concern over the sexualisation of young female bodies is contributing to renewed interest in and anxiety about the representation of Lolita both inside and outside the text. It has prompted critics to go back to the novel and ask, as Elizabeth Patnoe does,

> Why didn't the Lolita myth evolve in a way that more accurately reflects Nabokov's Lolita? Why isn't the definition of "Lolita" "a molested adolescent girl" instead of a "seductive" one? […] This misreading is so persistent and pervasive because it is enabled and perpetuated intertextually, extratextually, and intratextually (114).

In attributing the existence of the "Lolita myth" in part to its "intratextual[ity]" Patnoe touches on an issue that crops up time and again in criticism of the novel: Humbert's solipsistic narrative, which often seduces the reader into seeing Lolita exclusively from *his* point of view. By referring to the Lolita myth's "intertextual[ity]" and "extratextual[ity]", attention is drawn to what Patnoe perceives to be the pervasive sexualisation of young girls not only by Humbert, but also in literature and the 'real' world in general. Her perception that the myth is "perpetuated intertextually, extratextually, and intratextually" supplies one indication of why, according to Gail Hawkes and Danielle Egan's observation, "concerns over the escalation of

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[16] In the half a century thereafter, social anxiety in this regard did not abate; in 1974 the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) was passed, signalling the US government's first federal acknowledgement that sexual abuse takes place inside families (Bernstein and Schaffner 143). By 1990, children were considered competent witnesses in trials of sexual abuse cases (Kinnear 141).

[sexualisation] appear to be everywhere" (292); it implies that, as Fine and Bayma argue, "character interpretations" influenced by cultural stereotypes "may in turn reinforce the cultural stereotypes" (206).

The influence of popular culture on society's constructions of young female sexuality is increasingly being interrogated by scholars in the social sciences. In response to critical questions concerning possible causes for Lolita's representation in popular culture, John Marks suggests that this Lolita "bears little resemblance to Nabokov's original" because "she has been transformed by the machinery of mass culture" (quoted in Churchill 16). Marks's "mass culture" can be seen to function as an overarching concept for Patnoe's "intertextually, extratextually, and intratextually". Vickers specifically explores the solipsistic role of popular culture in *Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov's Little Girl All Over Again*, published in 2008. Says Vickers: "After her death, Lolita was to become the patron saint of fast little articles the world over, not because Nabokov's mid-1950s novel depicted her as such but because, slowly and surely, the media, following Humbert's unreliable lead, cast her in that role" (7).

Vickers ascribes this to a popular press and television broadcaster who were "starting to favor simple symbols. The public, they reasoned, wanted cartoonish representations of complicated things. […] In this breezy spirit Lolita would gradually exemplify the Sultry Teenage Temptress" (7-8). More concretely, however, Vickers ascribes the metamorphosis of Nabokov's character in the public mind to marketing campaigns for Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of the novel; whereas Nabokov had explicitly refused to feature an image of a young girl on the cover of the novel, the posters for the film showed a young girl suggestively sucking on a lollipop because, in Vickers's words, "[p]aedophilia is a hard sell" (71) and, by implication, pictures of sexy little girls are *not*. Vickers's assessment highlights the role of consumerism in the vulgarisation of

Nabokov's character and is suggestive of a *deliberate* sexualisation of *Lolita* that stands in stark contrast to Nabokov's characterisation of the girl.

From this, it emerges that Lolita images – sexualised images of girl-children – constitute a useful site for exploring the way in which meaning is inscribed on the body of the girl-child in advancing technological society since this society is in many ways an image-driven society, where images are often employed as rhetorical currency in the market place. In her doctoral thesis titled "The Lolita Phenomenon: The Child (femme) fatale at the Fin de siècle", Churchill launches an exploration of "the Lolita icon in contemporary popular culture […], connecting the image of the seductive, dangerous girl to the *femme fatale* figure. […] The dissertation charts a course that explores how the nymphet functions as a carnivalesque body emblazoned with cultural detritus (7). Churchill's theorisation of the Lolita image as being a textual site imprinted with the decay of past representations of ideal femininity reveals the girl-child's body as a representative emblem rife with social and political meaning, a point of convergence for the creative energy and angst from the different spheres in which representation takes place.

However, the history of the *Lolita*-discourse suggests that, in the past, critics have been loathe to examine the factors that underlie their responses to the novel. If the initial impulse to declare one's allegiance is interrogated, it becomes apparent that *Lolita* constitutes a textual space within which the reader is encouraged to explore the relationship between the representational and the 'real'. The reader is prompted to question the dynamics that govern representation, and consequently, the very idea of the 'real'.

As mentioned earlier, much of the ambivalence pertaining to *Lolita* derives from the novel's ostensible representation of Lolita as a seductress. The following questions now emerge: Who or what does the reader perceive Lolita to be a representation of? What are the characteristics of this figure? Is this figure 'real'? If not, what purpose does the construction of this figure serve? These questions resonate with Churchill's argument that

> [w]hat is typically lacking in the mountains of studies of Lolita (both novel and character), and the far too meagre examinations of her popular incarnations, is what Wendy Steiner, in her book, *The Scandal of Pleasure*, calls a 'subtle investigation of our attitudes to children's sexuality and to the meaning of our gaze' (6).

It is my contention that the Lolita-character, subject to a variety of factors, is alternatively seen as either the 'good girl' or the 'bad girl'. Each construction serves a particular purpose within the US national mythology. Thus, I will now move on to a discussion of the value attached to the ideal of innocent girlhood in the US to comment on the implications this has had for the reception of *Lolita*.

The Girl-Child as Symbol of an American Dream

Historically, the saintly image of the girl-child has held a particular significance in the US as a symbol of nationhood. *Lolita*, with its plot tracing the ostensible seduction of an adult man, Humbert Humbert, by his twelve-year-old stepdaughter, Dolores Haze, and Dolores's subsequent sexual abuse at the hands of Humbert, hit 1950s America like a "grenade" (Stringer-Hye 176). Writing in the 1960s and tracing the history of the US novel, Leslie Fiedler notes that "[o]n its most obvious level, the novel was a kind of conduct book for the daughters of the bourgeoisie, aimed at teaching obedience to parents and wariness before potential seducers; and dedicated therefore to the same brand of poetic justice as that advocated by Thomas Jefferson" (45).

Fiedler describes the US of his day as being shaped by the ideals of the Age of Reason, but "sustained by a sentimental and Romantic dream […] of an escape from culture and a renewal of youth", which is based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's utopian vision of "a society uncompromised by culture" (37). This ideal finds its most compelling symbol in the figure of the child – and most specifically, the girl-child. According to the Romantic discourse on childhood, children are the embodiment of "innocence, purity and natural goodness that is only contaminated on contact with the corrupt outside world" (Kehily 5).

Pifer emphasises the continued existence of this discourse in the contemporary Western world, maintaining that contemporary society views the child's sexual ignorance "as a prerequisite for innocence" (*Demon Or Doll* 87). Even some critical discourses in childhood studies "position children as sexually innocent"; however, as anthropological explorations into the history of sexual knowledge show, childhood sexuality is culturally produced and thus "a highly contested domain" (Kehily 6). Nonetheless, because of its intimate connection to the ideals on which the nation was founded, the image of the sexually innocent young girl is not easily destroyed in the minds of Americans (Fiedler 312).

The novelistic tradition itself can be seen as paying homage to "that secret religion of the bourgeoisie in which […] the Pure Young Girl replaces Christ as the savior [and] marriage becomes the equivalent of bliss eternal" (Fiedler 45). On Fiedler's view, in other words, the sentimental novel, and through it "the Pure Young Girl", came to represent a safeguard of perhaps the most important symbol and ideological institution of the American nation: the nuclear family. Thus any threat against the innocence of the girl-child constituted a threat against the nation.

Consequently, it emerges that behind Lolita stands a long line of fictional girl-children who have had to sacrifice their sexuality for the good of the nation. Fiedler identifies a failure by early American writers to portray the girl-child as anything other than essentially angelic, which leads him, writing in the 1960s, to conclude that "the American Girl is innocent by definition, *mythically* innocent; […] her purity, therefore, depends upon nothing she does or says" in 'real' life (Fiedler 312). This assertion highlights the important discrepancy between representation and reality, in that the 'fictional' girl child represents an ideal rather than a reality.

The ideal of young femininity in the US is very much tied to sexual innocence. Pifer contends that the discourse of Romantic childhood assumes that children who show sexual awareness "must be perverse" (*Demon or Doll* 87). Similarly, Rachel Devlin states that, in post- World War II America, sexual behaviour in young girls rendered them "juvenile delinquents" whose sexuality was reasoned away as being merely "incidental" to underlying psychological problems (50). It emerges that Lolita's sexual awareness was destined to be condemned by the US public, a recognition that is echoed in Fine and Bayma's statement that "[f]ictional or not, Dolores Haze in the 1950s was the girl next door in a society where prepubescent girls 'got what they deserved'" (207). Implicit in this condemnation of Lolita's behaviour is the belief that children are not sexual beings and that children like Lolita represent isolated instances of female deviance.

Thus, it can be argued that the theme of paedophilia, while shocking, was not what disturbed readers of *Lolita*; it was the representation of an American girl as considerably less than angelic that gave rise to the uproar the novel caused. The scholarship dealing with the reception of Nabokov's novel suggests that if *Lolita*'s story had been an open-and-shut case of paedophilia it might have caused somewhat less of a stir than it did. As it was, the perception that Lolita had facilitated her own victimization through her 'seduction' of Humbert defiled the treasured *notion* of girlhood innocence.

The novel emphasises that Lolita had lost her virginity at summer camp shortly before being raped by Humbert, prompting Mary Winn to state that "[i]t was not so much the idea of an adult having sexual designs on a child that was appalling. It was Lolita herself, unvirginal long before Humbert came upon the scene, Lolita, so knowing, so jaded, so *unchildlike*, who seemed to violate something America held sacred" (Winn quoted in Pifer *Demon or Doll* 66). The "something" that Winn refers to can be interpreted not only as the ideal of girlhood innocence but also, by implication, the institution of the American nuclear family.

Lolita's assault on the concept of girlhood innocence came at a time when traditional perceptions of gender were in flux in post-World War II America, a factor which arguably amplified negative reactions to the novel. While during the war women were prompted by necessity to perform what were hitherto considered male functions in society, "national strength" was, after the war, actively reimagined as located in "a solid family unit" and

> fiction writers drove home the message that women were to be especially vigilant in carrying out their social responsibilities. They could not flirt with playfulness or with stepping outside the boundaries of the family circle in this vulnerable time. Female risk taking and self-assertion were dangerous by-products of modernization for they threatened to dilute the collective will, sap the moral strength of a populace dependent upon feminine virtue and maternal altruism. It was crucial that people give up their adolescent dreams of carefree adventure and assume the sober mantle of citizenship (Honey 97).

Given the ideological atmosphere of the postwar period with its renewed emphasis on "feminine virtue" it is not surprising that the manuscript of *Lolita* was turned down by publisher after publisher.

Considering the extent to which the character of Lolita violated American ideals of girlhood, it seems anomalous that Lolita should have become such an icon of American popular culture. It is my contention that this phenomenon, too, can in part be attributed to the process through which literature is sanitized. In its subversion of the good girl ideal *Lolita* serves to "explode the myth of sexless and saintly children" (Stringer-Hye 176) through depicting a girl who actively explores her own sexuality. However, the 'bad girl', as non-representative of the American girl, can be seen as a stock character, a caricature of sorts – essentially a fiction. Consequently, because Lolita is relegated to the category of 'bad girl', the fictional nature of the text *Lolita* is emphasised, rendering the novel – and ultimately the character – acceptable.

To a great extent, the Lolita of popular culture became an object of ridicule and derision – reinforcing the ideal of the good girl. Whereas Humbert, as a paedophile, was already considered a clear example of pathological and isolated male deviance, Lolita's ambiguous representation as both seductress and victim threatened to blur the lines of acceptable young femininity. By relegating Lolita to the category of 'bad girl' this threat was neutralised, since, in the North American ideological landscape, the ideal of innocent girlhood had become conflated with the 'real', so that the 'bad girl' was seen as an isolated instance of (senseless) female deviance, and thus not representative of girls at large.

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From this chapter it emerges, ultimately, that we (as readers and critics) make sense of Lolita by viewing her through the lens of culture. However, individual differences in perception make it unlikely that two people will see the character in identical ways – from there the vast amount of criticism on this complex novel. Nonetheless, as a result of cultural overlaps which influence the way in which readers respond to the text, there are certain trends in the criticism. Because the dominant culture made sense of Lolita by rejecting her as a 'realistic' representation of girlhood, the novel did not wholly succeed in subverting the Romantic ideal of girlhood. Lolita's rejection was facilitated by the transformation of the character into a caricature of a 'bad girl'. As a result, counter-narratives have come into existence, not only to recuperate the original character, but also to subvert, in their own right, the Romantic ideal of girlhood.

CHAPTER TWO

Re-presenting *Lolita*: Opening Up the Boundaries of Fiction and Femininity

It is essential for researchers to examine what constitutes a text, whose stories are being told and whose stories are being silenced. Fragmentation and distrust of the grand narratives (the stories cultures tell themselves and live by) have produced a seamlessness between the real and the imagined, between truth and fiction. This fragmentation occurred as certainties have been called into question.

Gloria Latham, "The bookcase at the end of the thesis"

One of the vital signs of feminism is its voracious desire to multiply practices and theories, to develop new ways of correcting and coping with female voicelessness.

Patricia Yaeger, "Afterword", *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*

[Woman] must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history […].

Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

The existence of the three *Lolita*-derivatives under discussion in this thesis can, as argued in the previous chapter, in part be attributed to the distortion of Nabokov's Lolita-character in the years following the novel's publication. However, a second, yet equally important reason for the production of the derivative novels is located in their contribution to present-day debates about the representation, sexualisation, and sexual abuse of girls. In trying to ascertain the influence of girls' sexualised representation in the media, these debates seek to establish what the relationship between the representational and the 'real' is – a theme that, as I argue in this thesis, is central to *Lolita* and the derivative novels. The derivative novels all serve to open up the boundaries of Nabokov's novel, exposing the larger narrative of which the novel is part. Consequently, this chapter illustrates how the changes in scholarship on *Lolita* reflect wider concerns about the representation of girls.

While Churchill refrains from "an aggressive feminist dismantling" of what she terms "The Lolita Phenomenon" (1), efforts by critics such as Vickers to trace Lolita's popular culture lineage is paralleled by a similar project within feminist literary criticism. Anika Quayle points out that,

> [i]n particular, the 1980s and 1990s saw a deepening interest in the figure of Lolita and her representation in the text. Or, more accurately, this period saw a deepening interest in the *non*-representation of Lolita. It has become a critical commonplace that Humbert is blind to Lolita, replacing her with, or subsuming her within, an imagined idealized image that is the product of his artist's imagination; further, it is argued that it is to a large extent only this imagined Lolita that the reader has access to in the novel (1).

Vickers calls the "non-representation" of Lolita, which Quayle refers to here, the "most commonly recurring complaint" in "forty years of feminist discussion about *Lolita*": "we simply never get to hear the girl's point of view" (207). In "Lolita Talks Back: Giving Voice to the Object", Timothy McCracken investigates Lolita's supposed silence, which he describes as "deafening": "[H]er words, few and far between, are filtered through Humbert" (135).

Linda Kauffman's article "Framing Lolita: Is There A Woman in the Text?" similarly insists on Lolita's muteness, concluding that "the inscription of the father's body in the text obliterates the daughter's" (131). McCracken identifies McNeely, Patnoe and Kaufmann as the principal theorists who have tried to give Lolita a voice through "speak[ing] up for the largely silent Lolita by trusting not the teller but the tale that Humbert and Nabokov tell" (131). According to McCracken it is necessary to accept the Lolita characterised in the text – the Lolita who initiates sex play with Humbert, but who eventually cries herself to sleep every night because of the abuse she suffers – if one is to imagine the abused girl-child.

Finding Lolita: 'White Ink' and 'Lo-centric criticism'

Lolita's tendency to disappear in the discourse about *Lolita* points to the necessity of a body of feminist criticism on the text as it emerges that social anxiety about the sexualisation and/or sexuality of young girls has been instrumental in remaking Lolita as a villain and in neglecting the 'reality' of the character depicted by Nabokov. Feminist criticism on *Lolita* is rudimentary at best, and it is my aim to contribute towards a more fully developed body of scholarly work on this important novel. Eric Goldman suggests that "affinities between Nabokov and contemporary feminist critics are stronger than might appear after a first reading of *Lolita*" (101).

The task of feminist criticism in *Lolita*'s case is thus to deconstruct past interpretations of the novel to find, through "Lo-centric criticism", what McCracken calls the "absent/present" Lolita or "the Lolita closer to life than to fantasy" (131). This Lolita will necessarily also be a fiction – a representation – but such a project seeks to lay bare the way in which any representation of the girl is constructed, checking itself throughout to avoid becoming solipsistic in its own right. The critical endeavour is made all the more perilous (to the critic, to Lolita, to girl-children) in that, like Humbert who has "only words to play with" (Nabokov 32) in Lolita's absence, criticism 'speaks' for Lolita in words that cannot be separated from the critics' own context and subsequent interpretation of the novel.

This suggests a reason for the emergence of the *Lolita*-derivative novels; perhaps the medium of fiction has the potential to provide a relatively safe space for (re)imagining Nabokov's character without falling prey to the trappings inherent in theoretical discourse. McCracken similarly points to the limitations of criticism when he states that "while criticism can contest, negotiate, rethink, and reframe, it cannot rewrite *Lolita*" (132). Through its *self-conscious* appropriation of a Lolita-like character, however, a derivative novel can offer an alternative interpretation of Lolita's abuse and rape, acknowledging throughout that what is being represented is ultimately fiction. Perhaps it is as a result of the difficulties implicit in approaching *Lolita* from a critical perspective that the deepened interest in the representation of Dolores Haze in *Lolita* has spawned another brood of girl-children over the past two decades. Vickers ascribes the existence of the derivative novels to Lolita's perceived silence in Nabokov's text, saying that "from time to time Dolores Haze would, so to speak, try to find her voice and get her version of things published" (Vickers 207).

McCracken ascribes the existence of these derivative works more explicitly to a fundamentally feminist endeavour, calling them "white ink versions" of *Lolita.* He borrows this term from Hélène Cixous (135) and posits that

> [t]he white ink versions rewrite Lolita with an emphasis on the broken lives of the girls, not the broken hearts of the men. Cixous is arguing for the creation of 'a new history,' a history written from within a woman's body. White ink versions parallel Lolita's experience and give voice to the hitherto silent object. White ink therefore not only empowers the individual woman writer, but also provides a cultural counter-memory – in this case – to Humbert's protestations of the "magic" and "romance" of pedophilia (134-5).

Cixous's concept of "white ink" is meant to evoke the nourishment of mother's milk (Cixous 881) which allows the child to be strong and healthy. Implicit in the idea of "white ink" literature is the hope that this literature can empower not only writers and readers, but also the characters that are re-imagined, imbuing them with new life. In this sense "white ink" is an important and powerful vehicle for the reinvigoration of canonized literature.

However, it is equally important to recognize the ways in which historically produced 'reality' has obscured already empowered characters – as in Lolita's case. While there would undoubtedly be some value to producing a "cultural counter-memory" to the counterfeit Lolita of popular culture, I agree with Quayle and Vickers that the girl-child's voice does come through strongly in *Lolita* if we listen closely. Thus it follows that the "silent object" that McCracken refers to is a critical misnomer – perhaps "*silenced* object" would be a better designation. Lolita's voice in the text has been muffled not only by Humbert's narrative, but also by criticism that overlooks and/or reasons away her abuse. Stating that the "idea that Humbert is blind to the 'real' Lolita has received almost no critical challenge" (6), Quayle makes a compelling argument *against* such a reading of the text, urging that it "obscures many important aspects of *Lolita*. It obscures not only the 'real' Lolita as very present in the text, but also Humbert's moral culpability in relation to her, […] Nabokov's moral message on pedophilia"(23), as well as "other important, and in some cases highly socially relevant aspects of [his] most famous novel"(1).

Quayle identifies four crucial points obscured by such a reading (my numbering):

> 1. "Humbert objectifies Lolita, largely reducing her to her physical appeal, and through showing the harm caused to Lolita by Humbert's treatment of her, the novel constitutes a comment on the dangers of, and the moral turpitude of, objectification" (21).
>
> 2. "Although there are few explicit sex scenes in the novel, the fact that Humbert presents the reader with a detailed account of the 'reality' of the girl's body, including, at different points, the 'reality' of her body hurt, bleeding, cold or sick (167, 198, 239-40), encourages the reader to imagine the brutal physicality of the act of rape that has been inflicted upon it. Thus, again, it is through Humbert's awareness of the 'real' Lolita that Nabokov advances his 'moral message' on pedophilia" (21).
>
> 3. "To recognize the extent to which Lolita – both her mind and her body – is present in the text is to recognize Nabokov's effort to ensure that, in spite of the fact that her story is told by Humbert, Lolita had a strong presence and a clear voice in the text" (22).

> 4. "[T]he novel draws attention to the fact that high culture, like low culture, can be implicated in the reduction of human beings to the sexualized, objectified, physical appearance" (23).

Implicit in these four points is an exploration of the relationship between sexualisation and objectification, as well as the idea that objectification, at least in *Lolita*, plays a pivotal role in facilitating rape and in diverting the public's attention away from the violence (and even the fact) of rape by placing the focus on the sexualised body rather than the suffering body. This is a concern that finds resonance in a contemporary discourse on the sexualisation of young female bodies, which suggests that the renewed interest in the representation of Lolita is part of a wider feminist interest in the representation of girls.

Sexualisation, Paedophilia, and the Question of Tolerance

In the 51 years since *Lolita*'s publication, the critical reaction to the novel has gained momentum and what sparked the initial uproar – the theme of paedophilia and the characterisation of twelve-year-old Lolita as a seductress – is still at the core of the discourse. This can be ascribed to the persistence of "child sexuality and adult sexual interest in children" as tropes of social contention (Clegg 9). While the 1950s "were the hayday of what was then known as the New Criticism, […] which rejected the introduction of ethical questions into criticism" (Fine and Bayma 199), Pifer posits that "[d]uring the past two decades, with increased public attention focused on issues of child abuse, questions have repeatedly been raised concerning Nabokov's choice of subject and his depiction of the sexually exploited child" ("The *Lolita* Phenomenon" 186). In other words, changes in social awareness as well as the focus of criticism have contributed to shifts in critical responses to *Lolita*.

According to Hawkes and Egan, concerns over the sexualisation of very young girls has increased across the board since 2004 as corporations have increasingly targeted this segment of the market with sexualised, "hegemonic marketing messages" (292). Thus it seems that the line between reality and fiction has started to blur in the American cultural landscape with real girls being perceived as becoming more like the Lolita of popular culture, as is implicit in Pifer's statement that "[i]n the popular mind the name Lolita has come to signify the cynical sophistication and sexual precocity, bordering on lewdness, of American – and Americanized – youth" (*Demon or Doll* 65). Anxiety over this phenomenon has caused parents and feminists[17] alike to blame the consumerist sexualisation of "tweens" for "everything from girls flirting with older men to child sex trafficking", according sexualisation "a juggernaut-like status" and conceiving of it as "universal in its reach and damage" (Hawkes and Egan 297).

