

Vladimir Nabokov and Humbert Humbert: Phosphorescent Fingertips

Fabian Fernandez

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Research Question:**Table of Contents**

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Abstract:

Lolita was Vladimir Nabokov's first American novel; a novel written while Nabokov was struggling with both linguistic and cultural challenges. As a foreigner, Nabokov had to immerse himself in American culture and rewrite America based on his own immigrant perspective.

The purpose of this extended essay is to challenge scholarly assumptions that there are no similarities between Vladimir Nabokov and Humbert Humbert, the narrator of his American novel *Lolita*. The scope of this essay encompasses two works: the novel *Lolita* and various scripted interviews with Nabokov compiled in his book *Strong Opinions*. Although Nabokov is very explicit in his interviews, I will also support his other opinions through essays written by him and excerpts from his biography *Nabokov: The American Years*.

When I first began writing this paper, I understood the implications of such a comparison. I am not arguing that Nabokov, like Humbert, is a pedophile. Instead I would argue that there are some striking similarities in their situations as immigrants and their perspectives of American culture. Although they end up approaching their situations differently, both Nabokov and Humbert initially view America through a tainted European lens, detest philistinism, and despite these challenges continue to unwaveringly show their faithfulness to both Lolita and her native country. I believe that in the novel *Lolita*, Humbert is an outlet for Nabokov's immigrant experience. In crafting this masterpiece, Nabokov left his phosphorescent fingertips on the work of his own creation, only to be illuminated by the light of careful observation and analysis.

Introduction

The writer and lepidopterist Vladimir Nabokov first immigrated to America in 1945, on the eve of World War II, fleeing from his Russian Diaspora in Berlin to protect his Jewish wife from the violent pogroms in Germany. In America he found himself estranged from his European culture and native tongue, forced to write and teach in a language not his own. In an interview Nabokov laments that: "...I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English" (15). The young Nabokov was adept in Russian, French, English, and German, yet he had difficulty adapting his writing into English. As a young European scholar, he also struggled adapting to American life.

In his American novels Nabokov had to find a way of depicting his interpretation the U.S. into a fictional landscape of his own creation; one could argue that itself is a stylization of the American culture and its mannerisms as perceived by Nabokov. Nabokov himself confesses: "Reality is a very subjective affair" (10). As Nabokov once admitted in an interview, "I had to invent America and *Lolita* (26). In *Humbert*, I believe that Vladimir Nabokov finds an outlet for expressing his first impressions and gradual appreciation of America.

Many literary critics including Nabokov himself have claimed, "there is nothing autobiographical in *Lolita*," since suggesting so would equate Nabokov to his pedophilic protagonist. It is ridiculous to claim that Nabokov was a pedophile, but is it so ridiculous to deny any semblance between H.H. and his author? I believe that the connection between Nabokov and H.H. is not direct, but one of subtle influences in which the writer, while molding his characters leaves many of his perceptions of American culture like

fingerprints on his the works of his creation. When placed under a certain light, these fingertips glow phosphorescent, an indication of the authors influences. Drawing upon the novel _____ and comparing it with interviews from Nabokov's _____ (accompanied by other essays and some biographical information from _____

_____), I would like to highlight the similarities between H.H. and his author regarding their foreign views on 1950s American culture, particularly concerning: their tainted European lens, detestation of poshlust, and perceptions of Lolita/America.

America through the European Lens

Nabokov:

In Nabokov and Humbert's European lens, America is a bitter disappointment that can never truly fulfill their European ideals for the simple fact that America and Europe are two different places with closely related yet independent cultures and geographical landscapes.

When first arriving in America, Nabokov worked both as a University professor and author. His teachings centered primarily on the European classics: Joyce's _____, Kafka's _____, and Proust's _____. In his early years, Nabokov, relied strongly his European background, educating young American students in the literature and culture of the Old World. This reverence for the great European authors can be firmly juxtaposed with Nabokov's strong detestation for most American authors. When asked about American writers, Nabokov claims that most write "the sexy, phony type of best seller, the violent, vulgar novel, ... the popular mixture of pornography and idealistic humbuggery that makes me vomit" and are "absolutely

banned from my bedside.” (58) In interviews he repeatedly looks down upon American expatriates like Eliot as “not quite first rate” and Pound as “definitely second-rate.” (43) In an interview Nabokov allegedly laughed at Hemingway, an acclaimed author of his time, calling him a “writer for boys” (42). This literary bias extends not only to his taste of books, but also in his writing. Even , with a prominent setting in America, is saturated with allusions to European works of literature like the colorful rainbow in (404) and the magical world of Carroll’s (377). There are a few allusions to American writers like Poe, but the dark poet is probably accepted because of Nabokov exposure to his writing at an early age (42). Although Nabokov later developed an appreciation for American authors like Salinger and Updike (57), his initial reactions towards American literature were not positive, especially when comparing it to the great European literary tradition. Just like everyone else, Nabokov’s perceptions of the world and literary culture are defined by his past and cultural heritage.