Contextualising the fears of various groups who condemn the sexualisation of children, Judith Levine notes that

> popular sexual fears cluster around the most vulnerable: women and children. The political articulation of these fears in the late twentieth century came from two disparate sources. On one side were feminists, whose movement exposed widespread rape and domestic sexual violence against women and children and initiated a new body of law that would punish the perpetrator and cease to blame the victim. From the other side, the religious Right brought to sexual politics the belief that women and children need special protection because they are 'naturally' averse to sex of any kind (xxiii).

Levine's overview of the attitudes that are at the root of concerns over the sexualisation of children reveals two important considerations that influence critics' engagement with issues of child abuse: first, the feminist goal of the eradication of 'victim-blaming' in narratives of sexual abuse, and second, the historically reified belief in children's sexual innocence. Both of these considerations have influenced criticism of *Lolita* over the years, shaping the way in which critics respond to the text.

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[17] My intention here is not to group parents and feminists into two mutually exclusive groups – one can, of course, be both a parent and a feminist.

Central to the debate about the significance of girls' representation in the media is Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze's concept of "corporate paedophilia", which links consumer society's sexualisation of children to sexual violence; Rush and La Nauze contend that "the sexualisation of children could play a role in 'grooming' children for paedophiles" by implying that, "contrary to laws and ethical norms, children are sexually available" (qtd. in Hawkes and Egan 295). Levine reiterates concerns over sexualisation as the motivation for a renewed emphasis on childhood innocence when she posits that "we have arrived at a global capitalist economy that […] finds sex exceedingly marketable and in which children and teens serve as both sexual commodities […] and consumers of sexual commodities". Like Hawkes and Egan, Levine expresses concern over the response to this state of affairs: it has set into motion campaigns "with wide political support to return to [sexual] reticence" (4).

Warning that past configurations of asexual femininity have to a certain extent been displaced by the women's liberation movement, but that "its regulatory impetus [has] been redirected onto the lives of young girls" (305), Gail Hawkes and Danielle Egan examine "the foundational assumptions of the argument against sexualisation and explore its potential social and political implications". They contend that this discourse constructs girls as "passive recipients" and that "their sexuality becomes the result of and reduced to sexualisation". In other words, Hawkes and Egan are concerned that the efforts to protect girls from objectification will construct them in the same terms that the Romantic discourse does, so that what seems like progress and protection becomes, in truth, oppression and a return to conservatism.

Hoping to avoid this, Hawkes and Egan call for a new way of looking at girls and their sexuality, asking if “this [is] the only choice? Is there room for a less binary vision of the sexuality of children? […] Is there any space for agency or resignification as opposed to the only option being outright rejection? (291-2). The concerns voiced by Hawkes and Egan about the oppressive potential of feminist discourses on the sexualisation of girls relate to current debates surrounding feminist criticism of *Lolita* in that the focus is placed on the dangers of constructing the girl as a passive victim, and disallowing her sexual agency by recognising only ‘adult’ sexuality.

Abigail Bray argues that, on the one hand, this concern can be traced back to “the late 1980s backlash against so called ‘victim feminism’” (Bray 325). On the other hand, the literature that condemns the “moral panic” resulting from concerns over the sexualisation of girls warns against “the ‘tyranny’ of ‘our determination to hunt [child sexual abuse] down and ‘the subsequent restructuring of *normative* conduct between children and adults’” (325). Such critiques take two alternative standpoints as their basis: one contends that “moral panics are intolerant petit bourgeois alarmism”; the other argues that “children’s sexuality has long been manipulated and denigrated by conservative cultural sanctions” (326) Bray further notes that “the pathologisation of fear and the fearful body” intensified in the aftermath to World War II when a political and social emphasis on tolerance emerged and fear became “the affect one is continually instructed to overcome if one is to achieve the emotional resilience necessary to compete and survive and expand a democratic tolerance for difference” (327). From Bray’s critique of the literature on the sexualisation of girls it would seem that the figure of the girl-child is still at the centre of a largely political debate in that protectionist strategies are framed as threats against the ideals of democracy.

Joining Forces: Feminism, Critical Theory and New Strategies of Resistance

The centrality of the girl-child within the debate on sexualisation can be attributed to consumer culture's proliferation of sexualised images that result in one-dimensional representations of identity, so that the objectified girl-child is conceived of only as a sexualised image, not as a real person. *Lolita* can be read as a modernist reaction to this aspect of post-Enlightenment rationality,[18] the ensuing advanced industrial society, and the subsequent corrosion of perceived and/or 'real' autonomy.

These representational practices reflect normative rather than 'real' identities and, on account of their proliferation of these normative representations, narrow the scope for individual subjectivity through the circumscription of consciousness. Consciousness in this context refers to the individual's ability to imagine themselves or others (both living and fictional) as being *other* than what they are perceived to be in normative representations of the subject. The circumscription of consciousness necessarily results in a loss of (perceived and 'real') autonomy since the subject's freedom is reigned in by the prescriptions of normative subjectivity, regardless of whether behavioural restrictions are self-imposed or enforced by another.

Herbert Marcuse's theory of one-dimensional society describes the social conditions of advanced technological society that effect the closing of the universe of discourse, limiting the ability of the functional language of this society to convey meaning on multiple levels. Current feminist debates about the representation of girls find resonance in this theory in that feminist concerns also centre on the oppressive potential of these representations. While various opposing viewpoints are represented within the discourse on sexualisation the collective concern is a reduction in the scope of girls' conceivable subjectivity resulting from the representational practices of consumer society. Marcuse's theory is especially applicable to an exploration of the politics of representation in that, in his view, both high and low culture contribute to limiting the subjectivity of individuals. The way in which various modes of criticism have hindered the recognition of Lolita as an autonomous subject, as well as the role of popular culture in constructing a one-dimensional representation of Lolita, point to the potential of Marcuse's theory to assist in understanding the means through which oppressive representations come into existence and become hegemonic.

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[18] Post-Enlightenment rationality refers here, following Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, to the logic according to which subjects construct ''reality'' in advanced industrial society. This logic obscures individual differences on the level of perception, thereby creating a false sense of coherence in society. Individual differences are obscured by the representational practices of culture, where culture can be seen as comprising of both high (canonised) and low (popular) culture.

Recognising the complex challenges posed by the representational practices of advancing technological society, thinkers such as Wendy Brown and Ben Agger advocate the emergence of a new critical theory which merges the concerns of Critical Theory and feminism. Brown introduces the topic with a quote from Marcuse which states that "[f]eminism is a revolt against decaying capitalism" (1) and contends that "Critical Theory […] is a model both for the complexity and self-reflexivity feminist theory requires and also offers elegant insights for contemporary thought" (5). Departing from a similar premise, Agger campaigns for the development of "a third-generation critical theory, surpassing but learning from the first-generation critical theory of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse and the second-generation critical theory of Habermas" (1). Agger argues that

> women and household labor, the imagination, and the popular have been equivalently devalued by male supremacy, a modernist philosophy of history, and cultural mandarism, respectively. I argue that these three 'causes' of domination are, in fact, one, requiring us to rethink separability and territoriality in creative ways […]. Feminism politicizes the household and sexuality; postmodernism interrogates the modernist philosophy of history; and the Frankfurt school theorizes the culture industry politically. Within these three venues of politics and power people actively resist their own domination,

> working imaginatively and courageously to create vital spaces of […] counterhegemony (4).

In accordance with Agger's argument I find the work of Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno especially relevant to an analysis of the mechanisms whereby meaning in *Lolita* has been manipulated over time, especially in light of current debates in feminism concerning the representation of girl-children. A brief comparative interweaving of the two modes of criticism serves to situate my discussion of the novel.

It is my contention that a Marcusean overview of the history and evolution of literature and literary characters in the West and their relation to readers sheds further light on the early reception of Nabokov's novel. Marcuse argues that the "moral, aesthetic, and intellectual values industrial society still professes" derive from higher culture, but that they are no longer valid since they were based on a Romantic, "pre-technological culture" that was essentially different to that of technological society (61). These values were consciously employed in high art to distance its readers from the realities of the "entire sphere of business and industry, and from its calculable and profitable order" and were, ultimately, restricted to the bourgeois minority. This "bourgeois order" was "over-shadowed, broken, refuted" by the grim, working class 'reality' of the rest of society, which was represented in the literature by "such disruptive characters as the artist, the prostitute, the adulteress, the great criminal and outcast, the warrior, the rebel-poet, the devil, the fool – those who don't earn a living, at least not in an orderly and normal way". Marcuse notes that these characters have not disappeared from the literature of advancing technological society, but asserts that they are no longer representatives of an alternative way of life who serve to disrupt and undermine the current order; rather, they become "freaks" – abominations whose existence validate the "established order" (62).

In Marcuse's view, then, the proliferation of the values of the "established order" becomes oppressive in that they do not make provision for any other way of life, marginalising those who do not conform to normative behaviour. The phenomenon described by Marcuse is parodied overtly in *Lolita*'s foreword, which condemns both Humbert and Lolita for their deviance from society's behavioural codes, proposing that the book be seen as an incentive to enforce this code more strictly (Nabokov 5-6). However, the novel implicitly illustrates the disastrous consequences of clinging to a Romantic/normative view of human nature in a technological world, thereby espousing the same general critique of advancing technological society as Marcuse's work.

Hawkes and Egan's criticism of the argument against the sexualisation of girls in the media turns on the same basic idea as Marcuse's above in that it posits that the concept of sexualisation does not provide for alternative sexual subjectivities of girls, so that the concept of girlhood in itself becomes oppressive, limiting the agency of girls and constructing them as passive. Bray locates the confusion within feminism that is hampering the adequate theorisation of the relationship between media representation of girls and the sexual abuse of girls in the clash between "post-feminist girl power", which embraces women's right to express their sexuality freely, and the feminist desire of liberating girls "from the objectifying prison of patriarchal modernity" (328). The gist of Bray's argument is that the neo-liberal politics of tolerance, which is the impetus behind arguments against sexualisation, pathologises questions of intolerance against the system, so that any resistance is rendered moot (336). Thus the politics of tolerance in some instances work *against* its ideals of liberation, evoking Horkheimer and Adorno's description of advancing technological society as a society "where progress becomes its own opposite" (999).

Bray concludes with the question of "[w]hat kind of feminist cultural politics" would be "equal to the task of challenging the corporate sexualisation of girls" (336). This perceived 'dead end' within feminism echoes Marcuse's stance that "traditional ways and means of protest" are becoming "ineffective"; in fact, according to Marcuse's theory, traditional forms of protest may even be dangerous in that they *create* the false impression of resistance (260). Like Bray, then, Marcuse calls for a new form of resistance, postulating that it is more likely to be effected from within the current system than take the shape of a revolution which overturns the established order. It is my argument that feminist revisions of *Lolita* (in their capacity to depict the girl-child as multi-dimensional) have the potential to initiate a movement challenging not only traditional constructions of girlhood sexuality, but also the corporate sexualisation of girls.

Derivative Writing and the Limits of Criticism

I have argued above that the emergence of the *Lolita*-derivative novels can be seen as attempting to offer a new form of resistance in the face of the difficulties and dead ends faced by feminist criticism. Ken Plummer, although not specifically referring to derivative novels, argues that the factor of "human interest" that is present in stories cannot be replaced by criticism's "abstract arguments and dense detail" when it comes to generating greater insight and social transformation (175). Furthermore, he notes that "[n]ew ways of telling start to creep into academia too. Academics find their formal 'scientific rhetoric' inappropriate as a means of communication and turn to other ways of presenting their 'sex findings': the personal narrative, the play, the poem, the collective story, the chorus!" Plummer posits that "stories of deconstruction" have started to emerge because

> in the late modern period, the very language we use to grasp the world comes to the fore as a problem—no longer can it be simply assumed to describe or reflect

> ‘reality’. The old language is seen as clichéd, straitjacketing, empty of meaning. This has become the age of the sign, where symbols, icons, language and stories become increasingly problematic. There has been a ‘textual revolution’ and sexual stories are part of this. Sexual stories become more and more ambiguous: a lack of clarity, a sense of the power and profound ambiguity of language, mingles with simple-minded borrowings, repackaged into pastiche, reassembled to tell the same old stories in new and ironic ways. The stories are full of indeterminacies; a supermarket of sexual possibilities pervades, with endless choices potentially available and unavailable. Sexual story telling becomes much more self-conscious and much more artefactual (134).

Plummer’s assertions about the changing nature of stories to accommodate the decay of meaning in “old” language presents a solution to the difficulties faced by feminism and described by the Frankfurt school in that it suggests a new way of making sense of matters pertaining to sexuality.

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The theory of “stories of deconstruction” is particularly applicable to the *Lolita* derivatives in its emphasis on the repackaging of “old stories in new and ironic ways”. Furthermore, the description of these stories as more “self-conscious” and “artefactual” relates to my observation that the self-conscious nature of derivative novels allows them to negotiate the trappings of discourse more carefully in that attention is constantly drawn to the fictionality of what is being represented. The “indeterminacies” and “endless choices” that characterise “stories of deconstruction” may present new and unlimited ways in which the subject can conceive of herself – and perhaps reinvigorating and recuperating the “old” language to produce new meaning. With a view to determining the extent to which the text *Lolita* can be viewed as a story of deconstruction, the next three chapters are dedicated to its analysis – taking care throughout not to fall back on “old” ways of viewing the girl-child.

CHAPTER THREE

Contextualising *Lolita*: Modernism and the Constructed Nature of Reality

> *Yes, […] this world [is] just one gag after another, if somebody wrote up [my] life nobody would ever believe it.*
>
> *Dolores Haze,* Lolita

In the past Nabokov's Lolita has been obscured and, with concerns about girls' subjectivity now at the forefront of feminist debates, it is imperative that this past distortion be corrected. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to work towards creating a better vantage point from which to view Lolita. This can be done by contextualising the novel as a whole, the understanding of which has also been eschewed together with that of the title character. First, a brief summary of World War II's influence on US attitudes to gender and family in the years preceding and following *Lolita*'s publication is given. An overview of the text as a modernist novel follows. Then *Lolita* is discussed as a reaction against Romantic childrearing practices that endanger girl-children through constructing them as innocent and asexual. This topic flows into a discussion of the constructed nature of 'reality' as depicted in *Lolita*, a theme which forms the foundation of the novel's critique of advancing technological society's representative practices.

The USA After World War II

The recognition that the aftermath of World War II represents a transitional period in American history is central to forming a picture of the normative ideals imposed upon the girl-child during the time in which *Lolita* is set. The end of the war signalled a return to 'normalcy', which manifested in the return of men from the battlefields, the shift in production from wartime necessities back to consumer products, and the return of women from their wartime jobs to resume their duties in the home full-time. The impact of these three changes in American society are of vital importance in reconstructing an image of the girl-child as a body imprinted with political significance in that the period was marked by a profusion of propaganda. This propaganda was aimed at the recuperation of family life through a celebration of nationhood in order to render worthwhile the sacrifices of the war. Furthermore, since national strength was conceived of as being rooted in the nuclear family, the re-establishment of family values was of ideological centrality in the promotion of American supremacy on the global economic and political front. As Lori Rotskoff notes, "[n]arratives in mass-circulation magazines, movies, television shows and other cultural forms aligned the suburban nuclear family with happiness, affluence, and other blessings of U.S. citizenship" (7). In postwar America, then, family life and nationhood were seen as inextricably linked, so that the wellbeing of the one depended on the wellbeing of the other.

The unprecedented affluence of the postwar period was instrumental in preserving the centrality of the nuclear family in American life. The increase in wages that resulted from the booming postwar economy decreased the need for women to earn money by working outside the home and served to reinstall them as nurturers and homemakers. Women's work outside the home during the war did not, as one would expect, impact significantly on the general perception of their traditional role in society; wartime propaganda represented women as symbols of sacrifice in service to a national cause and elided the implications that women's competence in traditionally male occupations had for women's rights. Maureen Honey asserts that "the implicit message that women could do all kinds of work was muted and eventually silenced altogether" (96).

The importance of recuperating the concept of the housewife as an integral part of family life can furthermore be attributed to a need to preserve a definitive sense of men’s identity in postwar America. The jobs that women occupied during the war were, post-war, again reserved for men, who had traditionally been identified and identified themselves primarily as breadwinners. Whereas the war had provided ample opportunity for women to conceive of themselves in non-traditional roles, it had also served to reinforce men’s traditional role as protectors, not only of their country, but also of the traditional American way of life. For men to find themselves jobless and relegated to the domestic sphere upon their return from the battlefields would have resulted in a collective loss of male identity, weakening the sense of nationhood during a time when the threats of atomic energy, political disparity, and communism demanded strength and solidarity.

Despite the return of women to the home, men’s sense of identity was threatened in the aftermath of the war in that they had become almost redundant to family life during, and as a result of, their absence. The situation was further exacerbated by the long hours fathers worked outside the home, the rise in the popularity of watching television as a pastime, and the spacious suburban home that negated the necessity for children and parents to occupy communal living areas. Rachel Devlin posits that “[i]n the 1940s and 1950s paternal authority was officially on the wane, if not extinct, in the United States” (9). In 1948 anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer observed that “the role of father [is] more vestigial […] in the United States” than in most other societies (qtd Devlin 9).

Devlin argues that “social change, popular culture, and psychoanalytic theory influenced each other” (8) during this period to “reformulate paternal power” (10). While the interaction of various cultural phenomena contributed to the reformulation of the role of the father in postwar America, the rise of the popularity of psychoanalysis and Freudian interpretations of familial relationships can be seen as playing a central role in Americans’ perception of human personality and family relationships, “locating needs and conflicts in a dense web of projections, identifications, and subconscious fantasies, much of it stemming from the Oedipal myth" (8). According to Devlin,

> because of these developments, the relationship between father and daughter came to be understood, in ways both subtle and overt, as primarily – if not exclusively – erotic in nature. Taken separately, transformations either in scholarly thinking about female adolescent behaviour or in popular representations of fathers and daughters would compromise noteworthy historical developments. Together, they reflect a fundamental shift in the social meaning of the father-daughter relationship and challenge us to consider its significance to postwar sexual culture (2).

The shift in "the social meaning of the father-daughter relationship" that Devlin refers to resonates strongly with the project of exploring the ways in which meaning is inscribed on the body of the girl-child in *Lolita* especially, though not exclusively, in her focus on the *erotic* nature of the relationship. Devlin's research serves to reinscribe the culpability of the father in the eroticisation of the body of the girl-child, and consequently to problematise the characterisation of Nabokov's eponymous character, by some critics, as a depraved seductress.

Aside from emphasising the importance of social change and psychoanalysis in reconceptualising father-daughter relationships in postwar America, Devlin points to the significant role played by consumer culture in refiguring parental authority as well as sexual culture. According to the 'new' concept of fatherhood,

> [a] father should participate in – rather than guard against – the new forms of sexualized consumerism in which his teenage daughter was involved. […] It was this revised understanding of the father-daughter relationship that allowed for and helped facilitate the massive commercialization and sexualisation of 'girls' culture' at mid-century. What direct authority fathers may have given up was replaced with the subtle, psychological power of erotic attraction. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of the emergence of the glamorous postwar teenage girl without her father, not simply because his permission was technically necessary for her to procure these new accoutrements, but because he was so consistently

> imagined as a central character within her sartorial and cosmetic coming-of-age (11).

Devlin's research has significant implications for exploring the depiction of Lolita in Nabokov's novel.

While on the surface the father-daughter relationship in *Lolita* seems to resemble the picture sketched by Devlin, there are some important differences that must be taken into account in order to expose the ways in which the girl-child resists her abuser under the guise of conforming to the role of the daughter. In the quoted paragraph Devlin notes that the "glamorous postwar teenage girl" cannot be imagined without considering the presence of the father in two different, but related capacities: first, as the financier of "new accoutrements" and second, as central to her "cosmetic coming-of-age". This observation points to both the superficial and more personal dimensions of fatherhood in America – that which is explicitly visible to outsiders in the procurement of goods, and that which is implied by this procurement of goods: a controlling of the girl's sexual coming-of-age.

From the above it is evident that in the postwar US, girls' subjectivity was, as far as media representation is concerned, anchored in consumerism. It points to a society where consumption and consumerism were becoming central to the formation of identity in general, with the result that the range of conceivable identities a particular person could inhabit necessarily became limited to those identities that were ready-made for consumption – those that were depicted in the media. Of course, not everyone is equally susceptible to the influence of the media, so that it remained possible to inhabit an identity not represented therein. However, in such a media-oriented, media-saturated society the non-representation of those who do not conform to the norm is significant; to a certain extent, the media elides their existence, rendering them unintelligible to those around them. To a great extent, this is what happens to

Lolita: of all the representations of young girls that seemed to reflect her identity, none were faithful to Nabokov's characterisation, which proved unintelligible because of its lack of representation in the media.

Lolita ***as Modernist Text***

Lolita's revelation of advancing technological society's ineffective representational practices is symptomatic of its location within the modernist tradition. Neil Larsen posits that, essentially, modernism grew from a "crisis of representation" in capitalist society, the crisis being that representation "no longer 'works'", that it "no longer appears to offer the subject any cognitive access to the object" (xxiv). In *Lolita*, the latter certainly seems to be the case. Karen Jacobs argues that, in this novel,

> we find that behind the 'innocent' face of any representational mirror stands an intractably embodied, interpretive centre. In this restaging of an essentially modernist revelation about the subjective underpinnings of perception in ways that challenge the very distinction between self and world, *Lolita* marks a moment of changing visual codes and visual relations, one that cannily anticipates a postmodern view (44).

Humbert, whose narration has been characterised by critics as unreliable, represents Lolita's "embodied, interpretive centre" (Phelan 130). This problematises interpretations of the novel since it becomes difficult to distinguish the narrator's 'truth' from his 'lies'. However, Jacobs's analysis reminds us that, for modernism, the act of narration is always implicitly unreliable to an extent, rooted as it is in subjectivity.

It is also in part the novel's modernist characteristics that engender a critique of the representational practices of advancing technological society. Jacobs specifically notes that modernism seeks to expose the (authoritative) body's "situated partiality, its culturally determined distortions, its will to dominance and even violence", suggesting that these characteristics "have become the basis for Anti-Enlightenment critique" (2).

This corresponds to the Frankfurt school's emphasis on the oppressive power of post-Enlightenment rationality, which exercises totalitarian control disguised as culture. Furthermore, in exploring the distorting gaze of the subject, modernism insists "that the smallest segment would reveal an entire world when subjected to microcosmic, microscopic analysis" (Cantor 35).

In considering "the smallest segment" a microcosm of the larger system, modernism shares with Marcuse the understanding that the disorder of the individual can potentially shed light on the disorder of the entire system. The most obvious "disorder" in *Lolita* is Humbert's paedophilia, but more generally the "disorder" that constitutes the theme of the novel can be seen as the conflation of the representational and the 'real'. Specifically, *Lolita* explores this "disorder" within the ideological context of mid-20th century American. *Lolita* reflects in many ways "the sense of cultural crisis in America in the late-1940s and early-1950s", which Keith M. Booker describes as being "so strong that even ostensibly utopian works of the period take on decidedly dystopian intonations" (91). The text can thus provide valuable insight into the ideology of the time, its heritage, and its legacy.

However, it is important to bear in mind Nabokov's assertion that he is "neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction" and that for him "a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords [him] […] aesthetic bliss" (Nabokov 314). In keeping with this claim, his novels are commonly approached as strictly self-reflexive, and therefore as antirealist (Strehle 3). Kauffman attributes certain critics' tendency to overlook the sexual abuse in *Lolita* to the framing devices of John Ray, Jr.'s foreword and Nabokov's afterword, which establish the novel's "self-referential textuality" and which warns against a reading of the novel that considers it a commentary on "social issues like child abuse" (132) Thus, to the reader who "take[s] Nabokov at his word" (Kauffman 132), *Lolita* merely constitutes the portrayal of the closed ideological matrix within which the 'reality' of Humbert, the protagonist-narrator, is produced.

However, as noted previously, Nabokov's commentary on *Lolita* threatens to be as solipsistic as Humbert's observations regarding Lolita; especially when exploring the perilous nature of representation it becomes particularly important to disregard the author's input. On the other hand, Nabokov's phrasing is ambiguous: the novel's theme of the unreliable nature of representation can be seen as a critique of any individual who is "a reader or a writer of didactic fiction" because fiction tends to present the reader with extremely subjective representations of 'reality'. Booker reiterates this idea, positing that in *Lolita*

> characters who accept any fictionalised version of 'reality' uncritically and unquestioningly […] are rendered incapable of effective action in the real world. By consistently emphasising the fictionality and literariness of his own creations Nabokov seeks to avoid contributing to this problem by refusing to have his work taken as an authoritative statement about 'reality' (55).

Furthermore, inviting a reading that considers the novel a form of social commentary is the fact that Humbert's world does resemble the reader's to a great extent – writing in the 1960s Fiedler states that "[n]owhere in [America's] recent literature is there so detailed and acute a picture of [the American] landscape, topographical and moral, as in *Lolita*" (335).

For Strehle, texts with this mimetic quality belong to the genre of "actualism" (6), which "seem[s] impelled to explore, celebrate, criticize, and engage the outer world" (4). In texts such as those by Nabokov, "[p]laying with the pieces, putting them together, suggests a common metaphor for both literature and life […]; reading and living resemble the process of constructing a jigsaw puzzle" (Strehle 323). *Lolita*'s actualism allows it to "[demolish its] narrator['s] certainties behind [his back]" (Strelhe 225) by "expos[ing] the fictionality of 'reality'" (Strelhe 3), allowing the reader to discern not only Humbert's ideologically driven consciousness, but also their own. Consequently, *Lolita*'s self-referentiality is a powerful device in illustrating the power of ideology to produce not only individual 'reality', but also collective or social 'reality'.

The Constructed Nature of 'Reality'

In one of the few instances in the text where we hear Lolita talk about her own situation there is an implicit reference to the solipsistic power of language and culture when she muses: "Yes, […] this world [is] just one gag after another, if somebody wrote up [my] life nobody would ever believe it" (Nabokov 273). The "world" that Lolita describes as "one gag after another" refers implicitly to the text *Lolita* with the word 'gag', on the one hand, locating the reason for her hypothetical reader's disbelief in the novel's perceived comical/parodic elements, and signifying that the text cannot contain the story of "her life" because it represents a non-real or unreal world. This statement asserts Lolita's agency in that it serves to assert ownership over her story; her story depends upon *her* perception of events and thus cannot possibly be articulated by *anyone other* than herself.

Furthermore, the words "this world" ties together the worlds inside and outside the text, since the interpretation of the textual world as parodic depends on the readers' perception of their own world as 'real'. In keeping with the modernist tradition in which the novel is written, Lolita's words here point towards the fictional or constructed nature of any 'reality'. Such a reading of Lolita's statement has significant implications for the heated debate that *Lolita* has elicited. It implies that our inability to reconstruct a 'realistic' life story for her from Humbert's narrative is intimately connected with the constraints of discourse and the limitations of language to accurately "write up [any] life", because meaning is also determined through the act of reading, not simply through the act of writing.

On a literal level a "gag" also denotes a restraint used to silence or muffle someone's voice: Lolita's story becomes its own opposite; speech becomes silence as the true meaning of the communication is lost in the restrictive realm of language and culture. In other words, because language is embedded in culture, the potential for Lolita's story to be heard is significantly diminished because of the cultural associations of girlhood. Because girls are associated with passivity and asexuality, their stories of initial sexual exploration and eventual escape from sexual abuse, are gagged.

This 'gagging' signals oppression, since it limits the liveable lives available to Lolita. In *Lolita,* the boundaries between 'reality' and the self disappear in that both are individual constructs relying on our perceptions of the world around us for their scope. The escape from circumscribed 'reality' or consciousness thus requires the ability to transcend the boundaries of the self. In this vein, modernism takes as its project "a breakthrough to a different self, through writing on the part of the author, and through reading on that of the reader" (Cantor 43). Through inviting us to identify with its narrator, Nabokov's novel presents an extreme example of this transcendence because of the protagonist's desires, which represent a transgression of society's moral laws. However, it emerges from the criticism on *Lolita* that arguably the biggest challenge the novel poses to the reader is that of identifying with Lolita, the object of Humbert's lust, whose story is overpowered by the narrator's. It is thus imperative that readers overcome his or her own cultural trappings and place themselves in the girl-child's shoes. While only Lolita can tell her own story, the reader can potentially have a clearer idea of her story.

If modernism concerns itself with transcending the self in order to illustrate how 'reality' is constructed, the child becomes the logical focus through which to pursue this project, since childhood constitutes a valuable site for exploring how the self creates meaning. Modernism draws attention to the ways in which identity is imposed on individuals according to the position they occupy in the institutions of culture and, therefore, seeks to locate a self who is "different from the ordinary familial and social being known in everyday life" (Cantor 43). This sentiment resonates strongly with the attempt to conceive of the girl-child in terms that resist the normative ideals of society, since, as noted in the introduction, the girl-child's subjectivity has historically been constructed in terms of her position in both the family and society.

Lolita as a Critique of Romantic Childrearing Practices

The girl-child's position in the family and in society are directly related to her construction in the Romantic discourse. Thus, a strong argument can be made for *Lolita* as a critique of modern childrearing practices, which continue to be influenced by the writing of Rousseau. Norman F. Cantor's claim that "[w]e are still living through the consequences of the political and ideological outcomes of Romanticism" (4) becomes particularly apparent on a rigorous reading of *Lolita.* John Ray Jr.'s foreword to the novel invokes the aims of Romantic childhood, suggesting that observing these could prevent other girls from following Lolita's terrible fate. Simultaneously, the novel, read within the chronology of the gender crisis of post-World War II America, highlights the constructed nature of Romantic concepts of 'woman,' as is apparent when considering that not even a *child* can live up to the standards of innocence and virtue expected of adult women. Thus, when considered alongside a feminist reading of Nabokov's novel that exposes the tragic effects of a culture rearing its children according to the ideals of Romanticism and drawing in its films on the 18th century sentimental novel, while (however subconsciously) eroticizing children as conforming to its criteria for ideal womanhood, Ray's foreword becomes highly parodic, exposing the inadequacy of Romantic concepts for dealing with the 'realities' of industrialised society. The text as a whole can be read as an allegory of the disastrous effects of this inadequacy, with Humbert (and his partner in crime, John Ray Jr., whose initials can be no coincidence in a Nabokovian text with its myriad allusions) representing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Dolores Haze representing the quintessential girl-child.

Such a reading is in keeping with modernism's "rejection of philosophical idealism" (Cantor 37), of which Romanticism is an example. Lolita's inadequate and inaccurate knowledge of sexuality is the result of residual Romantic childrearing practices in American society at large, which exclude children from adult knowledge in order to protect their innocence, so that they are left to draw their own conclusions about sex. Rousseau explicitly states in his watershed work *Emile* that children should be told nothing, but left to discover things for themselves. A reading of *Lolita* as a critique of such practices is furthermore supported in the text by Humbert referring to himself as "Jean-Jacques Humbert" when he talks about his mistaken assumptions about Lolita's innocence and the illusion that he could preserve it intact. He shows an awareness that children are not by nature innocent, that they will engage in sexual experimentation with or without "adult knowledge" of sexual matters. During her ostensible seduction of him he is aware that Lolita sees "the stark act [of sex] merely as part of a youngster's furtive world, unknown to adults [and that] [w]hat adults [do] for the purposes of procreation [is] no business of hers."

The construction of children as essentially innocent, pure, and good (Kehily 5) is based on an idealistic assumption that is thoroughly undermined by the worrisome consequences of society's efforts to protect childhood innocence in *Lolita.* In the novel, Humbert's initial treatment of Lolita is based on the assumption that she is an innocent child. The fact that Lolita has *some* sexual knowledge contributes to her eventual rape, because Humbert "by-pass[es] the issue by clinging to conventional notions of what twelve-year-old girls should be" (Nabokov 124). Humbert does not consider the fact that Lolita could engage *him* in a sexual encounter, so that when it does happen, he sees in it, rather than the exploratory sexuality of a child, the realisation of his nymphet fantasies. Humbert's failure to consider this possibility thus renders Lolita particularly vulnerable.

Adding to Lolita's vulnerability is the fact that her perception of love and sex is initially shaped by the Romantic discourse of love as portrayed in the media. This is reflected in her initial idolisation of Clare Quilty, and subsequently of Humbert. The discourse of love as portrayed in the media focuses on romance and elides sexual intercourse – Lolita does not associate love with sex, as is clear from the text's suggestion that she sees "the stark act [of sex] merely as part of a youngster's furtive world". Humbert is aware of Lolita's perception of love and sex, as is evident when he realises early on in the novel that he "could kiss her throat or the wick of her mouth with perfect impunity" and that "she would let [him] do so, and even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches" (48). Humbert manipulates and uses Lolita's naivety in order to live out a fantasy produced by Romanticism's fascination with youth and innocence, as is evident when he says that "Lolita has individualized the writer's ancient lust" (45).

The "writer's ancient lust" here explicitly refers to the origins of the novel as a type of conduct book for girls, which I alluded to earlier, but also to the type of women – and thus sexual objects – the Romantic discourse seeks to produce: passive, innocent, asexual. Humbert's idealization of Lolita seeks similarly to mould her into a shape which pleases him, and which serves his own purposes. Thus Lolita represents *all* girls who have been constructed as innocent and servile by Romantic notions of childhood and gender. According to Ragussis, "*Lolita* recasts the plot in which the family erases individual identity, especially by the abuse of the (female) child in the name of the family" (168).

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In summary, this chapter has shown that *Lolita*'s publication came at a time when US gender roles were being re-fixed and consumerism and the media were contributing to the construction of girls as passive and asexual once again. Thus, the text constitutes a modernist critique of both Romantic childrearing practices and advancing technological society's representational practices. The novel points to the constructed nature of 'reality', and the dangers inherent in Romantic constructions of girlhood, showing how representation can lead to advanced levels of oppressive conformity. This same conformity has in the past prevented a 'truer' Lolita from being revealed, as the next chapter will show.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lolita and The Oppressive Power of Operationalism

> *Every time we choose to believe in one of the [popular culture Lolitas] instead of the original, it surely tells us something about ourselves and our times. […] Happily, the 'real' Lolita can always be perfectly restored for anyone who cares to read or reread Nabokov's novel.*
>
> Graham Vickers, *Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov's Girl-Child All Over Again.*

How can we reveal a Lolita different to those previously constructed in criticism and the popular mind? In order to be able to do this, it is necessary to take a closer look at the way in which 'reality' is constructed both inside and outside the text *Lolita.* To this end, the current chapter lays bare Humbert's self-reifying thought process, which ultimately leads him to transpose the ideal onto the real. I explore how this can constitute the transformation of the 'real' into an object. Next, the destructive power of conformity is discussed; I look at the role of categorising, external appearance, naming and the myth of authority in the oppression that is caused by conformity. Lastly, the influence of consumerism in advancing conformity is discussed. This chapter contributes to laying the groundwork for Chapter Five, which will look at how Lolita uses the society's advancing conformity to escape from Humbert.

One-dimensional Humbert

If modernism has as its goal the breakthrough to a "different self" (Cantor 43), Humbert (however alien his behaviour may seem) is not representative of that different self. Humbert, as the first-person narrator with whom the reader is encouraged to identify, *represents* the reader, a notion which is reinforced by the way in which Humbert pre-empts the readers' response to his narrative throughout. In this way, the reader and writer are constructed as a single entity, who simultaneously writes and reads; in other words, writing becomes reading, and vice versa. This process is similar, in principal, to the way in which technological rationality takes effect. Technological rationality, the prevailing mode of thought of technological society, is a one-dimensional system of thought that upholds itself through an ongoing process of self-reification.[19] In other words, Humbert's, and the reader's, understanding of the world is predicated upon various knowledge systems, most notably those of literature and popular culture, and these knowledge systems both reflect and inform his, and thus the reader's, rationality.

In these conditions, the meaning of a word or concept, since it continually reifies itself, easily becomes fixed or rigid, closing off the possibility that it may signify something other. This phenomenon is identified by Marcuse as "operationalism", which is one of the features of the closing of the universe of discourse:

> The feature of operationalism – to make the concept synonymous with the corresponding set of operations – recurs in the linguistic tendency 'to consider the names of things as being indicative at the same time of their manner of functioning, and the names of the properties and processes as symbolical of the apparatus used to detect or produce them (90).

Operationalism constitutes the essence of technological reasoning and fosters "the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods" (87). In other words, operationalism erases the boundaries between representations and the 'real'.

Operationalism is confirmed, quite explicitly, as underlying the way in which Humbert relates to the world when he comments:

> I have often noticed that we are inclined to endow our friends with the stability of type that literary characters acquire in the readers mind. […] [W]e expect our friends to follow this or that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them. […] Any deviation in the fates we have ordained would strike us as not only anomalous but unethical (265).

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[19] This broad summary is based on my understanding of Marcuse's *One-dimensional Man* in its entirety.

The similarity in the sentiment Humbert expresses here and the way in which readers have vilified Lolita on account of her failure to conform to traditional ideals of innocent girlhood is easily identifiable, which confirms the idea that the acts of 'reading' within the novel conform to those outside it. However, it soon becomes clear that *Lolita* constitutes a critique of US ideology: a close reading of the novel reveals Humbert's logic as being flawed, since his expectations – based on the "stability of type" he assigns them – are continually overturned.

One such instance occurs at the beginning of the novel; before Humbert's first wife, Valeria, announces that she is leaving him for another man, he observes: "During the last weeks I had kept noticing that my fat Valeria was not her usual self; had acquired a queer restlessness; even showed something like irritation at times, which was quite out of keeping with the stock character she was supposed to impersonate" (27). After the announcement, sitting at a café with Valeria and her lover, discussing their future plans, Humbert describes her as "pour[ing] words into [that] dignified receptacle with a volubility [he] had never suspected she had in her" (28). In keeping with the tendency to assign "a stability of type" to people, instead of concluding that Valeria is more complex than he had initially thought, Humbert's surmises that he has been "as naïve as only a pervert can be", failing to notice the 'real' Valeria because he was distracted by "the imitation she gave of a little girl" (25). He quickly adjusts his mental picture of her: she is no longer, as he had initially thought, a "practically brainless *baba*" (26); rather, she is a different "stock character" - "the comedy wife" (28). Humbert's use of the word "pervert" is ironic: on the one hand, it refers to his sexual perversion, but, on the other, it refers to the distorted 'logic' implicit in the tendency to assign "a stability of type" to people when, in reality, identity can be seen as fluid and changeable.

Humbert's inability to comprehend of identity as fluid instead of fixed is illustrated when he makes much the same mistake in his second marriage; in fact, it seems that he has forgotten his misjudgement of Valeria when he says that "[h]ad Charlotte been Valeria, [he] would have known how to handle the situation" (83). Charlotte, to him, constitutes an altogether different "stock character", one that he does not know how to "handle". As such, "[b]land American Charlotte" (83), this "wom[a]n of principle" (84), "frightened [him]" (83). He realises that his "lighthearted dream of controlling her through her passion for [him] was all wrong" (83). He laments his misjudgement of her character as follows:

> Oh, you cannot imagine (as I had never imagined) what these women of principle are! Charlotte, who did not notice the falsity of all the everyday conventions and rules of behaviour, and foods, and books, and people she doted upon, would distinguish at once a false intonation in anything I might say with a view to keeping Lo near. She was like a musician who might be an odious vulgarian in ordinary life, devoid of tact and taste; but who will hear a false note in music with diabolical accuracy of judgment. […] Such then, was the mess (84).

In order to make sense of Charlotte's identity, he must find some point of similarity with a category he understands; as such he compares the category of "women of principle" to "musicians". There is something mystical in this ability to "distinguish at once a false intonation"; it is practically unimaginable – it makes no logical sense because Charlotte "did not notice the falsity" of anything else she encounters. According to Humbertian logic, in order for something to exist, it must be imaginable – as is evidenced by Humbert's injunction that the reader imagine him: "I shall not exist if you do not imagine me" (129).

The Danger of Transposing the Ideal Onto the Real

Through framing his novel as the memoir of his narrator, including an editor's foreword, and thereby blurring the lines between fiction and reality, Nabokov emphasises the dangers implicit in transposing the ideal onto the real. For Humbert, his ideal subject, Lolita, who emits "a burst of rough glee" which is "the sign of the nymphet" (133) before seducing him, is more real than Dolores, the "mere child", so that, to the casual reader, her rape is the result of a horrific case of 'mistaken' identity. If Humbert is to be taken at his word, he does not recount an imagined seduction: Lolita really does "put her mouth to [his] ear" (133) to whisper a sexual suggestion, initiating intercourse or sex play. In so doing the "mere child" exhibits the qualities of the "nymphet" and crosses over into the realm of Humbert's ideal, which for him becomes a reality. Thus, it would seem that Lolita and Dolores are one and the same, that Dolores is both knowing seductress and "mere child". Yet, as suggested earlier in this thesis, these two identities have historically been juxtaposed as mutually exclusive. Thus, it emerges from the text that Dolores is just as much a fictive construction as Lolita, so that the category of the "mere child" – who is by definition sexually innocent - is problematised and exposed as belonging to the realm of the ideal, rather than the 'real'.

Humbert situates the folly of his actions in the apparent seamlessness of appearance and reality when he says that he, "Jean- Jacques Humbert, had taken for granted, when [he] first met [Dolores], that she was as unravished as the stereotypical notion of [the] 'normal child'" and that he had clung to "conventional notions of what twelve-year-old girls should be" (Nabokov 124). Humbert's formulation in this instance refutes the customary reading of *Lolita* as (exclusively) *his* solipsistic narrative in favour of a reading that illustrates the solipsistic power of language in general. He admits that he had automatically given preference to, by implication, society's "stereotypical" and "conventional" ideas of what a child "should be", exposing a representational practice that reveals a complete dissociation from that which is particular or individual.

The novel problematises the significance of representation throughout; it emerges that representation and objectification are two sides of the same coin in that the act of representation, on the level of individual consciousness, can constitute the transformation of the 'real' into an object. Early on in the novel, after secretly bringing himself to orgasm against Lolita's buttocks under the guise of mock playfulness, Humbert says that Lolita has been "safely solipsized"(60). The statement implies the assimilation of her into his experiential world, while she, "having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own" remains unaffected by him (62). The implicit link between representation and objectification is made here when Humbert asserts that the incident has "affected [Lolita] as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a dark screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark" (62). Through Humbert's comparison of the incident on the couch to a man masturbating in a film theatre, the text problematises a reading of Humbert's paedophilia as a relatively isolated case of male deviance.

While the novel's fictional foreword characterises Humbert as a "maniac" who is "abnormal" (5), the reference to a "photographic image rippling upon a dark screen" points to a society that sexualises representations of young girls in the media, reinforcing the idea of *Lolita* as a microcosm of that society. While Humbert molests an unwitting Lolita, the "hunchback abus[es himself]"; neither Lolita nor the hypothetical girl projected onto the screen are aware of the violation that occurs, implying that both represent the same action and as such both should be equally harmless or dangerous.

The text questions the effect of objectification even more explicitly early on in the novel when Humbert wonders what becomes of all the girls he has fantasised about in his life:

> In this wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect, could it be that the hidden throb I stole from them did not affect *their* future? I had possessed her – and she never knew it. All right. But would it not tell sometime later? Had I not somehow tampered with her fate by involving her image in my voluptas? Oh, it was, and remains, a source of great and terrible wonder (21).

Humbert's question here is designed (by Nabokov) to evoke deeper thought, precisely because the answer is so clear: no, just looking at the girl cannot be harmful to her. However, the invocation of "fate" suggests that what is at stake here is not the girl's immediate and physical wellbeing, but rather the long term possibilities of her life. In other words, the question could be reframed as whether Humbert's objectification of the girl could impact on the range of liveable lives available to her. Hence, the question invites the reader to make the link between operationalism and objectification and conclude that objectification, like operationalism, is a restrictive act that necessarily leads to oppression.

The Destructive Power of Conformity

Ultimately, as a textual device, the fallacious reasoning on Humbert's part is very effective in drawing attention to the power of deductive logic to eschew reality. Furthermore, it begs the question of *why* the seemingly intelligent Humbert would make such a glaringly false deduction with relation to Lolita's behaviour. The answer to this question narrows the scope of the novel's theme of the destructive power of conformity as it leads to a more critical look at Humbert's perception of Lolita's character, and the factors that shape it.

The first factor shaping Humbert's perception of Lolita's character is, as noted, his categorising proclivity. However, whereas the novel starts out with a positive reinforcement of technological rationality through Humbert's discovery of Annabel Leigh's reincarnation in Lolita, there is a movement towards its negation. Towards the end of the novel, Humbert's sense of self, which depends on his ability to categorize himself and others, unravels completely as technological rationality fails him time and time again. His inability to identify Quilty as Lolita's accomplice in running away represents the final outpost in his loss of identity – while he recognises an uncanny resemblance to himself in the intellectual profile of the unknown man – to the extent that he feels the other "mime[s] and mock[s]" (249) him – he still has no way of identifying him. Supporting this thematic movement in the text is the fact that progression takes place from a Humbert who professes to know and be able to neatly categorise the girl-child – "She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita" (9) – to one who admits that he "did not know a thing about [his] darling's mind", despite knowing her likes, dislikes, weight and measurements inside out.

Furthermore, Humbert assigns meaning to Lolita based on her external appearance, as is clear when he identifies her as Annabel's reincarnation: "It was the same child – the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair" (39). The exposition of the artificial meaning imposed on individuals from the outside is foreshadowed in the text one day when, after the girl-child eludes him for a brief period, Humbert asks Lolita if the unclothed mannequin in the window of a storefront is not "a rather good symbol of something or other" (226). While on the one hand the doll's arms are "twisted and seem to suggest a clasping gesture of horror and supplication", so that Humbert's comment constitutes an implicit physical threat. Humbert's inability to put his finger on the symbolic significance of the absence of any signifiers of identity on the bodies of the unclothed dolls reflects his ignorance, at the time, of the fact that he has no idea of Lolita's identity beyond the meaning he has assigned to her name, consumer habits, and physical stature.

A further factor shaping Humbert's perception of Lolita is, then, Humbert's ideal of female beauty, through which the text elaborates on the relationship between representation and objectification. The text problematises the possibility of distinguishing between real and assigned meaning when, after the incident on the couch, Humbert says: "What I had possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita – perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her" (62). Humbert's statement here draws attention to the complex mechanisms through which meaning is produced: while Humbert's Lolita is not the 'real' Lolita she shares characteristics with her – characteristics that are subject to interpretation both by Humbert and Lolita herself. Thus Lolita, with an observable set of characteristics, 'floats' between Humbert and Lolita so that her identity is constructed from these attributes by each of them subjectively.

Ultimately, *Lolita* constructs 'real' identity as hidden, unknowable, perhaps even non-existent – as is implied by Humbert's suggestion that the Lolita "floating" between him and the girl-child is "more real" than the Lolita before him. Who is the latter Lolita who is less real than the one floating between Humbert and the girl-child? The novel refrains from answering this question. "Lolita" becomes a signifier of absence; the name Lolita has been deconstructed and revealed to mean nothing. Naming, as an act of representation, is revealed as ineffective, even counter-productive.