Nabokov’s tendency to interpret America through his European lens is not only reserved to American literature, but also focuses on the American landscape as he travels across the country in search of butterflies. On his first road-trip to the West Coast, Brian Boyd, the definitive Nabokov historian writes that “as he [Nabokov] crossed the Mississippi, Nabokov recalled not Mark Twain but Chateaubriand’s verdant America” (Boyd 28). On his second trip to the West Coast Nabokov writes in his journal: “June 30: A grim El Greco horizon... somewhere in Kansas.” (Boyd 201) Both quotations show how Nabokov as an immigrant interprets America through his own European heritage. Nabokov later came to appreciate America, yet his earlier years were fraught with

disappointment from these cultural comparisons, which could not and would never be realized in America. Although he may not patronizingly intend to interpret America through his European heritage, he does so in the narrative of his pedophilic protagonist Humbert Humbert.

Humbert:

After leaving the cobblestone streets of his native Europe, Humbert arrives in America proficient in both English and French. As a scholar in New York, H.H. attempts to write a compendium of French poetry with translations and interpretations for young Americans students (34). Throughout the book, particularly in his fantasies and romantic musings, H.H. infuses his writings with French words and phrases. As a European scholar in America, we can see that Humbert, like Nabokov, spends his first few years trying to take his literary heritage and force it upon young American students. Throughout the book H.H. shuns American publications as glossy magazines and advertisements in stark comparison to the decadent literary tradition of Europe.

H.H.'s cultural comparisons are not only reserved to European literature, but also extend to the American landscape as he travels to the West Coast with Lolita. Traveling across the United States, H.H. is constantly assuaged by disappointing comparisons between the American and European landscape. Driving across the Northeast he notices, (147).

He goes on to describe the Southeast mountains as

(158). Later on, while visiting the Atlantic coast he whines –

(169). In Humbert’s idealized Europe, the youths consummate pleasure in the sunlit woods,

(Lo 170). These landscape comparisons demonstrate greater evidence of Humbert’s frustration. H.H. is the perfect outlet for Nabokov’s initial perceptions of America; their impulses to compare their European heritage with America are strikingly similar.

Poshlust and Consumer Culture

Nabokov:

In various interviews and essays Nabokov shares his strong detestation of fake culture and commercialism. He is, in fact, so disgusted by this phenomenon that he coins the term “Poshlust.” Nabokov explicitly describes Poshlust as: “... not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive” (“Philistinism” 313). According to Nabokov, uncivilized brutality, honest vulgarity, and simplemindedness are not Poshlust; they must have the “verneer of civilization” to be considered such (“Philistinism” 313). People that practice or dabble in Poshlust are called “Philistines.” Citing examples of Poshlust in an interview Nabokov rambles:

“I loath such things as jazz, the white-hosed moron torturing a black bull, rayed with red, abstractist bric-a-brac, primitivist folk masks, **progressive schools**, music in supermarkets, swimming in pools, brutes, bores, class-conscious

philistines, Freud, Marx, fake thinkers, puffed-up poets, frauds, and sharks.”

(18)

Although Nabokov argues that “Philistinism is international” and “found in all classes” (“Philistinism” 310) he recognizes the influences of Poshlust everywhere in popular American culture and writes about them in *Lolita’s America*.

Humbert:

Humbert Humbert similarly loathes philistinism and poshlust, recognizing it everywhere around Nabokov’s fictional America. Some of the most common examples of American poshlust are the advertisements H.H. notices along his travels. He talks of “...American ads where schoolchildren are pictured in a subtle ratio of races, with one... chocolate-colored round-eyed little lad, almost in the very middle of the front row”

(82). Another advertisement entitled depicts “... a dark-haired young husband with a kind of drained look in his Irish eyes ... modeling a robe by So-and-So and holding a bridgelike tray by So-and-So with breakfast for two” (71). Both advertisements are forced, blatantly disguising the realities of racism and sexism through false-cleverness, false civilization, and false heros. These prime examples of Poshlust pervade 1950s American culture, from the Haze household to the shady motels H.H. spends nights in across the country. Even in the northern snows of Antarctica, H.H. cannot escape American Poshlust surrounded by, “heaps of supplies – the Reader’s Digest, an ice cream mixer, chemical toilets, [and] paper caps for Christmas” (35) – all false attempts to recreate civilization in the frozen tundra. These

reflections of American poshlust permeate Nabokov's America whether they are in New York, the Haze household, or even the frigid cold of Antarctica.

Aside from the very physical manifestations of poshlust, there are also many philistines in Nabokov's . Lolita's mother, Charlotte Haze, is an excellent example because she pretends to be cultured, speaking in broken French and busying herself about the house, when in fact she is devoid of any aesthetic beauty or intellect. H.H. describes her as a woman whose polished words reflect everything but her soul. Upon first meeting her he illustrates her as:

“... utterly indifferent at heart to the dozen or so possible subjects of a parlor conversation, but very particular about the rules of such conversations through the sunny cellophane of which not very appetizing frustrations can be readily distinguished” (39).