While Humbert does not seem wholly aware of the folly of his own habits of categorization, he is aware of the camouflaging power inherent in systems of classification. His constant fear of detection while initially on the road with Lolita is partly caused by the fact that he “seemed to [himself] as implausible a father as she seemed to be a daughter” (174). His fear, of course, originates from his preconceived ideas about the mystical powers of “women of principle”, but also on the principle that deviations from “conventional patterns” are often conceived of by others not only as “anomalous” but also “unethical”. Given this he “crave[s] for a label, a background, and a simulacrum” to camouflage his unorthodox relationship with his stepdaughter. Settling in Beardsley and sending Lolita to school gives her the appearance of a “routine schoolgirl” and allows Humbert to “attach [himself] to some patterned surface which his stripes would blend with” (174-5).

This reflects the social world Nabokov is critiquing. In advancing technological society, people are prone to accepting the reality they are confronted with, “never [doubting] the reality of place, time, and circumstances” (Nabokov 189) communicated to them by what they consider an authoritative source of information. However, the concept of ‘reality’ is complicated by the myth of authority. In advanced technological society, with its high levels of conformity, traditional symbols of authority may be empty signifiers. The most obvious example of this in *Lolita* is the father as signifier of authority. Traditionally, the mere designation ‘father’ imbues a male figure, as head of his household, with authority. In the family unit the father represents the law maker, the judge, as well as the disciplinary agency. It is under the guise of fatherhood that Humbert is able to control Lolita; his jurisdiction over matters pertaining to her are not questioned. After Charlotte’s death, when John Farlow suggests that Lolita be fetched from camp and Humbert wants to prevent this, it is the ‘fact’ that “Humbert is Lolita’s real father” (101) that resolves the issue. Being “Charlotte’s friend and adviser”, John is unwilling to accept Humbert’s advice as “doctor”, but, when imbued with the authority of being “Lolita’s real father”, “whatever [Humbert] feel[s] is right” (101).

Even Lolita, at the end of the novel, despite all the abuse she has suffered under his regime, surmises that Humbert "had been a good father" (272). Far from affirming the authority of the father as real, however, Lolita's paradoxical statement calls it into question. Humbert recognises that he is not a father to Lolita when he says that he "often noticed that living as [they] did […] [they] would become strangely embarrassed whenever [he] tried to discuss something […] she and a parent [..] [or she] and a sublime, purified, analyzed, deified Harold Haze, might have discussed" (284). This statement is furthermore significant as it does not presuppose that Harold Haze would have been a good father to Lolita simply on account of their blood relationship; a 'real' father, in this instance, would have to be God-like in his virtue in order to be admitted to "absolutely forbidden" "regions" of Lolita's identity. As such a 'father' becomes an almost mythological creature, an ideal which seems impossible.

The novel points to the influence of operationalism in closing the universe of discourse when Humbert says that "[m]id-twentieth century ideas concerning child-parent relationships have been considerably tainted by the scholastic rigmarole and standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket" (285). Ironically, however, the ideal has been assimilated into the real – Humbert's sexual abuse of Lolita is never detected by his community because, outwardly, he seems to conform to the ideal of fatherhood and thus of authority. Humbert points out the discrepancy between appearance and reality as follows:

> Query: is the stepfather of a gaspingly adorable pubescent pet, a stepfather of only one month's standing, a neurotic widower of mature years and small but independent means, with the parapets of Europe, a divorce and a few madhouses behind him, is he to be considered a relative, and thus a natural guardian? (172).

Likewise, when Lolita calls Humbert "Dad" for the first time "she let[s] the word expand with ironic deliberation" (112), drawing attention to the artificiality of the title:

this man, who had before only been a boarder, a relative stranger in their house, is now legally her father.

In trying to keep Lolita under his control Humbert appeals to authority as well, frequently referring to the law, or, in one instance, "a learned book […] about young girls":

> I am your daddum, Lo. […] Look, darling, what it says. I quote: the normal girl – normal, mark you – the normal girl is usually extremely anxious to please her father. She feels in him the forerunner of the elusive male […]. The wise mother (and your poor mother would have been wise, had she lived) will encourage a companionship between father and daughter, realizing – excuse the corny style – that the girl forms her ideals of romance and of men from her association with her father. Now, what association does this cheery book mean - and recommend? I quote again: Among Sicilians sexual relations between a father and his daughter are accepted as a matter of course, and the girl who participates in such a relationship is not looked upon with disapproval by the society of which she is part (150).

By emphasising that he is "[quoting]" Humbert seeks to enforce the authority of what he is extracting from the book. Through parenthesis – "– excuse the corny style –" – Humbert further emphasises that this is not merely his opinion, but facts recorded by experts. By invoking Lolita's deceased mother, claiming her corroboration, these facts, in turn, are given more weight. Humbert corners Lolita in a metaphorical sense; to argue that her mother would *not* have agreed would constitute an insult, implying that her mother was not "wise".

Humbert furthermore manipulates Lolita by playing on her need to be "normal" – note that he contrives the reading in such a way that "normal" is repeated three times in one sentence. The words "usually" and "as a matter of course" fulfil the same function, attempting to normalize Humbert's sexual abuse of Lolita. This litany is eventually concluded – after convoluted references to, amongst other things, "the Mann Act", "the

Gods of Semantics" and "tight-zippered Philistines" – by Humbert saying to Lolita: "I am your father, and I *am* speaking English, and I love you" (150). It is clear here that Lolita has complained that he is confusing her – thus "I *am* speaking English" is yet another attempt to convince her of the credibility of what he is saying. Finally, he cements the speech by reiterating that he is her "father" and that he "love[s]" her – emotive claims meant to deflate any further arguments from Lolita's side. Humbert's eloquence is instrumental in preserving his image of authority. This is emphasised when Lolita tells him, on an earlier occasion, "You talk like a book, *Dad*" (114). Thus it emerges that the destructive power of conformity derives not only from the oppression that results from having one's identity elided, but also from its tendency to create a false image of authority and consequently to cover up abuse. In *Lolita*, it emerges that the myth of authority translates into 'real' authority, since 'reality' is constructed from the *images* around us. In other words, what looks like a father *becomes* a father.

The Seductive Influence of Consumerism

While on the surface, through her "normative" behaviour, Lolita seems to submit to Humbert, thereby allowing him to mould her according to his fantasy, her "normative" behaviour becomes a shield which she uses to hide herself from Humbert until such time that she can escape from him. Thus, because Lolita refuses to let Humbert know her mentally, he makes sense of her according to 'consumer logic' – a fact which eventually allows her to escape him. An analysis of a number of significant instances in which Lolita interacts with consumer culture shows that while Humbert conforms to the superficial characteristics of consumer society fatherhood as described by Devlin, he does so in an effort to cloak his abuse of Lolita from the public. Furthermore, his description of the money he spends on Lolita is meant to vilify her in the eyes of the reader by creating a picture of her as a superficial, ungrateful child.

When Humbert describes his sense of Lolita's identity, he says that "[m]entally, [he] found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth – these were the obvious items in her list of beloved things" (148). This is significant, in the first instance because it testifies to the extent to which he connects her identity to consumer products. Moreover, it points to the high levels of conformity in this society – the words "conventional" and "obvious" show how commonplace it is for a girl of Lolita's age to love these things. This conformity is the result of a consumer driven society, which is constantly creating needs that demand satisfaction. This correlates with Marcuse's theory of the controlling power of consumerism: these (initially) false needs become integrated into the way of life. Potential consumers are targeted by companies according to very specific market research outlining their needs, and thus Humbert is able to gauge quite easily that Lolita would like "a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, [and] sunglasses" (142). Humbert assumes that she would like these things because they are being "sold" to her through advertisements: "She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster" (148). Lolita's – and the consumer's in general – identity becomes inextricably linked to consumer products – the advertisements depict her way of life, so that she is the "subject" of the advertisement, but she is also the "object" or goal of the advertisement; in this way the poster board becomes a mirror, showing her herself, but also the self she desires to become. It is this Lolita that Humbert knows.

The process of advertising is in a sense a type of seduction, but the word "foul" adds something sinister to this; it reminds of a 'dirty old man' taking advantage of a naïve child, thus comparing consumer society to the sexual exploitation in *Lolita.* In fact, very early in the novel, Humbert already establishes the link between consumerism and paedophilia when, in considering the benefits connected to marrying Charlotte, "all the casual caresses her mother's husband would be able to lavish on his Lolita" (70), he says that "before such an Amazing Offer […] [he] was as helpless as Adam at the preview of early oriental history, miraged in his apple orchard" (71). This statement is significant, furthermore, because it establishes that Humbert, also, is a 'consumer,' not of consumer products, but of Lolita. The simile Humbert employs implicitly constructs Lolita as something to be consumed: Charlotte is the biblical Eve, while Lolita is the apple with which she tempts Humbert/Adam. Such a reading shows how absolutely Humbert objectifies Lolita and how he constructs her as essentially passive.

As with the typical advertisement, this "[o]ffer" holds a seductive promise – that "[a]ll [his] troubles would be expelled, [he] would be a healthy man" (70). While there is no "foul poster" tempting him to accept the "Amazing Offer" he is "drunk on [his] visions" of Lolita in much the same way that he perceives Lolita to be "entranced" by the "trochaic lilt" of the words "'novelties and souvenirs'" (148). To Humbert, the name "Lolita" and all that it signifies is the symbolic advertisement, equally entrancing in its musicality: "[t]he tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (9). The link between seduction and consumerism is further emphasised by the recurrence of the word "enchanted" – the narrator states that "[t]here is a touch of the mythological and the enchanted in those large stores where […] [l]ifesize plastic figures of snubbed-nosed children with dun-colored, greenish, brown-dotted, faunish faces floated around [him]" and "the belts and the bracelets [he] chose seemed to fall from siren hands into transparent water" (108). When, at the "Enchanted Hunters", Humbert presents Lolita with the gifts that he has bought her, the way in which she "walked up to the open suitcase as if stalking it from afar, at a kind of slow-motion walk, peering at the distant treasure-box" makes him wonder if they are both "plunged in the same enchanted mist" (120) – he is "enchanted" by Lolita;

she is “enchanted” by the gifts. Through the use of the word “stalking” Humbert compares Lolita to a hunter “stalking” its prey; he furthermore refers to himself as a “very Enchanted Hunter”, showing the extent to which he considers Lolita’s identity to be rooted in her consumer habits, as his identity is rooted in paedophilia.

Humbert’s articulation of his perception of Lolita’s identity points to the high levels of conformity caused by consumerism in advanced technological society when he states that Lolita’s “beloved items” are “obvious” and that she is a “conventional little girl” in that regard. However, the word “obvious” also implies that there are other, less “obvious” aspects to her identity that are not reflected in the list, illustrating that the high levels of conformity mask individual differences. The “conventional little girl” becomes a stock character, a stereotype which takes the place of a more complex concept of who or what a girl child is. As such consumerism, as argued in the previous chapter, becomes the chief signifier of identity, not only to others, but potentially also to the girl-child herself, who defines herself in terms of her likes, dislikes and activities that are connected to consumer culture.

However, “low” or popular culture, which is usually associated with consumerism, is not singular in its solipsistic power. The text constructs all humans as being susceptible to the prevalent culture they are confronted with, as is evident when Humbert describes his and Annabel’s identities in childhood. “Our brains were turned the way those of intelligent European preadolescents were in our day and set, and I doubt if much individual genius should be assigned to our interest in the plurality of inhabited worlds, competitive tennis, infinity, solipsism and so on” (12). In their context, then, Humbert and Annabel were, like Lolita in hers, “disgustingly conventional”. When describing the qualities of a nymphet, Humbert confirms this idea by the formulation “vulgarity, or at least what a given community terms so” (17).

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The text thus constructs the human as a creature who possesses vast potential to be influenced by culture – sometimes to devastating effect, as the novel illustrates through Lolita's abuse. Ultimately, this chapter has shown how Humbert objectifies Lolita, and why he does so; his technological rationality, which depends upon self-reification, was revealed to wipe out individual differences in favour of a false conformity. Through Humbert, the reader's way of making sense of the world was also laid bare, since the novel constructs reader and writer as one entity. An inherent danger of conformity is that the ideal is transposed onto the 'real' – something which contributes to the tragedy of *Lolita*, but which can also be seen in representational acts outside the text. Conformity emerged as a destructive power; one that is fuelled by acts of representation in literature and the media. However, as the next chapter will show, the oppression inherent in conformity can also constitute the makings of liberty: among other things, Lolita uses conformity in a subversive manner to escape from Humbert.

CHAPTER FIVE

By Any Means Necessary: How Lolita Resists and Escapes From Her Abuser

> *There is an important difference between wilfully failing to appear and never being summoned.*
>
> Peggy Phelan, "Broken Symmetries: Memory, Sight, Love"

The misreading of Nabokov's *Lolita* presents feminist scholars with an important task: that of rereading the original text in order to highlight what Quayle calls the "socially relevant aspects" (1) thereof. To that end, my textual analysis of *Lolita* concentrates on the much neglected topic of Lolita's representation in the novel.[20] A great irony of the *Lolita*-discourse is the fact that this novel, which explores the capacity of perception to distort, has itself been subject to a substantial amount of distortion. However, as the current chapter will show, the transformation of Lolita was, to a certain extent, also a symptom of the text's literary technique. In its attempt to illustrate the impossibility of accurately representing the human being, the novel presents the reader, at first glance (and for some readers even thereafter), with a one-dimensional Lolita so simple and opaque that she stands squarely in the way of the readers' recognition of another, less 'known' Lolita. In other words, the apparent absence of a fully-rounded Lolita-character in the text has had the effect that the Lolita visible on the surface – the "disgustingly conventional little girl" (148) Humbert describes – was mistaken by readers for the 'real'. In a way, it is *this* Lolita that has been distorted; for the most part, readers have only recently started breaking through this surface to apprehend *Nabokov's* Lolita.

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[20] While some might argue that my thesis is anti-feminist in the limited attention it pays to the rape and violation of Lolita's body, I disagree; for me, the most significant aspect of the text is its refusal to fully subsume her subjectivity into the category of 'victim'. Consequently, my discussion focuses on Lolita's resistance, both physical and mental.

The lack of insight the reader is given into the girl-child's mind in *Lolita* is aimed at evoking questions about her autonomy and agency. In *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990,* Sabine Sielke argues that silence can generate rhetoric (4) and that texts "mean just as much by what they leave unsaid as by what they say, by what is absent as by what is present" (3). Following a logic similar to my own in this chapter, Sielke interrogates textual spaces to fill in the blanks, to ascertain *why* certain elisions in the narrative have taken place. According to Sielke, silence, in its capacity to elicit debate, is also a manifestation of power. Likewise, in *Lolita*, the girl-child manifests her power through apparent silence and passivity. For the most part, when Lolita does act or speak, she merely enacts the American female adolescence that is the norm, an adolescence that is prescribed by the consumer culture of the postwar period. However, the true image of Lolita that emerges upon a close reading of the text is one of autonomous resistance; Lolita shows active disdain for both Humbert and the gifts he buys her.

Lolita's Resistance to the Seductions of Consumption

While initially Lolita may be a victim of consumer culture she soon ceases to accept its claims without question. Booker claims that both Lolita and her mother "have had their minds so thoroughly shaped by popular culture that they are seriously hampered in their dealings with the real world" (55), a sentiment which corresponds to Humbert's belief that Lolita is "the ideal consumer" to "whom ads were dedicated" and who "believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Land* or *Screen Land*" (Nabokov 148). Humbert's narrative confirms, at first, that as "ideal consumer" Lolita had been taken in by him when he describes a "full-page ad" on her bedroom wall:

> It represented a dark-haired young husband with a kind of drained look in his Irish eyes. He was modelling a robe by So-and-So and holding a bridgelike tray

> by So-and-So, with breakfast for two. […] Lo had drawn a jocose arrow to the haggard lover's face and had put, in block letters: H.H. And indeed, despite a difference of a few years, the resemblance was striking (69).

By presenting us with this evidence of Lolita's initial infatuation with him, Humbert seeks to lessen his guilt in the eyes of the reader by suggesting that she had been 'contaminated' by popular culture before he came along, and by implying that she had invited his advances. This is reiterated when Humbert claims that he has "all the characteristics which, according to writers on the sex interests of children, start the responses stirring in a little girl: clean-cut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulder. Moreover, I am said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush" (43). However, Humbert himself gives us a hint that Lolita soon ceases to idealise him:

> 'Come and kiss your old man', I would say, 'and drop that moody nonsense. In former times, when I was still your dream male […], you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals […]. That idol of your pals sounded, you thought, like friend Humbert. But now, I am just your *old man*, a dream dad protecting his dream daughter' (149).

It is important to note here the elision on Humbert's part; he neglects to mention what transpired between "former times" and "now". The reader knows, however, that Lolita's change in attitude has been brought about by his abuse of her. Thus, it emerges from the text that Lolita has been disillusioned and no longer believes in the fantasies projected by advertisements. Through the use of italics, Lolita's recognition of the transition from "dream male" to "*old man*" is emphasised. Furthermore, through similarities in syntax the discrepancy between 'reality' and fantasy is fore-grounded: just as the image of the relationship between Humbert and Lolita as that of "a dream dad protecting his dream daughter" is easily recognisable as farce, so too is the image of Humbert as Lolita's "dream male" obviously a distortion.

Lolita's disillusionment with Humbert is immediately apparent after he rapes her the first time. After Humbert has had "strenuous intercourse three times" with her, Lolita "viciously" hurls the new garments he has bought for her "into a corner", choosing to wear the previous day's dress again instead (138), signifying her rejection of and disillusionment with Humbert through the rejection of the consumer items he has bought. Shortly afterwards, driving away from the hotel, Humbert wants to pull the car over to have sex again, upon which the girl-child objected, crying "shrilly", stating that she should "call the police and tell them [he] raped [her]", and calling him a "dirty, dirty old man" (141). While this incident in itself is enough to alert the reader to the fact that Lolita no longer harbours any illusions about Humbert as a "dream male", the phrasing "dirty old man" stands in stark contrast with her earlier fantasy of him, and, likewise, undermines Humbert's sympathy-seeking lament over his transformation in her mind from "dream male" to "just [her] *old man*". Lolita no longer considers Humbert either a fantasy father or a fantasy sweetheart: in the act of rape the two dreams have culminated in a nightmare, that of the "dirty old man".

Lolita's disillusionment is not restricted to Humbert, but applies to the promises of advertising as a whole. This is evident when Humbert remembers their visit to a

> Magnolia Garden in a southern state which cost me four bucks and which, according to the ad in the book, you must visit for three reasons: because John Galsworthy (a stone-dead writer of sorts) acclaimed it as the world's fairest garden; because in 1900 Baedeker's Guide marked it with a star; and finally, because… O, Reader, My Reader, guess! …because children (and by Jingo was not my Lolita a child!) will 'walk starry-eyed and reverently through this foretaste of Heaven, drinking in beauty that can influence a life.' 'Not mine,' said grim Lo, and settled on a bench with the fillings of two Sunday papers in her lovely lap (154-5).

With this passage, the narrator attempts to depict Lolita as a wilful, sullen teenager with trashy taste, who prefers popular culture to the beauty of nature; however, a close reading reveals that Lolita's refusal to engage with the attraction of the garden signifies a rejection of Humbert and what he represents in her mind. In proclaiming that the garden will not have the effect described in the guidebook on *her,* Lolita is simultaneously distancing herself from 'innocent' and "starry-eyed" children, drawing attention to the disillusionment effected in her consciousness by Humbert's abuse, and refusing to be manipulated by both consumer culture and Humbert.

Thus, while in *Lolita* Humbert explicitly fulfils the role of financier and reinforces this image by rattling off lists of consumer products:

> bought her four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, sunglasses, some more garments – swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks (142).

However, this list is also designed to create a false image of Lolita in the reader's mind. Nowhere are we told that Lolita requests any of these items and, again, the first indication that Humbert is manipulating our perception of Lolita's consumer behaviour is given in the text directly after he rapes Lolita. After getting dressed at the hotel Humbert "gave her a lovely new purse of simulated calf (in which [he] had slipped quite a few pennies and two mint-bright dimes) and told her to buy herself a magazine in the lobby" (138). Here the word "slipped" is meant to suggest the indulgent behaviour of a loving father, but on the other hand it also connotes slyness and subterfuge, as well as a desire to control Lolita's actions, which is mirrored in his instruction that she should "buy herself a magazine in the lobby". The fact that Humbert attempts to control Lolita through manipulating her love for popular culture is furthermore evident when it emerges that the magazine is a prop meant to keep Lolita from appearing suspicious or talking to strangers (138). Shortly before Lolita escapes from Humbert, while she is in hospital and he is sick in the motel room, Humbert sends her luggage to her as she requested, and tells us: "I imagined Lo displaying her treasures to [the nurse]… No doubt, I was a little delirious" (244). This statement echoes the idea that Lolita shows visible disdain for the gifts Humbert buys her.

The connection between Lolita's sexual rejection of Humbert and her rejection of the material objects he buys her is illustrated most explicitly through one of the rare instances in the novel where we are given insight into Lolita's response to his sexual abuse:

> On especially tropical afternoons, in the sticky closeness of the siesta, I liked the cool feel of armchair leather against my massive nakedness as I held her in my lap. There she would be, a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a newspaper, as indifferent to my 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).

The comparison here of Lolita's attitude towards Humbert's penis to her attitude to "a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis racket" she had accidentally "sat upon" evokes the list of things Humbert had bought her and reveals her equally indifferent to them. By calling her "a typical kid" Humbert diverts our attention away from her extremely valid and personal reasons for rejecting him, instead focusing on her vulgar childishness. The word "indolent" is further meant to vilify Lolita by depicting her as jaded and cruel. However, this is a clear distortion of the facts: as Humbert himself informs us earlier, Lolita has "absolutely nowhere else to go" (142). What resistance Lolita is able to offer, she does, as is evident in Humbert's description of "her cheek (recedent) against [his] (pursuant); and this was a good day, mark, O reader!" during the same encounter (165). We are explicitly invited to question what Humbert's idea of "a good day" entails: is this "a good day" for Lolita, in that she is able to resist Humbert somewhat, or in that he does not force himself on her more violently, or "a good day" for Humbert, in that she does not resist him more violently on this occasion?

Lolita's resistance of Humbert is furthermore indicated in the course of the description of this encounter in the fact that this is not a singular occurrence, but a regular one, as is clear in the plural formulation "[o]n especially tropical afternoon*s*" and Humbert's description of the section of the newspaper she would habitually read on these occasions, the column "Let's Explore Your Mind" (165). He specifically highlights the content of one of these columns:

> 'Let's explore your mind. Would sex crimes be reduced if children obeyed a few don'ts? Don't play around public toilets. Don't take candy or rides from strangers. If picked up, mark down the license of the car.' […] 'If,' she repeated, 'you don't have a pencil, but are old enough to read and write […] scratch the number somehow on the roadside' (166).

This paragraph is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it points to Lolita's consumer habits as being less frivolous than Humbert would have us believe. Second, Lolita's reading this extract to Humbert constitutes resistance in illustrating her full recognition of the fact that their relationship is one of abuse, not of love, a fact which she takes care to remind him of, asserting herself in the relationship. Furthermore, through the inclusion of this fictional newspaper column the text draws attention to the practice of victim blaming through the question of whether "sex crimes [would] be reduced if children obeyed a few don'ts". The "don'ts" listed here become particularly ridiculous when considered in light of Lolita's situation, particularly in its warning not to "take candy or rides from strangers". Ironically, no warning is issued against fathers or stepfathers.

Most significant in the above paragraph, however, is another clue that Lolita violently tries to resist Humbert. In response to the column's instruction to "scratch the [plate] number [of the abuser] somehow on the roadside" Humbert mocks both the column and Lolita, saying "[w]ith your little claws, Lolita" (166). This reminds the reader of Humbert's description of how a "full-blown fleshy woman […] might ask [him] at the 'lodge'," "[w]hose cat has scratched poor you?" (164), implying that, in lieu of alerting someone to the abuse that she is suffering, Lolita has scratched Humbert somewhere on his body where it would be noticeable to strangers. In doing this, Lolita inscribes her abuse on Humbert's body, as he has inscribed his cruelty on hers. This is confirmed by Humbert saying that "[t]his was one of the reasons why I tried to keep as far away from people as possible, while Lo, on the other hand, would do her utmost to draw as many potential witnesses into her orbit as she could" (164).

While Lolita is much smaller in stature than Humbert and therefore physically unable to resist him with much success, she does find other ways of resisting him. One such strategy is through conforming to the normative characteristics associated with girlhood. This is signified in the text, for instance, when Humbert takes Lolita to the ice rink and temporarily loses sight of her because "Dolly wore blue jeans and white high shoes, as most of the other girls did" (160). Lolita's resistance of Humbert through the enactment of specifically *his* normative ideals is furthermore represented in instances in the text where she seems to comply with his desires. For instance, when Lolita and Humbert have the argument which ultimately motivates Lolita to put her escape plan into action, she storms out of the house and when Humbert tracks her down, she is busy making a phone call from a public telephone booth, ostensibly trying "to reach [him] at home" (207), but, as the reader realises later, in reality conferring with Quilty about her escape. She asks Humbert to take her on another road trip; by manipulating his desire for her through conforming to his ideal – as is clear when he responds by nodding and thinking "[m]y Lolita" – she throws him off the scent of her deceit. Furthermore, when they reach home, Lolita is the picture of submission, in stark contrast to the Lolita who previously scratches Humbert's face to attract suspicion to him: "Carry me upstairs, please. I feel sort of romantic to-night" (207). The use of the word "romantic" here evokes Humbert's folly in considering Lolita an innocent child initially, and illustrates how she temporarily inhabits his ideal here in order to keep him from becoming suspicious.

Moreover, Lolita uses Humbert's suspicions and jealousy in order to resist him. While on their second road trip, Humbert collects their mail from the post office they had put down as their forwarding address in Beardsley and Humbert, finding "a very special-looking envelope" addressed to Lolita, "open[s] it and peruse[s] its contents" (222). When Humbert looks up from the letter, Lolita is gone. Far from merely using a chance opportunity to escape Humbert here, this has been planned by Lolita, as is evident when Humbert opens the letter and concludes that he is "doing the foreseen since she did not seem to mind and drifted toward the newsstand near the exit" (222). Like Lolita's earlier behaviour when she asks him to carry her up the stairs, her response here is out of character: the Lolita usually sketched by Humbert would have retaliated by saying "unprintable things" (205). The same is true of an incident shortly afterwards, when they are on the road again, when Humbert notices that a man has been following their car. Usually maintaining an "exasperatingly impenetrable" front and presenting him with "the dead end of her face" (204), now Lolita distracts Humbert by speaking "for the first time […] spontaneously of her pre-Humbertian childhood" (219). Whereas Lolita consistently refuses Humbert access to her inner self, here she pretends to share with him something of herself in order to distract him. In doing so Lolita manipulates Humbert's longing to be admitted to "absolutely forbidden" "regions" of her identity (284).

Finally, certain more abstract textual elements of *Lolita* reinforce a reading that Humbert's narrative does not succeed in obscuring the autonomous Lolita completely. While this thesis investigates the link between language and the oppression of identity, Nabokov's text, from the first, establishes a relationship between murder and language, as is evident when the narrator tells us that "[y]ou can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (9). After raping Lolita, Humbert compares the feeling he experiences to "sitting with the small ghost of somebody [he] had just killed" (140). In a text where representation and sexual abuse are linked, and language and murder are linked, Humbert's perception that he has "killed" Lolita through raping her refers not only to the act of rape, but also to his objectification of her. However, the reader is reminded of the fact that Humbert has admitted previously to being unable to kill – a claim that becomes ambiguous in light of the fact that, when he starts writing his memoir, he is in fact awaiting trail for the murder of Quilty.

If murder can then rather be seen as a metaphor for solipsism, Humbert's inability to "kill" points back to his inability to reason away the pain he causes Lolita, but also points towards Lolita's escape from his narrative – despite his efforts to infiltrate her consciousness, he is never able to gain access to her psyche. This inability on his part, as well as the fact of an autonomous Lolita to be discovered in the text, is reflected in Humbert's statement that "[n]o man can bring about the perfect murder" (84). However, it can also be argued that man's inability to "bring about the perfect murder" is directly proportional to the resistance he encounters in trying to do so. In other words, Lolita's conscious and energetic refusal of Humbert's solipsism brings about his failure.

This autonomous Lolita refuses Humbert's appropriation right to the end, when they meet for the final time, and Humbert sees that "[i]n [Lolita's] washed-out gray eyes, strangely spectacled, [their] poor romance was for a moment reflected, pondered upon, and dismissed like a dull party, like a rainy picnic to which only the dullest bores had come, like a humdrum exercise, like a bit of dry mud caking her childhood" (272). Her husband knows nothing of Humbert's abuse of her – illustrating the fact that Lolita has not allowed Humbert to infiltrate her present life in any way. Her speech coming in a "relaxed flow", signifying confidence, Lolita tells Humbert that Quilty "was the only man she had ever been crazy about" (272). When Humbert accuses her of having betrayed him in running away, she says simply, confidently, "Betrayed you? No." (275). Compounding her ultimate resistance of him, she is smoking – "[*s*]*treng verboten* under Humbert the Terrible" (275).

When, after having told him how she had escaped him, Humbert (true to his old habit of pressuring her to tell him the details of her and her friends' sexual experiences) asks her to describe the sexual acts that had taken place between the girls, boys, and men on Quilty's farm, she gags herself: she "refuse[s] to go into particulars" (277). Through her "refus[al]" to talk Lolita takes ownership of her story and thus of herself. The picture of the autonomous Lolita is fleshed out further by her account of how she had refused to take part in these sexual exploits by telling Quilty: "I said no, I'm just not going to […] because I want only you. Well, he kicked me out" (277). When Humbert, after giving her the money she had inherited from her mother, asks her to leave with him she "rais[es] herself slightly" like "the snake that may strike" (278), revealing the gusto that had allowed her to escape him in the first place. When he induces her one last time to go with him, "she said smiling, 'no'" (280). The Lolita that emerges here is assertive, calm, self-confident, and happy.

However, we are told in the foreword to the novel that Lolita dies in childbirth at age 17, a fact which implies that while she has escaped Humbert, she has not been able to escape the conformist world. Figuratively, Lolita's death in childbirth suggests that becoming a mother is also a wiping out of identity, that one ceases to *be* when giving birth to a child. This points to the destructive power of conformity once again, since "mother" is also a category which elides individual differences. Alternatively, the fact that Lolita gives birth to a stillborn girl (4) suggests that she gave birth to a girl who would be raised according to the Romantic ideal of girlhood, to be mute and passive. Lolita's 'death' could then be seen as her relinquishment of her autonomy in favour of tradition. There is no one meaning to Lolita's death; it draws out a flurry of associations that once again testifies to the power of literature to signify multiple things to different people.

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Contrary to how Lolita has habitually been represented by critics, she is not a passive victim. This chapter has shown that the novel depicts Lolita as resisting her abuser by any means necessary: from scratching his neck in the hope that someone will notice the scar, to taunting him with magazine articles about child abuse in order to assert herself in the relationship, to surrendering to him sexually in order to throw him off the scent of her plan to escape. After her escape from him she keeps up her defences against him by not allowing the story of her past to filter into her relationship with Dick. Nabokov's Lolita, then, has been obscured by readers' expectations of what she should be, not what she is: a strong, determined, innovative girl-child who stops at nothing to reclaim the freedom that was temporarily stolen from her.

CHAPTER SIX

Molly and *Lo's Diary*: (Feminist) Success Stories?

> *[W]e may term a novel 'feminist' for its analysis of gender as socially constructed and its sense that what has been constructed may be reconstructed – for its understanding that change is possible and that narrative can play a part in it.*
>
> Gayle Green, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*

> *You can't talk about* a *female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible.*
>
> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

Presented to the reader as Lolita's secret diary, *Lo's Diary* aims to give the reader insight into Lolita's experience of the events in Nabokov's novel, providing many of the details 'missing' in Nabokov's novel, such as how the death of Lolita's brother and father comes about. In this way, the novel 'restores' to Lolita the story that has been taken from her by Humbert; she is given a strong voice in which her psyche is reflected. Parts of Humbert's story is revealed as fiction, so that the constructed nature of 'reality' is emphasised. Most prominently, however, the novel emphasises the constructed nature of gender.

In an unpublished conference paper titled 'Will the Real Lolita Please Stand Up?' Nancy Jones, Nabokov scholar and author of the *Lolita*-derivative novel *Molly*, describes her novel as intending to give a voice to Nabokov's silenced girl-child. As I do in earlier chapters, Jones argues that critics have habitually overlooked Lolita's suffering in the text, falling victim to Humbert's solipsistic narrative voice, a propensity which necessitates renewed attention to be paid to Nabokov's characterisation of the girl. In *Molly*, Jones reinterprets Lolita's character through the presentation of the girl's would-be diary; however, she adds the memories of an imagined best friend, Betsy, who is also the novel's narrator, reflecting the fact that there are multiple ways in which to "perform" one's girlhood.

It is evident from the above that the authors of both derivative novels attempt to give a voice to the Lolita-character, to restore to Lolita the story that she has been deprived of by Humbert, readers and critics. To my mind, this restoration of Lolita's story is also a restoration of self and individual identity and thus goes hand in hand with affording her mobility and power – the opposite of the Romantic ideal. Consequently, the primary questions with which I approached the study of the derivative novels were to what extent each text affords the Lolita-character agency and how this agency manifests.

On this topic, with regards to *Lo's Diary,* Vickers' commentary is scathing; he finds that Pera's "Lolita's wit is spiteful, her sexual knowledge improbably comprehensive, and her viewpoint very unchildlike" (210). Furthermore, he suggests that Pera's book displays a "strangely gratuitous tendency to demonize Lolita":

> Prior to Lo's Diary the open-minded may have allowed that Lolita was an unusually bold flirt or even a co-conspirator in the [couch seduction] scene, but to cast her as its Machiavellian creator seems absurd. Throughout Lo's Diary runs similarly dreary attempts to depict Lolita as a sexual punk for the postwar years, a crude protofeminist [who] decides to ensnare Humbert Guibert as "Daddy 2" from the moment they first meet in the garden of 341 Grassy Street (210).

Also on the topic of agency, Susan Bordo notes that, in *Molly*, Jones is "as determined as Pia Pera to give Lolita her own voice and story", but while Molly "is hardly passive in her relationship with her stepfather […] Jones is careful to remind us continually that the fact that Lolita may have technically 'seduced' her stepfather […] does not make him any less the exploiter of her innocence" (145).

It is noteworthy that these two reactions to *Lolita*-derivative novels display a polarisation similar to that found in the original reaction to Nabokov's novel. With regards to Jones's novel, the emphasis is on the Lolita-character's innocence; in Pera's, the girl-child is "demonized". While a very limited amount of criticism exists on the two novels, I will venture to say that, based on the opinions I have encountered casually in the course of my research, the above readings of the derivative novels' title characters are representative and that this is the result of the same ideological trappings which have determined responses to Nabokov's girl-child in the past. In other words, it is my position that these novels, too, are in danger of being misread.

This is not surprising, since the very fact of the derivatives' writing is fuelled by the energy generated by the anxiety surrounding the historical representation of girls. Thus, in this chapter, I perform a reading of first *Lo's Diary* and then *Molly*, paying particular attention to how the novels position their girl-children ideologically, as well as to their treatment of girlhood and femininity as social constructs. Since both novels take the shape of diaries, offering direct access to the inner 'reality' of the Lolita-character, these texts constitute valuable opportunities for the restructuring of the representation of Nabokov's girl-child. The chapter is concluded with a comment on the extent to which each text has utilised this opportunity.

***Pia Pera's* Lo's Diary**

Lo's Diary follows the basic plot of Lolita quite closely, but includes a host of rich details which render the characters multi-dimensional and believable. It depicts Lo's mother, Isobel, as a cruel, vain woman who does not care much about her daughter. As a result, Lo seems to adopt Isobel's friend, Nora, as a substitute role model. With the onset of adolescence, Lo discovers the power of her sexuality, and 'practices' her seduction techniques on their lodger, Humbert Guibert, in order to secure a new husband for her mother. When her mother is run over by a taxi-cab and killed, Guibert holds Lo captive, and Lo's life story unfolds much as it does in the original novel, with one important difference: she does not die in childbirth, but publishes her memoir as a counter to that of Guibert. Lo claims that Guibert's memoir, *Lolita,* contains many lies, and offers her own version of events to the same publisher who published Guibert's.

Like *Lolita*, *Lo's Diary* explores the oppressive nature of both childhood and the socially constructed boundaries governing female behaviour. However, since the story is narrated from the girl-child's point of view, the oppression inherent in these social constructions is addressed more directly, as when Lo asks, "You know what it means to be a child? To wear clothes you'd never want to be caught dead in" (59). While there is humour in the latter statement, it is also indicative of the lack of control and agency children have in their own lives; in some cases, they are not even allowed to decide what clothing they would like to put on. However, in keeping with *Lolita*'s theme of sexual victimisation, *Lo's Diary* focuses in particular on the law's shortcomings in protecting children, suggesting that laws pertaining to the rights of children can only protect well-informed, autonomous children.

The novel is critical of contemporary child-rearing practices, rooted as they are in the romantic ideal of the innocent child, which often fail to take into account the child's own inclinations and needs, and which reserve decision-making as the sole right of the parent, denouncing children as fickle and unintelligent. When these children then find themselves in situations of danger, they are unable to make informed choices to ensure their own safety and survival. This situation is compounded by children's economic dependence on adults, which forces a power relationship where the child is inevitably in a position of weakness.

Similarly, middle-class western women have historically been financially dependent on men, making any semblance of equality in gender relations near impossible for as long as the stereotype of women as the weaker sex is proliferated. *Lo's Diary* grapples with issues such as biological determinism and questions the notion that the maternal instinct is present in all women and absent in all men. Finally, it points to the individual's ability to create herself and transcend her circumstances. For the purpose of this thesis, the latter is the most significant; the novel presents the reader with a Lolita-character who is strong, and who, aside from surviving the abuse visited upon her by Humbert, survives the birth of her child and devotes her life to finding creative ways to empower the handicapped.

By recounting the events of *Lolita*'s plot from the Lolita-character's point of view Pera's novel emphasises the ultimately unknowable nature of individual reality. Pera's Lo is intent on seducing Humbert from the first; as Bordo notes, Pera turns the tables: in her novel Humbert is the one who is the unwitting object of lust. However, in disagreement with Bordo, I will argue that Pera's Lolita-character is more true to Nabokov's than Jones's; in *Lo's Diary* we see Lo grow from a naïve, playful child to a cynical, knowing woman. While Bordo identifies Pera's feminism as a "power feminism" which situates female agency in the ability to manipulate men sexually, I argue, in contrast, that the novel criticises a society in which female sexuality and femininity has become formulaic: it has become, quite markedly, "an identity, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 415). A strong contrast is drawn between Lo's youthful, exploratory sexuality and Isobel's "perfumed" femininity, which is calculated to seduce, screaming out "want me, want me, want me". Lo finds herself in a system over which she has little control and from which she cannot escape; she is forced to operate within the system in order to survive. Her seduction of Humbert Guibert is, from the first, an attempt to ensure security for her mother and herself, although she is also partially driven by rebellion against her mother and Guibert's oppressive parenting. Ultimately, her sexuality is the only thing she has to bargain with.

The novel's strength lies in the fact that it does not vilify or romanticise the Lolita-character; rather, Lo is depicted as a complex, multi-dimensional character. In many respects Lo is shallow and judgmental, a vain girl who takes pleasure in the pain of others, but on the other hand she is young and frightened and struggling to come to terms with the gruesome death of her brother, her father's mental decline and death, and a mother who, no doubt traumatised as well, often misunderstands and mistreats her daughter. In the foreword to the novel John Ray comments that the diary is more childlike upon a second reading than may initially appear (Pera 7) – a veiled warning from the author, aimed at counteracting the vilification of Dolores Haze that has at times been a characteristic of *Lolita* criticism, and the possible vilification of Lo for her brazenly sexual behaviour. Behind Lo's bravado lies a world of pain, as is revealed by her dream of becoming an actress. While on the surface this seems an indication of her vanity and thirst for (especially male) admiration, in truth it is an escapist fantasy; a desire to become someone else, to escape her own unhappy circumstances and the stifling post-war femininity.

Gender As Social Construct in Lo's Diary

The text places a great emphasis on the socially constructed nature of femininity. The book Nora gives to Isobel, *How To Catch A Man: 101 Winning Strategies*, "explains how to bend any man to your will. It says that now that the war is over women have to go back to being total women" (59) situating the novel's construction of femininity and the societal forces prescribing how gender should be enacted firmly in post-war America. This reflects the "stifling conformity" of the era. The book devotes "a chapter [to] a woman's exterior appearance, leading Lo to conclude that you should "devote more attention to your appearance than to anything else, because you will never have a second chance to make a first impression" (60). Lo describes, after shopping with Guibert and Isobel for perfume, how Guibert tries "to escape the perfumed woman". The text's indictment of "the perfumed woman" corresponds with Bordo's assertion that

> It could be argued that fashion itself was only giving form to something already in the air when it began to celebrate the woman-who-is-not-yet-a-woman. When Nabokov wrote *Lolita*, that 'something', while not yet embodied in mass-media images of waifs and nymphets, was arguably foreshadowed in a new spirit of ridicule and rebellion against the Charlottes (read: conventional wives and mothers) of post-war culture and what many men (and a bit later, young women) began to view the prison of their domestic domain (133-4).

The construction of post-war femininity as rigid, superficial and specifically "performative" is most apparent in Lo's description of Isabel's beauty routine as an impersonation:

> When Mom paints her lips, she draws an outline with a pencil first, very carefully puts on the lipstick, and then starts wandering around the house: her lips look like they were cut out of cardboard, like they're detached from the rest of her body, like she's trying to impersonate 'the lady with painted lips' – which usually goes along with 'the lady with painted nails', waving her hands in the air so the polish will dry, or 'the lady with her hair in curlers', who with her freshly polished nails and her painted lips stuck out like a fish goes around the house as if she's a kind of walking prayer: want me, want me, want me. […] What possible interest can Mom's lips ever have had – they're so precisely painted they look like an advertisement (100-1)

Implicit in the description of Isobel is not only the extreme conformity of the period, but also the subservience and passivity of post-war femininity. Lo's femininity is more progressive: "I choose the colour [of the lipstick] myself – I certainly don't go and ask what his favourite is" (100). The contrast between Isobel's and Lo's femininity lies chiefly in Isobel's as prescribed, and Lo's as uncontrolled. The passage implies that Isobel's appearance is modelled on advertisements of what a woman should look like in order to please a man, stripping her of individuality, agency, and a discernable identity. "[T]he lady with painted lips" sounds like a painting or prototype, and the label "the lady" conveys a feeling of anonymity and emptiness – Isobel is akin to a mannequin in a clothing store.

Lo's rebellion, then, is not only against her mother, but represents a symbolic rebellion against the femininity of her mother's generation and the societal prescriptions that drive it. Right before Lo puts on her mother's lipstick to seduce Guibert on the couch (in the famous solipsism scene) Lo states that it is the beginning of "[a] small revolution and [Isobel] doesn't even realise it" (100). It is from this point onward that Lo becomes a sexual agent in her own right; she's "had enough of being the little orphan who goes to church with her checked pinafore and white patent leather purse. So Plasticmom goes by herself to pray for divine aid in her dubious undertakings, while [Lo] stays home with Hummie" (100). Through the contrast between Isobel's and Lo's seductive strategies – Isobel prays, Lo takes action – post-war femininity is depicted as passive, subservient and tragic, while emergent femininity is radical and active, using the same tools, but seizing power and taking control.

Consequently, Pera manages to shy away from the representation of the Lolita-character as one-dimensional; rather, Lo is a multi-faceted character with a keen sense of observation, acutely aware of the world around her, as is clear when she comments on the impact of current events of the postwar era such as the Bikini atom bomb (12). Critics such as Vickers find Lo's level of intelligence unlikely, but it is my argument that such opinions testify to critics who are, like Humbert in *Lolita*, blinded by and "clinging to conventional notions of what twelve-year-old girls should be" (Nabokov 124).

Furthermore, Vickers's apparent objection to what he calls Lo's "spiteful wit" and "unchildlike" point of view are moot; why should a girl-child not behave this way or express these thoughts, except to conform to conventional ideals of innocent girlhood? Besides, as an avid diarist myself, I recall my own first, awkward attempts (coincidentally also at the age of twelve) at finding my voice in diary writing. The result was often somewhat over-pitched, too wordy, too extreme in the opinions I professed to – and I knew it, but did not know how to change it. In my opinion, it is exactly that which makes the writing seem "unchildlike" which reflects the 'childishness' of the narrator; from there Pera's allusion, in the novel's foreword, to the possibility that a second reading will reveal the narrator to be more childlike than she initially seems.

This should also be remembered when reading the novel's depiction of Lo's sexual cognition. Whereas Vickers finds Lo's sexual knowledge "improbable", a close look at the text reveals that she is nowhere near knowledgeable when it comes to matters of sexuality. For instance, when Guibert helps Lo to remove an eyelash from her eyes, she thinks: "He's going to kiss me, […] we'll be lovers, lying in each other's arms kissing all day long" (82). It is clear, from this, that Lo's idea of being "lovers" is limited to "kissing all day". Also, when her friend Rowe asks her, at summer camp, whether she's "ever done it," she replies "more or less", and Rowe has to explain to her that "[i]f [his penis] doesn't go in, it doesn't count" (113). Her lack of sexual knowledge is similarly evident when she anticipates having sex with Roger: "As I understand it, Roger will loom over me and I'll find myself under his melon-colored face" (115). The description here is vague and, accustomed to a Lo who is not shy to say what she wants to, the reader is obliged to assume that Lo does not have a much clearer picture of what is about to happen.

Importantly, however, despite Lo's lack of sexual knowledge, she is depicted as being sexually aware. After the couch seduction scene, the Lolita who stood with "cheeks aflame, hair awry" in Nabokov's novel, in *Lo's Diary* reacts as follows:

> I feel weird, too, I melt, and something goes by without my really seeing it, a whir of swift wings, it disappears in an instant and we sit there looking at each other, all blushing, not knowing what to do. I'd like to curl up and wrap myself in his arms (103)

With this depiction, Pera breaks the tradition of portraying girls as asexual. This endeavour is taken further in Lo's first sexual encounter with Roger, where Lo describes her experience as follows:

> I feel like I'm all gurgling inside, with little jets piercing me here and there. […] I like it, there's no pain at all, only the sensation that I am made of a thousand layers that he is unfolding one after another […] and when that thing happens like a current that passes through you suddenly and makes you feel sort of like a lightning rod, it's not a boomerang but bubbles of light, little spheres of fire and then nothing (117-8).

This description of Lo's experience of sexual arousal and climax is especially effective since it shifts the focus from the realm of the abstract to that of the physical, reminding the reader that sex is first and foremost a physical act. Regardless of Lo's age, she cannot be separated from her bodily manifestation, which is subject to the same sensations as those of an adult woman.

The above also compels the reader to consider whether Lolita should be seen as sexually mature, and whether, then, Humbert's sexual relationship should be condemned. Pera is careful to remind the reader, however, that just because Lo can experience sexual pleasure does not mean she is mature enough to have an adult relationship with a man. This is particularly evident when Lo, upon discovering that she has started her menstrual period, declares: "To hell with women, what do I have to do with them?" (63). This statement also reinforces the idea that children can be sexual creatures – that sexual awareness does not automatically transform the child into an adult.

The novel makes its stance on the issue of Humbert's abuse of Lolita particularly clear through a pervasive image in Lo's mind:

> I'm in the ocean, and a shark appears. Instead of running away I stay still, and when the shark opens his mouth I quickly grab him by the fin and climb on his back. Then I gouge out his eyes and eat them […]. No-one saw the struggle, and I won't tell anyone about it. I don't care about being admired. I don't want anyone to know that I'm so incredibly strong I can murder a shark in the ocean, without a weapon, just with my hands and my teeth. It's my secret, and besides no one would believe it (167).

The image of Lolita's abuse that is communicated by this image is that she foolishly put herself in danger by engaging in sexual play with Humbert, like she places herself in the path of danger by going into the ocean, but that she escapes him eventually by blindsiding him. This powerful piece of imagery conveys the idea of a Lolita who is strong enough to outwit those who pose a threat to her, but it also comments specifically on the fact that the struggle – the abuse of Humbert and the resistance exercised by the girl-child – goes unnoticed by the outside world. Furthermore, Lo's claim that "no one would believe" that she overpowered the shark – Humbert – resounds with Nabokov's Lolita's statement that "if somebody wrote up her life nobody would ever believe it" (Nabokov 273). Thus Pera anticipates that her version of Lolita's story will be received sceptically, as it has been, on account of the character's transgression of the traditional representation of girl-children as passive and innocent.

Nancy Jones's **Molly**

Molly tells the story of Nabokov's girl-child from the perspective of her best friend, Betsy, who inherits Molly's (Lolita's) diaries upon the girl's death during childbirth. Betsy and Molly are separated just before they enter adolescence, when Molly's mother, Catherine Liddell, uproots her daughter in order to move to Ithaca, New York. In Ithaca, Mrs. Liddell takes in a boarder, and the events unfold in the same way as they do in Nabokov's novel. While pregnant at the age of 17, Molly writes to Betsy for the first time in years, asking her to be her daughter's godmother. Shortly afterwards, Molly dies in childbirth and Betsy receives her diaries. Stricken with grief, Betsy runs out into the cold and later on develops rheumatic fever as a result. Molly's abuse at the hands of Dr. Richard (Humbert) haunts her throughout her life, preventing her from engaging in romantic relationships and inspiring her to become a lawyer volleying for the rights of abused women and children.

In an interview, Jones told me that, during graduate school, she set out to write her novel because, for her, Lolita's voice is clear throughout Nabokov's novel. Her intention, rather than to *give* Lolita a voice, was to crystallise the voice the character already has, to illuminate, through a "dialectical and dialogical approach" the "very clear and complex picture" of Lolita that Nabokov provides. Two key questions provided the impetus for her writing: "How do I own my sexuality without having myself objectified by the male gaze […]? How can I actually own myself and the sexual part of my being in a way that is not a response to the addictive energies we receive from television and a host of other media?" These questions reveal the underlying feminist purpose of Jones's writing. Since it is Jones's opinion that Lolita is very much present within the text, her efforts to draw others' attention to that 'real' Lolita imply a desire to change the cultural misconceptions that have overshadowed Nabokov's girl-child. This resonates strongly with Christopher Moraru's assertion that "the re-storied story […] becomes itself a tool for the rewriter uses actively to determine cultural change according to his or her 'social agenda'" (9).

However, the extent to which Jones's novel achieves its feminist goal is debatable. Despite agreeing with Bordo that Jones's Lolita-character, Molly, is more true to Nabokov's character than the readings of many critics have been, I argue that, while Jones succeeds in constructing a credible voice and story for the novel's reimagined Lolita, this success is ultimately undermined by Betsy's narrative voice and story. The character of Betsy does contribute an interesting perspective on girlhood, but overshadows Molly so that the victimised girl is again silenced. This silencing is compounded by the novel's depiction of Molly's relationship with her mother; Molly is portrayed as 'her mother's daughter' who ultimately facilitates her own rape through the thoughtless re-enactment of her mother's ostensibly risqué femininity. While some autonomy is recovered for the girl-child through the diary entries recording the flirtation with her abuser which eventually leads to her rape, the powerful image of the seductress-mother reverberates throughout, so that any individuality on Molly's part is obscured. Furthermore, Jones's reinvention of the mother-character as the proverbial scarlet woman reveals the text's unwillingness to engage with the greater issues implicit in the sexual abuse of girls; rather than addressing the ideological history of the objectification of women, the novel suggests that women's sexual appeal is the definitive source of their victimisation. This idea is compounded by the epigraph of the novel, taken from *Bulfinch's Mythology*; in this extract Daphne beseeches her father, Peneus, "to change [her] form, which has brought [her] into […] danger". Finally, Jones's attempt to free the Lolita-character from her stepfather's lustful textual imprisonment is rendered moot as Betsy's evocation of the girl reveals itself to be sexually charged as well. While the suggestion of homoeroticism has the potential to offer a subversive counter-narrative to traditional constructions of girlhood innocence and normative heterosexuality, Jones does not follow through on the theme and succeeds only in cementing the representation of Lolita as primarily a sexualised body.

While on the surface the novel complies with Gayle Green's view of gender as "socially constructed" (2), *Molly* is rather pessimistic in its attitude towards the possibility of emancipation, doubting rather than embracing the idea that narrative can contribute towards a gainful restructuring of gender relations. In other words, the novel suggests that, for women, sexuality remains a zero sum game, that some part of the self must always be sacrificed in order to have a sexual life. This sentiment is also implicit in a statement Jones made during our interview; she describes the two girls in *Molly* as being "flipsides of the same coin", each possessing "half of what hopefully one has to have a full woman, fully owning her embodied life and her spiritual life". The novel takes a dim view of 20th century gender relations, boding ill for women who fuel the fire of men's lust by dressing and acting provocatively, and who engage in casual sex, denouncing this behaviour as a form of submission. Still, the novel does attempt to unravel the significance of representations of women and girls in the media, providing an explanation for the events recounted in *Lolita* and contextualising the girl-child's behaviour. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to exploring the way in which Jones represents the Lolita-character, and the significance thereof to the *Lolita*-discourse and feminist re-readings of *Lolita.*

Molly *and the Subversion of the Myth of Children's Sexual Innocence*

Like *Lolita, Molly* situates the development of gender identity firmly within the social sphere, emphasizing parental role models and interaction with the peer group. It evokes childhood as a time of curiosity and exploration, when children test the world in order to situate themselves in it. However, childhood is also demarcated as a time of danger and confusion, fraught with the possibility of irreparable damage to the child's sense of self. This danger is ascribed to the child's naivety and ignorance of the 'realities' of the world, especially with regards to sex. *Molly* subverts the ideology of childhood innocence in that it depicts both the narrator, Betsy, and the Lolita-character, Molly, as sexually aware, even at a very young age.

Sitting at the counter at the Corner Confectionary, "[c]rossing one leg high over the other" eleven-year-old "Molly knew the boys were watching her" (10) and Betsy, watching her friend dance with a boy of "sixteen, lanky and blond, with an Adam's apple that bobbed up and down" (10),

> hardly knew as [she] watched [her] whether [she] wanted to be in her place, so [she] could feel the rough hands of the boy against [her] back, at [her] waist, supporting [her] legs, or whether [she] wanted to be the boy himself, so [she] could be the one who lifted Molly to [her] shoulders and caught her in [her] arms (11).

However, the girls themselves are not described as being overtly aware of the sexual undertones of the sensations and emotions experienced here, but the retrospective narrator is able to identify them as such. As an adult Betsy is able to comprehend

> what it is to be a girl, to experience the strange and reckless sensations that grip you like the flu – the flushed face, weak knees, the vertigo [and] what it is like to be held captive by a glance, touch – and at the same time to find yourself a queen, able to command the world with the flick of a finger, the bat of an eye. […] [A] girl should never have to give up those feelings, nor the glamour of a goddess that descends on her, surrounds her like a mantle – [..] she should cling to them, for they are hers by birthright. […] A girl should become a woman, whose body has blossomed even as her blood has sung to her, sung of its own rhythms and longings, its secret pleasures and delights (265).

In contrast, as a child, raised in a home where she and her "mother […] never talked about breasts" (36), Betsy is ignorant about her own sexuality. As an adult she remembers how she and Molly "took their baths together before [her] mother put [them] to bed. […] Once, Molly pressed her feet and toes against [Betsy's] vulva, which she kneaded unconsciously, rhythmically, as she lathered herself with soap" (122). Afterwards in bed Betsy "lay quite still, knees clenched and bent almost to [her] chest, troubled by the wet, insistent throbbing between [her] legs", "never [connecting the sensation] with the flint-against-steel friction between Bogey and Bacall" (122). Thus the girls' lack of sexual knowledge is juxtaposed with their budding sexual awareness, pointing to the constructed nature of the concept of childhood innocence. Furthermore, sexual awareness in children is reconstructed as natural when the narrator says that "those feelings […] are hers by birthright". The use of the word "birthright" makes the assertion especially forceful, evoking the stark contrast between organic sexuality and the contrived, "flint-against-steel" sexuality of the silver screen.

Betsy overtly identifies the media as one of the factors which shapes both her and Molly's identities when she says:

> Molly Liddell felt the same as I. Together, we devoured every morsel from the outside world – magazines, newsreels, radio programs, films – savoring Elizabeth Taylor's triumph as National Velvet, Marlene Dietrich's victorious return from the front lines, Tom Mix's adventures in the Wild, Wild West. Our own lives, we knew, would unfold, petal by lustrous petal, somewhere far beyond the horizon. How could I have known our youthful longing, so strong at times it singed our skin, would lead to Molly's ruin – and my own transformation? (7-9).

In this extract Betsy locates the allure of media presentations of life in the fact of their removal from the conventional and the everyday, in the fantasy of escaping "the blandness of things". "Molly's ruin" here, obviously, refers to her rape, abuse and eventual death, while Betsy's "transformation" is less overt. However, Betsy's "transformation" is closely linked to Molly's fate; as a result of Molly's sexual abuse and death Betsy dedicates her life to "preparing cases for women whose husbands had beaten and abandoned them, for mothers who sought to save their children from abuse" (244). The text points to a frustration with traditional categories of femininity – a frustration that leads Molly to emulate film stars' and celebrities' behaviour, under the impression that it will allow a breakthrough to a different plane of existence. This attempt fails horribly when Molly seduces her paedophile stepfather – who significantly looks "just like Alan Ladd" – and leaves Betsy with the jarring realisation that there is a great chasm between their world and that of their silver screen-induced fantasies. In this way the text comments on the misleading power of the media's representations of sexuality, representations which are revealed as especially confusing when coupled with the exclusionary practices of traditional childrearing.

In saying that "a girl should never have to give up those feelings" Jones writes back to critics who hold Lolita responsible for her own abuse by constructing her as sexually precocious. Also, these words reflect the destructive effect of Richard's abuse on Molly's sense of self and personal liberty; while under Richard's care Molly "consider[s] herself above love – it [is] nonsense, just as the physical act itself [is] nothing more than evolution's way of mocking humankind" (232) and she "always banishe[s] […] at will the "strange chemical reactions that [rule] her body and [dictate] her emotions" (233) since her stepfather's inhumanity towards her leads her to conclude that humans are "no better than the great apes" (232).

An interpretation of the text as a reply to critics' construction of Lolita as depraved is supported by Jones's representation of the 'seduction' scene in *Lolita*. Betsy admits that "Molly did seduce her stepfather", (122) but defends her friends' behaviour and condemns Richard's, saying that "[h]e knew everything that [Molly] did not" (123). Furthermore, Betsy states that "[w]hen, at eighteen, [she] first read of Molly's rape, [she] did not think of it as such. [She] had no words, no definitions, to contain what had happened to her" (131). Implicit in this statement, again, is a denouncement of the exclusionary practices of childhood – the text suggests that it is Molly's lack of sexual knowledge which leads her to "[kneel] before him", "[explore] his mouth with her tongue as she [undoes] the buttons of his shirt" and to "[take] his sex in her hands and [pump] it gamely" (123). Molly's lack of comprehension of the realities implicit in the act of seduction is emphasised in Betsy's imagining of her behaviour: she imagines Molly "tossing off her nightgown and panties as Ava Gardner might have discarded a boa" (122). Again the media is indicted for its glamorisation and oversimplification of sex, especially in the text's allusion to how filmic representations (of the 1940s) elided the bodily aspects of sex. The implication is that Molly's point of reference for sexual behaviour is, for all intents and purposes, restricted to "Ava Gardner […] discard[ing] a boa".

Molly's behaviour here is mirrored in the text by her "pull[ing] [her] T-shirt over [her] head and [hanging] it on a branch" and "stepp[ing] out of [her] shorts and underpants" when, at summer camp, she and Chrissy canoe over to the boys' camp and "[skinny-dip]" with Teddy and Ronald. The innocent nature of the teens' adventure is illustrated by Teddy's juvenile "Last one in's a rotten egg" and Chrissy's "What's the matter, Molly? Are you chicken?" (112). Molly's reference to Ronald's penis as "his you-know-what" and her description that it "was sticking up out of the water like a fat pink worm" (113) are equally childish, showing that she is by no means a sexual savant. "Richard Richard knew, however – he knew." A teenager himself, even Ronald is aware of Molly's ignorance in sexual matters, as is evident when he explains to her that he "won't stick [his penis] inside [her]. That way [she] won't get pregnant" (114).

Despite the text's indictment of Richard (and thus Humbert), in her effort to demythologise childhood innocence, Jones's evocation of the Lolita-character eroticizes the girl-child more explicitly than Humbert's narrative does. The description of the two girls in the bath tub, sitting "face-to-face," their "legs straddling each other's rosy, slippery legs" and Molly "lather[ing] herself with soap" while "rhythmically" "kneading" Betsy's "vulva" (122) is in danger of being read like a Mills & Boon paperback; so is the description of Richard while "his face grew hot, and deep within him something stirred, something urgent and forbidden" – regardless of how "[unconscious]" Molly's actions are or the fact that Richard "knew everything [Molly] did not. These descriptions echo those undescribed "elements of animality" that Humbert (and Nabokov) omit because "[a]nybody can imagine them" (Nabokov 134). It does not reflect any of the pain of the "fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child" (Nabokov 134-5).

While the reader is privy to Molly's pain when she writes in her diary that Richard "hurt [her] horribly" and that she "thought [she] would burst into a million pieces", that she is "bleeding" and can "barely walk" (Jones 124), the two accounts of the rape are distanced from one another by the use of different typefaces, and it is not Molly's version of the seduction that we hear, but Betsy's. The result is that the girl-child is again silenced, again robbed of her right to recount the sexual encounter *as she experienced it.* To my mind, this constitutes a failure on Jones's part; Lolita's story remains untold, except for the obvious – that she was in pain.

Even more disconcerting is the fact that the rape is described from Betsy's point of view eroticizes the incident because throughout the novel, Betsy's description of Molly is sexualized. The reader has come to expect that Betsy views Molly with a desiring gaze, because when they are ice-skating at the age of eleven Betsy "[longs] to be the air in which [Molly] [swims], to part before her and pour across her face" (42); in Betsy's eyes, a scar Molly incurs at the rink Betsy renders "her leg even more beautiful, for it [blooms] against her skin like an orchid" (39). Reading Molly's diary, Betsy remembers "summer mornings […] when [they] played hide-and-seek and Molly's skin flushed pink and perspired above her upper lip and along her arms and legs like roses beaded with dew" and "muggy evenings" when she felt "Molly's minty, vaporous breath as she poured her plans into [Betsy's] ear, sweaty palms against [her] shoulder, one bent leg carelessly thrown across [hers] as [Betsy] lay on [her] back and drifted on [Molly's] dreams" (82). These descriptions evoke Humbert's, most notably of "the hot thunder of [Lolita's] whisper" (Nabokov 133) when she seduces him, and of the "guileless limbs" which "with perfect simplicity, the impudent child extended […] across [his] lap" (Nabokov 58), allowing Humbert to masturbate without her knowledge.

Like Humbert, Betsy claims to be "in love" (Jones 45) with the girl-child; elsewhere she refers to it as her "mad childhood intoxication" (175). Just as Humbert feels betrayed by Lolita when she runs away with Quilty, so Betsy feels betrayed when she reads about Molly and Christine "flicking their tongues in and out of each other's mouths" so that Molly feels "as if she [is] all lit up inside" – Betsy realises that she "had lost [Molly] long before she died" (82). Finally, there is a hint of objectification in Betsy's love for Molly, as reflected in her words when she says that after Molly moves to Ithica, she "could not forget how lovely Molly's mother was, how lovely Molly was herself" (62); another Humbert-like observation – at Lolita's play he describes two of the schoolgirls as "exasperatingly lovely" (Nabokov 221). This turn of phrase is typical of Humbert, and predictable, perhaps, in a paedophile, but unexpected out of the mouth of a child missing her friend.

Ultimately, the voice of the female narrator in *Molly* does not differ significantly from the male voice in *Lolita*; both represent the Lolita-character through a lens tinged with desire and objectification. Betsy's narration is so sexually charged that the reader suspects that it is actually her unconsummated love for Molly which holds her back, even in old age when she resists the advances of her geriatric poet-boyfriend. The homoerotic love Betsy feels for Molly, had it been explored, could have given the novel more dimension, engaging *Lolita*'s theme of breaking through to a different way of being. Instead, it serves again to divert the attention away from Lolita to the narrator, with the result that Lolita again becomes merely a reflection of another's desire. Thus, in linking the two narrators through their sensual evocation of the girl-child *Molly*'s Lolita-character is as much a phantasm as Humbert's. This idea is, ironically, echoed in Betsy's words when she tries to find Molly in "Mad Girl's Love Song" by Sylvia Plath: "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead/ (I think I made you up inside my head)" (qtd. Jones 175). The theme of the poem centres on a reality which is created by the individual's perception – "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead/ I lift my lids and all is born again" (Plath 13).

Also problematic in Jones's novel is the portrayal of Molly's mother, Catherine Liddell, and the recurring references throughout the novel to the similarity between mother and daughter. While the representation of the mother as all-powerful in determining the identity of the daughter could be effective as a critique of the disabling potential of parenting techniques on impressionable children, the text does not problematise the power relationship between parent and child to a satisfactory degree. If the "material body of the child Lolita" is "obliterated by the body of the father" (Kauffman) in Nabokov's novel, then girl-children's bodies tend to be "obliterated" by their mothers' in Jones's.

Despite Betsy's assertion that Richard "stole [Molly's] childhood" (1) and that she "wanted to strangle him, though not before [she] had cut off his genitals" (256), she blames Molly's fate, most emphatically, on the bad example of her mother, and her enactment of a risqué femininity that leads her and her daughter into danger. Catherine instructs the girls "in all the rituals of womanhood – how to paint [their] nails candy-apple red, […] how to hold a cigarette for a man to light" and as a result Betsy "watched Molly become more like her mother – how she flirted with Tommy DiFelice just as Mrs. Liddell flirted with Mr. Parker, with the veterans. [Betsy] had a premonition about the diaries" (70).

Betsy's mother also condemns Catherine Liddell early in the novel, urging Betsy to remember that "vanity has been the downfall of many a woman" (24). This is followed by the narrator's comment that she "did not believe her […] and wished more than ever [that she was] as bold and beautiful as Molly", communicating subtly to the reader that in the end, Betsy's mother was right. Betsy's saving grace, the novel implies, is her lack of physical beauty, the fact that she is "what [her] mother called 'solid.' [She] stood five feet, eleven inches, in [her] bare feet, taller than most of the boys in [her] class" (81). In the text, both girls are represented as versions of their mothers: "Mrs. Liddell wore lacy bras and panties, tailored slacks in taupe and wine, frothy playsuits with peek-a-boo cutouts – a vivid contrast to [Betsy's] mother's somber skirts, blouses, and sensible bloomers" (29). This is mirrored in the narrator's statement that "in comparison with Molly's life, [hers] seemed everything that was temperate and wholesome" (107). The result is that the girls are portrayed as passive, to an extent, their mothers' autonomy propelling them in directions over which they have little control.

The novel constructs the female body as a site of angst and oppression. The epigraph to the novel, discussed earlier in this chapter, already hints at this; later in the novel it is expressed more forcefully when, during her sickbed, Betsy "[hates] her body more than ever":

> Perhaps Molly was better off than I. She was, at least, at peace, whereas I was condemned to live with the knowledge of her fate, with the knowledge that to trust too much, to love too freely, was to be destroyed. Only Ovid's *Metamorphoses* suggested a solution: Daphne, fleeing from Apollo, finds refuge as a laurel tree; Io, defiled by mighty Jupiter, is transformed into a heifer; Syrinx, faithful only to Diana, becomes the pipes of Pan. I was tall as a tree, with fingers that spread like branches without leaves, but even this seemed insufficient to protect me (88-9).

Evocations like this one romanticise the female as a victim, not only of men, but also of her own body, which "[brings] her into […] danger". While the retrospective narrator posits that a girl "should not have to become a tree, a cow [or] a flute" (265), the sexed woman is constructed as eternally, irrevocably oppressed by her body. Betsy remembers:

> I had watched a woman with awkward, pendulous breasts trying to balance on a bicycle in the church parking lot that spring. She was small-boned and slender, but her breasts swayed before her like the pastry bags my mother filled with icing to decorate cakes. The woman's husband ran behind her, holding the back of her seat, but when he let go, she teetered sideways and lost her balance, dragged downward by her heavy breasts (30).

This description of the destabilising, disabling force of the cycling woman's breasts points to, in its obvious exaggeration, a female sexuality that hinders autonomy; when the "woman's husband […] let[s] go" she is no longer able to keep her balance or remain mobile – she needs him in order to move. The comparison of her breasts to "pastry bags" connects female sexuality to the domestic sphere, intimating that the woman's role as homemaker is restrictive, and the necessary result of her sexuality.

The metaphor, however, is problematic in that it situates the origin of oppression in the woman's body – not in a societal structure which appropriates and regulates her body and dictates her movement, hindering her autonomy. Specifically, it situates oppression in the female's inability to control her own body – thus Betsy wonders what Molly "might have become had […] her father not died" (154). The need to control female sexuality is echoed when Betsy's mother asks, after Molly has been sent home from school in the second grade for wearing lipstick, "What good do Hollywood looks do a woman when she can't even control her own daughter?" (23).

The text emphasises the vast scope of female oppression by evoking the memories of Betsy's "mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother" who were, like Betsy, "firebrand[s] for women's rights" (244), testifying to the long battle for female liberation. The novel sketches an America where women are complicit in their own oppression – as is evident in the fact that other *women* are instrumental in ostracising Catherine Liddell for her free sexuality. However, in *Molly* the girl-child, left to her own devices, becomes the symbol of a dangerous female sexuality which should be controlled if women are to escape abuse. Not even Betsy, who "like[s] her label as 'libber'", never marries and is a virgin at the time of narration, can be wholly credited with controlling her own sexuality – unable to have children because "[l]abor and delivery would put too much strain on [her] heart" she breaks off her relationship with Bobby Baker who "wanted [to have] a large brood" of children with her (203). Jones could have pursued Betsy's homosexuality in an effort to overwrite the restrictive subjectivities afforded women in the past, but instead she lets her become a cliché, a stock character: a spinterish feminist who grows old alone.

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Ultimately, of these two derivative novels, *Lo's Diary* provides the reader with the most compelling incarnation of Nabokov's Lolita. While *Molly* offers an interesting perspective on the challenges girls face in developing their sexual beings, the novel comes too close to blaming the "wayward child, the egotistic mother" (Nabokov 5), like John Ray does in the preface to *Lolita*, for the victimisation she incurs. In so doing, the novel nullifies any agency it bestows on the girl-child, since it reinforces the ideal of the innocent, passive girl. *Lo's Diary* constitutes a much more empowering text as it presents the reader with a considerably more nuanced interpretation, showing the troubled coexistence of innocence and savvy in the life of the girl-child which initially leads to her downfall, but eventually helps her to escape her abusive environment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Getting' Lucky: Understanding Children and Sex in Emily Prager's *Roger Fishbite*

> *Few stories in our culture right now are as popular as those of child molesting, and I wonder why this should be so. We are likely to say that the reality of sexual child abuse compels us to speak, to break the silence; but I would like to poke at that compulsion and at the connections between "the reality of sexual child abuse" and the stories we tell about it. Why do we generate these stories and not others? What rewards do they offer? Who profits from their circulation, and who pays the price?*
>
> James Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*

While, as shown in the previous chapters, Nabokov's Lolita and Pera's Lo are able to see through the artifice of consumer culture in the 1950s, Emily Prager's *Roger Fishbite* (2000) depicts a world where there is hardly any escape from the cogs of capitalism that constitute everyday reality. Through the child-narrator, Prager comments on a society shaped by media and advertising; the protagonist, Lucky Lady Linderhoff, is barely able to separate her thoughts from those opinions that seem to flow seamlessly from the television screen into the very air she breathes.

Still, Lucky is not depicted as a passive receptacle – painfully aware of the limitations and contradictions inherent in popular wisdom, the girl-child struggles to make sense of the world by collecting pieces of the puzzle and casting aside those that do not seem to fit. This process is depicted as a solitary one; adults seem caught up in their own existence and unaware of the confusion wrought by an approach to childrearing which is still fettered by romantic notions of childhood. Zeroing in on the sexualisation of young girls in contemporary society and contrasting this with Lucky's struggle to make sense of sex as portrayed in the media, the novel points out the tensions implicit in society's attitude towards children, writing back to reader-responses to *Lolita* through its engagement with issues such as victim-blaming.

The novel situates the occurrence of child sexual abuse within the larger context of the oppression of children, not only in American society, but in the world at large. It touches on issues such as child prostitution, child labour, and human trafficking and links these phenomena to a global society that ignores suffering in favour of the pursuit of the gratification of desire and ever-greater affluence. Through the use of the child-narrator, the novel draws attention to the lack of agency afforded children in this society and comments on the fact that children have no platform from which to contest their own oppression. A parody of *Lolita*, *Roger Fishbite*, like the Nabokovian classic, explores the cultural construction of identity. However, set at the turn of the twentieth century, Lucky's story paints a decidedly more dystopian picture of advancing technological society, one that is sceptical of individuals' ability to conceive of others' subjectivity outside of the pop ideology disseminated in the media.

The parodic mode allows the novel to deliver a biting critique of the way in which perceptions of self and others are constructed in society. In fact, while the novel uses *Lolita* as a platform for this critique, it is arguably more a parody of social perceptions as it is of Nabokov's novel. While structurally and plot-wise the novel is easily identifiable as a parody of Nabokov's, its depiction of the main character independently and very effectively explores the way in which identity is constructed in advancing technological society. The mass media is depicted as a sensation-seeking machine which sexualises child abuse in order to push up sales. Talk show culture is problematised for its potential to disseminate popular 'truths' that become the infrastructure for individual as well as collective identity. Simultaneously, however, the domain of talk[21] is constructed as a space where previously taboo topics may be grappled with, as such creating a platform from which especially women can contest oppressive social constructions of identity. Consumer culture is addressed in the novel in various ways, especially with regards to the way in which grooming is perceived to reflect identity in advancing technological society.

Published in 1999, and set in the late 1990s, *Roger Fishbite* is the fictional (retrospective) autobiography of fifteen-year-old Lucky Lady Linderhoff, written during her incarceration at a juvenile detention centre for the murder of her stepfather, Roger Fishbite. Lucky is the child of an alcoholic, single mother who takes in a boarder, Roger Fishbite, to supplement their income. Fishbite is Lucky's absentee father's former brother-in-law. Lucky's mother neglects her; the child comments that her mother "couldn't have figured out a baby monitor if you paid her" (14). Fishbite is a novelist who immediately takes a shine to Lucky, and marries her mother.

Disguised as a cab driver, Fishbite runs his wife over with a taxi cab while she is shopping for the tiny Chinese bound-feet shoes that she collects. He fetches Lucky from boarding school, telling her that her mother is ill and in hospital, and embarks on a road trip with her. During their first night in a hotel, Fishbite cuddles up to Lucky while she is asleep. Drowsily, the child rests her head on his shoulder, on the verge of telling him how happy she is to have him for a father, when he starts molesting her. Soon afterwards, they return to Lucky's hometown where the abuse continues, although Lucky claims at times to love Fishbite, and she eventually learns to enjoy it when he performs oral sex on her. Her refusal to do the same for him or to have sex with him leads him to 'cheat' on her with Evie Naif, (or, Evie Naïve), a child star who is Lucky's arch enemy.

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[21] I use the term "talk" to refer to the discursive practices of talk show culture.

Meanwhile, Lucky and her best friend have founded WHINE! (World's Hapless Infants, Notice Everyone!), a protest movement aimed at eradicating cruelty to children. Lucky and her co-conspirators are arrested after staging a theatre production protesting against child prostitution and child labour in front of the German consulate. Fishbite, spooked by the scrutiny that comes with the arrest and fed up with Lucky's antics, abandons her and goes to Disney World with Evie. When Lucky discovers his diary and 'deceit', she boards a plane fully intending to kill Evie, who has stolen her lover/father from her. In the heat of the moment she shoots Fishbite, recognising him as the true object of her anger. She is eventually found guilty of second-degree murder, but zealously uses her story as a platform for WHINE's activities, securing her own talk show, Baby Talk, and publishing her autobiography.

Roger Fishbite ***and*** **Lolita:** ***Two Texts in Conversation***

As a parody, the novel evokes the themes of the original from the get-go, although some are, of course, turned on their heads. Just as Humbert claims that he saw in Lolita his childhood sweetheart, Annabel, so Lucky draws the reader's attention to the resemblance between Fishbite and her father, Tex, inviting the reader to question pop psychology: "Did [her father's] leaving have something to do with what happened?

Was [she] a daddy's girl in search of a daddy? Could it be as simple as that?" (7). Says Lucky about the reluctant oral sex performed on her by Fishbite, which is the only sexual act she permits him: "So I enjoyed it while I was forced to, and enjoyed forcing Fishbite to, and it amused me that we were both being forced to do it, and it was pretty confusing" (128). By pointing out paradoxes like this one through the thoughts of the young protagonist, which are constantly in flux, vacillating between different viewpoints and emotions, and through its myriad popular culture references, the novel utters an emphatic '*no*'. Like *Lolita,* the novel draws attention to the dangers of oversimplification and to the misleading potential of reason and ideological syllogisms. In this regard, the text is especially effective because the child-narrator's logic is linked to popular culture throughout, thus illustrating that the naivety or ideologically induced blindness is not restricted to children – adults are often equally susceptible. The media, with its plethora of half-truths and ideological syllogisms is, after all, operated by adults. The text points to the self-validating nature of ideology in a media-driven, technologically advancing society, illustrating how advanced levels of conformity are produced.

While the novel is structurally and stylistically easy to identify as a parody of *Lolita* to the reader familiar with Nabokov's novel, it has other elements in common with it that are not as apparent. Just like *Lolita*, this text draws the reader into the narrator's world, inviting the reader to sympathise with her. Lucky Lady Linderhoff easily wins the reader's trust in spite of openly admitting to and having been convicted of the murder of her stepfather, Roger Fishbite. In fact, Lucky has an advantage over Humbert in that the myth of childhood innocence is still prevalent in society, so that Lucky is "mythically innocent" despite evidence to the contrary. In the fictional afterword to *Roger Fishbite* the producer of Lucky's talk show, Warma Moneytree, says that when she first met Lucky she "assumed that she was just another thirteen-year-old child murderess with a knack for publicity. […] But she'd never seen anyone like little Lucky. Beautiful, articulate, well-bred, educated, socially responsible, she was exactly what the public does not associate with sexual abuse, drunkenness, con games, and murder" (186). Thus, Warma's assessment of Lucky's virtue depends on who she perceives Lucky to be, rather than on any concrete evidence.

The afterword thus invites the reader to read the novel against the grain, questioning Lucky's construction of herself as a victim – "is she for real or is she just a clever killer?" (186). It places her narrative strategy under suspicion: for the reader who accepts her as a victim, the novel's multitude of references to "children killing children" serve poignantly to reinforce Lucky's tragic plight; however, a reading against the grain raises the possibility that this is just a murderer's "fancy prose style" (Nabokov 9). The possibility that Lucky misrepresents the events she recounts is likewise implicit in the fact that she states that she has "rewritten" her diary which she "[offers to the reader] as evidence of the spell she was under" (22). Likewise, the events are called into question when Lucky says:

> [I]t was my lawyer, Ms. Glove, who insisted on the abuse defence. As CEO of WHINE!, I would never have condoned that – but she convinced me. My work in the future was what made me go for it. And that it generally publicized the abuse of children. But the tricky part of all of it was that I was not just a child abused by this time, I was also a woman scorned, and from both sides of my brain, I felt awful about it (175).

Nothing is revealed about the trial except that "[t]he jury found [Lucky] guilty of second-degree murder" (187). This passage calls into question whether or not Lucky was abused at all – the reader has no evidence of it except for her word. The "tricky part" for the reader is to decide if Lucky is "a child abused" or "a woman scorned", or if it is possible that she is both. Just as in *Lolita*, the reader is uncertain whether Humbert can be both a vile monster and a man in love. When she says that "as CEO of WHINE!"

she “would never have condoned” the “abuse defence”, the truth of the statement is questionable – especially since she purports to have agreed to the defence because it “generally publicized the abuse of children”, which goes to the heart of WHINE!’s purpose, which is “to get attention paid” (137).

At one point Lucky says of Evie Naif – the girl Fishbite ‘cheats’ on her with – “it’s her I should have shot”, which arouses the suspicion that perhaps Lucky kills Fishbite specifically to draw attention to the issue of child abuse. In other words, she purports to be angry at Evie, not Fishbite, which suggests that she had another motive for killing him. This suspicion is strengthened when Lucky says:

> Here at the facility, I’m a bit of a celebrity to the other girls. I am the first sexually abused girl-child (that I’ve heard of in the media) to actually murder her abuser. Most children ‘displace,’ I think they call it in psychology. They hurt other people or animals or themselves. But that was not for me. Not that I deserve any credit, really. It was Evie I thought I wanted to kill (183).

Lucky’s failure to conform to the behaviour of “[m]ost children” in her situation casts some doubt on her assertion that her killing of Fishbite was not premeditated. Furthermore, Lucky using Fishbite’s murder as a platform from which to raise awareness about child abuse is mirrored by her allowing a Japanese business man to “feel [her] breast in return for buying [her] some bullets” (181): she is willing to endure some form of abuse or discomfort (being fondled, going to juvenile detention) in order to obtain ammunition – both literal and figurative – with which to wage war against perpetrators of child abuse.

Had Lucky shot Evie her story may just have been categorised as another case of a child killing a child, which, according to Lucky, is nothing unusual in America. However, as in the case of *Lolita*’s unreliable narration, the reader can never be sure of the truth:

Lucky has been properly counselled by her lawyer, "Ms [Velvet] Glove", who "[asks her] to make sure [the reader understands]" that when Lucky kills Fishbite, she is "out of [her] mind" (185). Thus the text draws attention to the subjective nature of reality, and the role of both reader and writer in constructing it. It can be argued that the stereotype of children as innocent and incapable of behaviour of such a calculated nature wins out over the psychological profile of abused children. The reader again finds herself in a position where differing ideological categories make any empirical claim at truth difficult.

Something else calling Lucky's account of the events into question is the fact that Evie Naif's presence at the murder scene was, by Lucky's own admission, never reported by the papers – which seems unlikely, in light of Evie's fame and the media's propensity for sensationalism. On the other hand, Lucky implies that the Naifs may have bribed the newspaper – a plausible explanation in a corrupt world. However, there is no-one to contradict or confirm the involvement of Evie Naif at any stage; for all the reader knows, Lucky may have used Evie's name, as a 'celebrity' who has been rumoured to use drugs and have affairs with older men, to lend credibility to her story. Then, as far as Lucky relates her story to the reader, Fishbite never raped her: "Lose my virginity to you? What are you, nuts? What's in it for me?" (103). Nor does she report any other physical abuse that would leave a mark, which means that there would be no physical evidence of abuse to corroborate her story, again making room for doubt.[22]

More than once Lucky refers to "Controllable Molesters" (92) – of which, presumably, Fishbite is one. However, the fact that Lucky imagines doing a talk show on the subject implies falsity – the novel questions the credibility of talk show hosts throughout –

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[22] Of course, this is often the case in real-life rape trials as well, which is why it is often so difficult to prove rape. Thus the text, aside from emphasizing the constructed nature of reality, is also commenting on the difficulties inherent in cases of sexual abuse.

especially in light of her idea for "a twenty-first-century show on which people would make up things that happened to them and talk about them. 'My Sister Was Born with Two Heads and I Cut One Off When I Turned Three' was one topic [she] thought of" (135-6). Finally, "[i]n the plastic box behind the gearshift, where people usually keep tapes, [Fishbite] had his well-thumbed paperbacks. 'What's this about?' [Lucky] asked, picking one up. He grabbed it out of [her] hand. 'A guy named Humbert. Men's stuff. Not for you. No princesses.'" (77) The fact that Lucky has access to the novel *Lolita* raises the possibility that she may have modelled her story on Nabokov's. On the other hand, it points to the prevalence of sexual abuse and renders the controversy created by *Lolita* almost laughable, raising the question of why society is so intent on denying or "gagging" stories of sexual abuse.

Contemporary Children: Trapped in a Media-saturated Culture?

As a parody of *Lolita* Prager's novel succeeds in revealing the powerful prejudice inherent in the ideology of childhood innocence. Even as a student of *Lolita,* well acquainted with the pervasiveness of the myth of childhood innocence and the seductive power of the first-person narrator, I was taken in completely by Lucky's account on the first few readings of the text – it was only once I started *looking* for possible holes in the story that the full extent of the narrator's control became apparent. In this respect, especially, the novel is very effective in its capacity as a literary parody of Nabokov's novel, opening the door to a more thorough dismantlement of the myth of childhood innocence. A reading against the grain, furthermore, illustrates the rampant fear of paedophilia that exists in contemporary society through pointing to stigmatisation that can occur so easily. Questioning the veracity of the 'plaintive's' account causes a great deal of discomfort, pointing to the continuing influence of traditional constructions of women and children as virtuous victims and men as sexually driven aggressors.

Still, the novel's most prominent theme is the powerlessness of children in advancing technological society, showing how difficult it is for child victims to stand up to adults and prove abuse. The children of the 20th century are depicted as knowing and informed on the surface, but desperately misguided and misinformed underneath the façade of knowledge. The protagonist of Prager's novel articulates the process through which children form their perceptions strikingly when she says that "[t]he life of a young child, which some of you may not realize, is really a series of hindsights. It's all a frustrating blur until one day your brain is ready, and then (to my knowledge they have not covered this on the talk shows) you suddenly can see so clearly" (Prager 11). This statement delivers an implicit critique against media practices and the subject matter of talk shows. Lucky's childlike explanation points to the fact that the media does not "cover" all angles of a matter, and even if it did, ones "knowledge" is restricted to what you have seen. The statement hereby also introduces the exclusionary practices of traditional childhood, which cause children to be only partially informed, making the world a "frustrating blur". Thus, Prager comments on a world of adults who are instrumental in the victimisation of children, both directly and indirectly. Aside from paedophiles and sweat shop owners, regular parents can cause children harm through ultimately dangerous childrearing practices.

Through the use of the child-narrator the novel comments on the lack of a platform from which children can protest their treatment and facilitate their liberation. Lucky's fate reminds the reader of Humbert's

> best friend, a social service monograph (Chicago, 1936), which was dug out for [him] at great pains from a dusty storage recess by an innocent old spinster, [saying] 'There is no principle that every minor must have a guardian; the court is passive and enters the fray only when the child's situation becomes conspicuously perilous' (Nabokov 172).

One of the salient points addressed by the novel is society's sensationalization of sex crimes, a point which derives its full impact from the fact that Lucky's abuse only comes to light because she kills Fishbite – then her "situation" becomes "[conspicuous]". The text comments explicitly on the media's sensationalism when Lucky, in talking about the juvenile detention facility where she is held for Fishbite's murder, anticipates the reader's question:

> Do they rape here? That's what you want to know, and why not? The press whets your appetite for that, you've got to satiate it. I understand. Not long ago, on the cover of our city's most prestigious newspaper, I read a story about the child sex industry in Thailand. It purported to be concerned and yet it opened with a man tweaking the nipple of a child prostitute, something factual and yet destined to sell papers. I felt, when I read it, as if that child was me. The point of the story was slim – now that Thailand's rich, nothing's changed in child exploitation. I'll say, and in New York as well (69).

Elsewhere in the novel, Lucky makes the observation that "America [is] not only about money but also about sex" (43), a statement which is placed in context with the above story. The horrific nature of child abuse is undermined by the media's sensationalist portrayals of sex crimes and exploited for the revenue that can be generated by showcasing such stories.

At the airport on her way to Disney World in pursuit of Fishbite and Evie, Lucky passes a newsstand:

> There on the cover of a daily was a mother's boyfriend's description of suffocating her child. 'I taped her mouth and when she stopped squeezing my hand, I knew she was dead,' it quoted the animal. The child had defended the mother when he and the mother fought. Death was the child's reward. Before I could stop myself, I turned on the newsstand owner. 'Don't you understand,' I screamed. 'Only people who

> don't care can read this filth. She trusted her mother!' In a rage, I swept all the papers off their shelves onto the airport carpeting (180-1).

This extract not only reinforces the desensitisation of the public to stories of child abuse, it also clearly illustrates Lucky's frustration with the state of the media and her desire to have a platform from which to raise awareness about the oppression of children. Furthermore, it links the abuse of children to the abuse of women through the reference to the killer's motive for murdering the child, pointing to the tendency in society of the strong oppressing the weak.

The socially constructed nature of childhood is illustrated in the novel in a variety of ways. The text stresses the way in which scientific research is often used to interpret human behaviour when Lucky refers to a film showed at her school - "the surrogate monkey film that shapes our culture" which "said that baby monkeys preferred cloth mother monkeys to no mother monkeys at all. It said they had to have a seat of warmth, even mechanical, or they would sicken and die" (42). Later in the novel, when Lucky "crawl[s]" into her abuser's bed to seek comfort there she says:

> Perhaps it shocking to you, Dear Readers and Watchers, shocking and incomprehensible that having finally been left alone, I would crawl back into the pervert's bed. If you must place blame, blame it on the cloth mother monkey, who is, you recall, better than no monkey at all (127).

Lucky's behaviour here reminds the reader (as it is intended to) of Lolita's behaviour when "in the middle of the night she came sobbing into [Humbert's bedroom], and [they] made it up very gently" (Nabokov 126). The explanation Humbert offers the reader is that "she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (142). On a literal level, this is not true – Lolita *could* physically go elsewhere, but implicit in Humbert's statement is the child's dependence on adults – a dependence which Prager's novel depicts as the result of conditioning. In the metaphor the "cloth mother monkey", despite being an inanimate object, is imbued with the qualities of parenthood, so that the child constructs herself in relation to it as if it were a live parent, and therefore the child does not "sicken and die".

This signifies a type of learnt helplessness and echoes Kauffman's statement about issues of autonomy and loss of agency as central to contemporary childhood studies. Lolita and Lucky's learnt helplessness facilitates their oppression and abuse. Lucky, however, shows an awareness of the mythical nature of children's helplessness when she says of children left without parental care/love: "I know from school that little girls get through it all the time. They have ennui and some depression. They often seem downcast when they are thinking, but that's all. They grow and learn and laugh and graduate with honors just like everyone else" (42). This statement echoes the novel's dedication: "To all the little girls I've met who started out in desperate circumstances. It is their boundless determination and unstoppable joy in life that profoundly influenced this book".

Prager's novel emphasises the idea that children's inadequate knowledge of the world, which results from their exclusion from 'adult' matters, contributes to their helplessness. When Lucky asks her mother about the rationale behind the practice of footbinding, she tries to explain it, but "every time […] she decided [Lucky] was too young" (33). The practice of footbinding as a metaphor for the disabling concept of childhood is made explicit when Fishbite explains that footbinding is practiced "[t]o keep girls at home" (33). The reference to footbinding further emphasises the constructed nature of the concept of childhood in that it alludes to the fact that childhood is not practiced in the same way in every country – it is rooted in tradition. Also, it is important to note that whereas Jones represents the female's helplessness or immobility (as signified by the woman with the "pendulous breasts") as inherent, Prager emphasises the constructed nature thereof.

Lucky refers to the restrictive nature of childhood throughout the novel. In trying to understand her mother's death she questions her Chinese caretaker, Chiong, telling the reader that "[i]n [her] life [she] was always searching for ragged shreds of information to get [her] through. Tiny details that others might discard had formed the memories [she] held dear and shaped [her] understanding" (123). This statement not only draws attention to the frustration inherent in being a child, it also points to the dangers posed by this method of making sense of the world – "others might discard" some "details" because they recognise them as being false, while a child, with limited life experience and knowledge, might not recognise this, resulting in an inaccurate or even distorted understanding of the world. *Roger Fishbite* situates the dichotomy of Lolita's "seduction" of Humbert in this context through the character of Lucky, who defends herself to her readers and viewers, the text mocking Humbert's style in *his* memoir: "Dear Readers and Watchers of tabloid TV and press, I want you to know the truth. […] Sometimes the water was so dark, it was like a blackboard at school. […] And you must judge, if I jumped in that water and a fish bit me, could it be my fault? Could it be? If I couldn't see the fish coming?" (Prager 6).

Roger Fishbite draws particular attention to the debilitating power of childrearing practices with regards to sexuality. Lucky's "mother [is] sorely lacking in the sex-education department. She said she believed in knowing nothing, it made the finding-out more fun" (61). The Rousseauian intonations in this attitude towards sexuality are conspicuously out of place and, the novel posits, dangerous in advancing technological society where children see sex "all the time on TV and in movies and hear it on the radio and [they] would have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to pick up on this part of the information age" (28). However, the information gleaned from the media is inadequate, as is evident when Lucky is bewildered by a sex scene in *Leaving Las Vegas*, which she describes as follows:

> When Elisabeth Shue came on and started hugging the girl's hips, I think it was lesbianism, which they have lectured us about at school. We are not supposed to be judgemental or afraid of it but several of us are not quite sure what it is. […] [T]hough I enjoy a good R-rated movie when I can get in, I really felt this was way over my head, so to speak […] (35).

Unequipped with the knowledge to interpret what she sees, Lucky feels "deeply disturbed" by all "this sex stuff" because "there [is] something about it that trip[s] [her] nervousness and [makes her] stutter". The reader, however, knows that Fishbite masturbates during the film (evoking the picture of Humbert's "hunchback" who "abuses himself") and that it is the fact that he is "sighing loudly and gasping [that is] really upsetting [Lucky]" (36). His behaviour, which she describes as "crazy" (36), frightens Lucky because she does not understand it. This incident functions as a precursor to the abuse that takes place later in the novel and, had Lucky had more sexual knowledge, she would have been able to identify Fishbite's behaviour as more concretely dangerous. Instead, sensing that something is amiss, all she is able to do is to "[keep her] door locked and [to] refuse to speak with [Fishbite]" (37). Once her mother comes home she "[goes] down to see her immediately" but cannot make any accusation against Fishbite – all she can do is to ask her mother if she "[w]ill […] always be there" (38). This highlights the lack of agency that can be associated with the doctrine of innocence.

When Lucky's mother mentions in passing the expertise of one of her lovers to Lucky, this theme is again highlighted. Lucky explains that she understands

> only the tone of what she was saying. Yes, the tone said, a lot better than [your father], and I remember this shocked me because I was still under

> the impression then, as all girl-children are, that the one you marry and have children with is the best one of your life. Sally Jessy Raphael still believes it, which is why to this day I watch her program.

This comments not only on the naivety which springs from the sex-taboo, but also on the powerful effect of subjective media on the developing individual's identity and world view, as well as on the advancing conformity in a society where "all girl-children" are as naïve as Lucky. While Lucky's assertion does not establish it as fact, it is plausible that it is fairly accurate – Lucky's household is not particularly conservative, and she is extremely media-oriented, creating the impression that, if anything, she should know more about sex than the average child. These instances place emphasis on the continued pervasiveness of the ideology of childhood innocence in advancing technological society. The reference to the copy of *Lolita* Lucky finds in Fishbite's van, especially, emphasises the intractable nature of the ideology – 45 years after the publication of a novel that launched a massive assault on the pure image of the American girl the myth of childhood innocence is still intact to a great degree.

While Lucky does not "seduce" Fishbite like Lolita does Humbert, her 'seductive' behaviour towards Fishbite closely resembles Lolita's in that, like Lolita, Lucky is a frequent visitor to the boarder's room, seeking out his company. In Lucky's diary she describes how she "took flowers to Fishbite. Just rang the door and put them in his huge hand and kissed him demurely on the cheek. 'That's for being you,' [she] said in [her] best Veronica Lake'" (29). Clearly, this is no seduction in the adult sense of the word; very early on in the novel Lucky remembers that Fishbite

> was not the first grown-up who liked [her]. They always did. Once, in second grade, when [she] was trick-or-treating, a grown-up opened the door, looked at [her], and kissed [her] on the lips and shut the door back up before [she] even knew it. [She] was dressed as a private detective and [she] looked very sophisticated, much older than [she] usually did, which

> must have fooled him. [She] got [her] costume from a movie [she] saw on TV with Veronica Lake, who [she likes] very much. [She admires] her slowness. She's careful and precise and slow like honey. On the outside, [Lucky seems] like that. But on the inside, [she's] a nervous child and [she needs] to move fast (5).

Implicit in this description is Lucky's ignorance of the danger she places herself in through her emulation of the actress when she says that her outfit "must have fooled" the man who kissed her when she was "trick-or-treating"; it demonstrates her naivety in that she does not consider the possibility that the man was aware of the fact that she was a child.

This is supported by the fact that Lucky admits that she only learns about the existence of paedophiles "after some months […] at the [juvenile detention] facility" (11). Now she

> [sees] that there exists a kind of grown-up man, his age between twenty-eight and ninety, who reveals himself to certain young girls painfully and utterly. He is the nice photographer, the friendly pastor, the jocular uncle, the mother's boyfriend, those whom the books call 'dirty old men' (11).

Initially when Lucky meets Fishbite she senses that he is a "weirdo" when he calls her "mistress" (4), but she cannot place the "[weirdness]"; she only "[picks] up right away" that "it [is] something he should not have said" (4). "[H]e didn't look dangerous. He didn't look like he would bite. No, he looked just like [her] father, if the truth be told" (4).

Ultimately, then, *Roger Fishbite* gives a voice to the girl-child who is rendered helpless by the combination of Romantic childrearing practices and a media-saturated culture. It shows how difficult it is for children to make their voices heard: the implication is that they have to resort to extreme measures – such as murder – to attract attention to their suffering. This is partly due to the desensitization that results from the media's sensasionalization of child abuse. Nor can children protect themselves from abuse by being watchful: Romantic childrearing practices bar them from sexual knowledge so that they are dependant on the media for guidance. The images of sex available in the media, however, are often misleading and contradictory.

Roger Fishbite ***and The Discrepancy Between Appearance and Reality***

Thus, as in *Lolita*, the discrepancy between appearance and reality emerges as a major theme in *Roger Fishbite*. While Lucky might seem, "on the outside", like she is "careful and precise and slow like honey" she is really "a nervous child"; though Fishbite looks "just like [Lucky's] father" he is "a pervert" (3). So, too, "[r]ight before Fishbite move[s] in, [Lucky's] mother [falls] in love" with a man who "[claims] to be a gynaecologist and a Muslim refugee from Serbia" (16) who turns out not to be "a gynaecologist, not from Bosnia, not a Muslim. He was just a guy who preyed upon rich women and had bilked a number of them out of money" (17).

Another striking example occurs when Fishbite fetches Lucky from prison after her arrest outside the embassy – the fact that he is male, well-groomed, and dressed in an expensive suit immediately places him beyond suspicion. Lucky herself comments on this state of affairs when she says that her mother would "trust a snake if it used hair mousse. According to Oprah, a lot of women would" (10). *Roger Fishbite,* like *Lolita*, thus comments on the ease with which, especially, corrupt adults can disguise themselves in a world where advanced age can automatically infuse a person with authority.

Prager's novel draws attention to the ideological trappings which prevent an open and honest discourse on paedophilia. Paedophilia is treated as an inexplicable phenomenon and the perpetrators are constructed as 'monsters'. In *Roger Fishbite* Lucky's musings on talk show culture point out the discrepancies inherent in representations of adult-child sexual relationships:

> Eglantine says it isn't normal for a grown man to be interested in a preteen but what does she know about love? […] I had to point out that all of the shows had those really young boys who were dating grown-up women. Some of those women got married and seemed pretty happy, happier than our moms have been. There must have been shows with really young girls dating grown-up men but I didn't see them. That, Eglantine says, is because it's against the law. She's right, of course, I know that, but who made her the love police? (31)

This passage is significant in that it raises the idea that relationships between older women "dating" boys are more overtly sanctioned by society than their inverse. Lucky's logic tells her that if such relationships are acceptable between women and boys, the inverse must also be acceptable. The words "love" and "dating", moreover, signify the extent to which these relationships are normalised in the media.

The passage furthermore illustrates the pitfalls inherent in media representations of love and sex for young viewers, while simultaneously problematising traditional configurations of paedophilia. It points to the traditional construction of men as violent and women as harmless – dangerous categorizations which may provide children with a false sense of security in that it blinds them against possible dangers in the same way that the habitual emphasis on "stranger danger" subverts the possibility that a person known to a child may pose a threat. Eglantine's explanation of why relationships between adult men and "preteen" girls are unacceptable - that "it isn't normal" and that "it's against the law" – further illustrates the extent to which the phenomenon of paedophilia is shrouded in mystery and confusion, while also pointing to the regulating power of discourse and legislation. Discourse and the law – and the media - are thus implicated as means of social control, perpetuating conformity.

Kincaid posits that the unwillingness to engage truthfully with the phenomenon of child abuse can be attributed to society's reluctance to take responsibility for the eroticisation of children. In this regard he refers to children's beauty pageants as an example of a practice which furthers the sexual exploitation of children, focusing on the murder of JonBenet Ramsey. The link between child abuse, the eroticisation of children, and child beauty pageants is made explicit in *Roger Fishbite* when Lucky says that JonBenet Ramsey "was a little girl who loved her dress-up, one after [her and Eglantine's] own hearts. She was one of [them]." In relation to the "little beauty queen['s] murder Lucky furthermore draws the following conclusion: "Daddies are scary. They can kill and hurt and shame. The tabloids ask if her daddy hurt the little beauty queen. […] I didn't sleep for weeks" (42). With this statement the text subverts the traditional construction of both fatherhood and child abuse, while supporting the subversion with a real-world reference to a case in which the father of a murdered child was a suspect. The text again interrogates the concept of stable identity by showing, as *Lolita* does, that the identity categories of "father" and "abuser" are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In its engagement with the theme of the eroticisation of children the novel, like *Lolita*, comments on the solipsism that can easily be a bi-product and/or prerequisite of desire. While staying at "the Ramada Tower on Grand Central Parkway opposite La Guardia Airport" (109) during their road trip, shortly before returning home, Lucky and Fishbite encounter the delegates of "a convention of child model-actresses" (110). During their stay Lucky has "several conversations with some of the girls", one of which "concerned [the murder of] the little beauty queen. Some ten-year-olds who'd done the beauty-pageant circuit were discussing her" (113).

> 'Have you really had a lot of trouble from men?' I asked seriously.
> The two girls sobered up and sighed.
> 'Oh, stuff and junk,' said Florrie.
> 'They can't help it,' said Mary Jane. 'We look so beautiful, like little candy women or something. Look around you.'
> She was right. I looked around and they were scrumptious, positively edible.
> 'But isn't it different – admiring and murdering?' I asked.
> They thought about it for a long time.
> 'Hop, skip, jump,' said Florrie. 'I don't trust 'em.'

By inviting the reader to draw the comparison between "admiring and murdering" the text writes back to *Lolita* and the way in which Humbert's idealisation and eroticisation of the girl-child elide her existence and identity so completely, so that for him, "the real child Lolita" (Nabokov 125) disappeared behind his "raging bliss" (Nabokov 124) and all that remains afterwards is "the small ghost of somebody [he has] just killed" (Nabokov 140). In Prager's novel the eroticisation of children is held responsible for making girls look like "little candy women", inviting men to "[murder]" them in both the figurative and literal sense. As such, there is just a "[h]op, skip [and a jump]" between "admiring and murdering".

Furthermore, this passage comments on the link between the oppression of women and that of children. While children are generally seen as sexually innocent, even a-sexual, dressing them as women "genders"/"sexes" them overtly, obscuring their immaturity, inviting sexual advances. The 'innocent' girl may represent some men's ideal woman; it could thus be argued that the practice of child beauty pageants seems to sanction this fetishism and invites paedophilia. Of note here is the fact that in the case of JonBenet

Ramsey an obsessed "fan" was one of the murder suspects who even confessed falsely, thus 'appropriating' the girl.

Early on in the novel already a link is drawn between paedophilia and the general objectification of women:

> At the time, Dear Readers and Watchers, I flattered myself that I and the minutiae of my doings inspired his undying new fatherly affection for me. Now, of course, I know he was just exercising his pathology, revelling in the toy-touches of a girl-child's life. The older girls here at the facility assure me that every woman feels this way after a man betrays her. 'Same trip in a different boat,' they say knowingly. And I want and don't want to believe them (54).

Through the theme of the sex-taboo *Roger Fishbite* writes back to and parodies reader-responses to *Lolita*, which assign blame to Lolita for what happened to her. The novel furthermore parodies reader-responses to *Lolita* through the novel's treatment of Fishbite's sexual abuse of Lucky; Lucky's claim to enjoy the oral sex Fishbite performs on her, and the claim that it even "offers a shred of freedom from the prison walls" can be related to some critics' characterisation of Lolita as a depraved seductress, or of interpretations of the novel as the story of a poignant love affair. The second claim, beyond the surface, draws attention to the grim situation Lucky finds herself in – oral sex offers a relief from the other horrors she suffers at Fishbite's hands.

The impossible situation children find themselves in is illustrated in the novel in various ways. Through taking the form of Lucky's personal account of her stepfather's murder, the novel comments on the lack of a platform from which children can fight their oppression. Lucky's desperate situation only comes to light after she has killed Roger Fishbite. Other attempts by children to bring attention to their fate is rendered laughable – as in the case of Lucky's subversive organisation, WHINE! illustrating how societal perceptions of children can undermine their cries for help; especially teenagers have been stereotyped as sullen and rebellious per se.

****

The novel's imagery points to the mistreatment of children – especially girls – as an age old practice, especially through the references to footbinding. Society's indifference to and ignorance of the real suffering of children is illustrated through Lucky's mother's fondness for the tiny shoes: to her, they are beautiful cultural artefacts, far removed from the pain and disfiguration they inflicted on the wearers, or the sexual fetishism which drives the practice of footbinding. Her sentimental attachment to the shoes which are designed to keep the wearer's feet small and childlike points to our own sentimental attachment to the construct of childhood, and its emphasis on keeping children innocent for as long as possible. The implication is that, by trying to squeeze children into a mould that we find pleasing, we are hurting our children and stunting their growth. However, childhood has become such a part of our culture that we no longer see beyond the surface to recognise its harmful effects.

Roger Fishbite can be seen as a powerful critique of advancing technological society, not only in its capacity as a parody of *Lolita,* but also in its own right. Through the act of parody it serves to reinforce, rather than detract from many of Nabokov's themes, while simultaneously commenting on the situation of children which is even more dire today than it was fifty years ago, when *Lolita* was first published. Prager's novel does succeed in creating a vibrantly alive Lolita-character; a believable character, surprisingly familiar, yet grotesque. The novel's parody lends to it, very comfortably, more than a taste of caricature, giving its protagonist the same type of articulate, seductive character that of Humbert in *Lolita.* Lucky is a character who, with a complex web of “real” world references and ideological syllogisms, wins the reader over with confidence, giving her credibility. As such *Roger Fishbite*’s Lucky, with her autonomy and sexual knowledge stands in stark contrast to the romantic concept and ideal of American girlhood, shocking and raising questions about the “real” world societal practices that rely on these concepts and ideals as the starting point for their logic. Through its use of imagery it suggests that, like the practice of footbinding, these societal practices disable girl children in the name of socially sanctioned sexual fetishism. Thus the novel succeeds in dismantling, more directly than *Lolita*, but not less effectively, the traditional concept and ideal of girl-childhood through the use of its Lolita-character.

CONCLUSION

> *Against the all-too common academic representation of girls as 'victims' of gender subordination, what might these girls tell us about navigating the transition from girlhood to womanhood? About the possibilities for transforming adolescent femininity?*
>
> DH Currie et al, 'The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth': Girls' Agency, Subjectivity and Empowerment

At the outset of this study, I armed myself with a vague, yet usefully open-ended question: What is it about Lolita that makes writers want to tell her story? In Chapter One, it emerged that Lolita constitutes a textual site where art and morality come face to face, leading to a polarised response to the novel. Readers who condemned the novel were reacting against the representation of Lolita, since the Romantic discourse, which shapes western norms of femininity, constructs the girl-child as innocent, passive and asexual. The figure of the girl-child constitutes a symbol of US nationhood, and thus Lolita, who seems to be characterised as a seductress, was disavowed as being representative of normative girlhood. The result is that Lolita has come to be characterised in the popular imagination as the quintessential child seductress, rather than as a sexually abused child.

It is this distortion of the Lolita-character that has led to the publication of the three feminist counter narratives discussed in this thesis. As a result of the vilification of Lolita, critics have in the past paid very little attention to her representation in Nabokov's text. However, the rise of girlhood studies has seen a renewed interest in the girl-child's representation and in critics' past neglect thereof. In Chapter Two I argued that feminist critics see Lolita's treatment by some critics as reminiscent of stories of rape in which the victim is often blamed, or the rape completely elided. Furthermore, the sexualisation of Lolita resonates with the objectification of young girls in the media that has raised wide-spread concern in feminist circles. These feminists grapple with the problematic nature of girlhood subjectivity; the danger is that, in trying to protect girls from objectification, their sexuality is elided, so that there is a return to romantic ideals. On the other hand, in allowing the sexualisation of girls in the media, we may be grooming them for paedophiles. Consequently, this debate raises questions about the relationship between the representational and the 'real'. Since this is a theme that is also central to *Lolita*, it is evident that *Lolita* and the derivative novels slot into a larger narrative on girls' subjectivity. Within this larger narrative, questions are also emerging about feminism's ability to address the problems associated with the representation of girls.

The girl-child's centrality to the debate about sexualisation can be ascribed to the proliferation of sexualised images of girls in the media and consequent fears that girls will be objectified. *Lolita* can be seen as a reaction against such hegemonic constructions of human identity and is underpinned by the belief that the representational practices of advancing technological society reflect normative rather than 'real' identities. The work of critical thinkers such as Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno is useful in contributing to an understanding of the dynamics of representation and of how oppressive homogeneity comes into existence and attains mastery in advancing technological society.

Since the "Frankfurt school theorizes the culture industry politically" (Agger 4) and feminism "politicizes the household and sexuality" (Agger 4), a merging of feminist theory and critical theory could contribute to the restructuring of the grand narrative of girlhood, for which there is evidently a great need. Critics from both fields call for new ways of resistance to oppression. I concluded Chapter Two with the contention that feminist revisionist novels such as *Lo's Diary*, *Molly* and *Roger Fishbite* signal the emergence of a new mode of resistance. I agreed with Plummer, who theorises the subversive potential of fiction; Plummer points out that "stories of deconstruction" have started to emerge to counter the hegemony of past narratives, stories that are full of indeterminacies, possibilities and choices.

Vickers' reference to these derivative novels as 'white ink' revisions calls to mind the work of Hélène Cixous, who calls for female writers to reinvigorate the canon by writing in 'white ink'. The aim is to empower women. However, to my mind, it is particularly in their endeavour to give a voice to a girl-child that these novels contribute to the critical effort; they empower *children*, and it is in this sense that they represent a *new* form of resistance. Through the creation of girl-child characters who think for themselves and move autonomously through the world, the Romantic ideal of passivity and innocence is overwritten. As such, the range of conceivable subjectivities available to girl-children is broadened. This is especially true because these novels, unlike children's stories, do not shy away from the topic of sex, but recognise that children talk and think about, and experiment with, sex. Nonetheless, this new form of resistance comes with its own pitfalls, since uncertainty exists about whose voice is really being heard: that of children, or that of feminists?

The idea that the derivative novels empower the Lolita-character prompted me to examine the representation of Lolita in *Lolita* and the derivative novels. First, in Chapter Three, I created a better vantage point from which to view the character by establishing the reigning zeitgeist at *Lolita*'s time of publication. It emerged that perceptions of gender were in flux during the postwar period, so that there was a need to reconsolidate the role of the woman as being in the home as the centre of the nuclear family. Consequently, there was a new emphasis on the Romantic ideal of girlhood, so that girls were again proactively constructed as passive, innocent and asexual in the media and therefore by society. *Lolita* can thus be seen as a critique of Romantic childrearing practices. Inherent in this critique is the idea that 'reality' is constructed and a critical understanding of the dangers inherent in Romantic constructions of girlhood. It illustrates how representation can lead to advanced levels of conformity that expose the girl-child to objectification and, consequently, sexual abuse.

I started Chapter Four with the question of how we can get to a 'truer' Lolita than those that have been constructed in criticism and the popular mind. In answer to this question, I suggested that, to be able to do this, we must take a closer look at how 'reality' is constructed both inside and outside the text *Lolita.* To that end, the Chapter Four laid bare Humbert's self-reifying thought process, which leads him to project the ideal onto the real. This was followed by an exploration of how this projection can constitute the transformation of the 'real' into an object. Subsequently, the destructive power of conformity was discussed and I explored how categorisation, external appearance, naming and the myth of authority function in the oppression that is caused by conformity. Lastly, the influence of consumerism in advancing conformity was discussed. This chapter laid the ground work for the discussion in Chapter Five.

In Chapter Five, I illustrated that Lolita is neither a passive victim nor a depraved seductress, as she has been characterised in the past: she is an autonomous girl who facilitates her own escape from Humbert by any means available. Drawing on Sielke's work, I argued that the lack of access the reader is given into Lolita's mind in the text aims to elicit questions about her autonomy and agency. Sielke argues that silence can generate rhetoric and that texts signify as much by what they omit and elide as by what they include and emphasise. I argued that in *Lolita*, the girl-child exercises her autonomy through what looks like silence and passivity. Generally, when Lolita does speak or act, she simply performs normative American female adolescence, prescribed by the consumer culture of the postwar period. When this is taken into consideration, together with the ways in which Lolita physically and psychologically resists Humbert , an autonomous girl-child emerges. Lolita inhabits the normative identity of US girlhood to hide her inner self from Humbert and to create the impression of helplessness in order not to arouse Humbert's suspicions, thereby paving the way for her escape.

This raised the question of what the derivative novels contribute, so I turned my attention to them next. Chapter Six showed that, of the first two derivative novels, *Lo's Diary* is the most powerful in its evocation of a multi-dimensional girl-child who struggles to manage the balance between innocence and experience. Lo is an autonomous character with an idiosyncratic sexuality and a strong sense of her own power. *Molly* provides an interesting perspective on the challenges facing girls in the course of their sexual development. However, the girl-child is practically blamed for the sexual abuse she undergoes, and Jones's narrator is too solipsistic in her own right.

In Chapter Seven I argued that *Roger Fishbite* is without question the strongest novel of the three derivatives. Maintaining a similar plot to *Lolita*, but casting new characters in a late 90s milieu, Prager makes ample use of the dialogue with *Lolita* to draw attention to the difficulties inherent in being a Romantic child in a sex-saturated, capitalist society. Like *Lolita,* the novel comments on a society whose thoughts are prescribed by the media. However, it does not depict Lucky as a passive receptacle of popular wisdom; rather, she is portrayed as one trying to build a puzzle without having all the pieces, but who is always searching for them in order to try to see the bigger picture.

This image of girlhood is the one that, to me, rings 'true'. It testifies to the girl-child's difficult position in society; she is always already getting older, becoming something *other* than a child, and yet Romantic childrearing practices treat her as being simply a child, innocent, passive, and asexual. Any evidence that she is contrary to this, earns her the designation ‘corrupt’. The scope for a liveable life under these circumstances is very small, as *Lolita* and the derivative novels testify. Ultimately, it is my contention that what prompts authors to retell *Lolita*’s story is the discrepancy between the ideal of girlhood and the realities of girlhood in Western society. The derivative novels testify to the fact that there is a need to position girl-children somewhere outside the traditional dichotomy of innocent-or-corrupt. *Lolita* provides writers and critics with a valuable starting point for such a restructuring of the grand narrative on girlhood, especially because the novel presents the reader with a realistic testament to the disastrous consequences of idealising girls as being sexually innocent while they are learning to be brazen from representations of femininity on the silver screen and in other media.

POSTSCRIPT

Ask the Worms

Under the gray star
of morning they dig her up,
with reverence only
for the job at hand, and none
for her, poor dolly,
who, after all these years,
still coyly haunts
the wasted frame
they now crack open
to gawk and prod at
all her secret places.
They bring out the tape measure,
record in inches her exact dimensions;
compute through scientific formulae
her sex, age, and cause of death.

No one thinks to open up her skull
to hunt for worms that eat away at human matter
to ask them what was on her mind.

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