Her false appearances of beauty, intelligence, importance, and civility demonstrate that, in the eyes of Nabokov and Humbert, she is an American philistine. Against his European illusions and fantasies, Lolita is also the inheritor of this philistinism and develops a passion for what H.H. considers poshlust through her upbringing and education.

In *Strong Opinions* Nabokov mentions his hatred for Progressive schools (18), a theme that arises later in the novel as Lolita grows older. In an attempt to try and live a normal life, Humbert enrolls Lolita in Beardsley School, an all girls-school, where intellect and artistry are pushed aside to make room for the cultivation of

The headmistress of Beardsley firmly advocates that this takes time away from the essential life skills and attitudes that young girls need in managing their own life – . These skills are

broken down into the four main pillars of Beardsley School: Dramatics, Dance, Debating, and Dating. Beardsley school is a strong example of Poshlust – the falsely important and falsely intelligent painted with a veneer of high society. Both Nabokov and his author share this strong loathing for philistinism and poshlust, demonstrating how Nabokov has once again left his phosphorescent fingertips on the works of his creation.

Lolita and America: Cultural Exchanges

Humbert:

There is this strange duality in Humbert's perception of Lolita as both the manifestation of his European aesthetic ideal and the inheritor of American poshlust. Through the lens of Humbert's European heritage, Lolita is the divine nymphet of his childhood love (a continuation of his unconsummated love with Annabel), yet time and time again we are reminded of her American philistinism and their abusive relationship. Lolita's mixture of discordant qualities (as both aesthetic ideal and inheritor of poshlust) serve as abrasive shocks to H.H.'s émigré sensibilities, forcing him to willfully delude himself and excuse those American traits which he finds so utterly revolting and incompatible with his European ideal. To him she is a corrupted shadow of his European Annabel, intoxicatingly beautiful yet flawed. Humbert simply cannot appreciate Lolita for what she is until she has disappeared completely. Even then he struggles with guilt and a burning desire to continue idealizing her.

Through his European lens, H.H. interprets Lolita in the light of his childhood past. In the beginning of the novel, before we even meet Lolita, we are introduced to the character Annabel, a childhood love of Humbert's who as a precursor to Lolita impacts

Humbert's subsequent impressions of her and the world around him. In the beginning of the novel H.H. writes that:

When Humbert first catches sight of Lolita he immediately associates her with his childhood love from the French Riviera: *my*

Later Humbert even admits that he "...

(41) Unfortunately, it seems that Humbert is only happy with her when Lolita conforms to the role of the child-like nymphet, either gracefully on the tennis court or in bed. Only then is she paid the highest complement, that of being European. When looking fondly on her he notices in her face and demeanor, "the blurry pinkness of adolescent maid servants in the Old Country." (*Lolita* 46) Even playing tennis with Lolita, Humbert recalls with ecstasy serving "ball after ball to gay innocent, elegant Annabel" (*Lolita* 164). All these allusions refer fondly to his European past and demonstrate how Humbert's European Lens shrouds the present with the past, preferring to project his ideal recollections of Europe rather than accept anything foreign to this aesthetic ideal. The most disturbing of these 'foreign traits' is Lolita's love for poshlust, which she expresses throughout the novel.

As a child brought up around advertisements and magazines, Lolita is also the inheritor of American poshlust. After accepting custody of Lolita, H.H. travels around U.S. becoming familiar with both the American landscape and Lolita's cultural inheritance. In reality Humbert considers her a spoiled brat embodying all the shallow qualities of American consumerism:

"Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl. Sweet hot jazz, square dancing, gooey fudge sundaes, musicals, movie magazines and so forth ...

She believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land*... She it was to whom the ads were dedicated... “ (148)

Her refusal to read

further demonstrates her entrenchment in American poshlust. As an American girl raised in the tradition of consumer culture, she is more inclined to the Dramatics, Dancing, Debating, and Dating of Beardsley school than to Humbert’s compendium of French poetry. Indeed one of her greatest passions is the theatre wherein she performs a play directed by Humbert’s antagonist Quilty. Following her Hollywood dreams of becoming a ‘movie-star’, she eventually runs away from H.H. leaving him far behind.

After Lolita’s disappearance on the 4th of July, Humbert realizes the toll of his transcendental idealizations, both on his perception of Lolita and her upbringing. Amid the egotistical grumbling and horrible sex crimes, H.H. (the artist, the poet) has moments of heartbreaking lucidity recognizing how he has deprived Lolita of her innocent childhood. When Lolita escapes, Humbert becomes melancholy listening to the sounds of children playing in the park. Recognizing that he has deprived Lolita of her childhood, Humbert writes, “... and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from the concord [of children playing in the park].” (Lolita 310) By later describing his reprehensible actions as “a sinuous trail of slime” H.H. is criticizing what he has done to Lolita driving through the “lovely, trustful, dreamy and enormous country” of America. (Lolita 177-178) Once Lolita is gone, H.H. gradually realizes his abuse and longs for her

once more. Amid Humbert's guilt and idolatry, Lolita breaks free from the shadow cast by Annabel, her European foil. As Humbert writes in his prologue: "A little later, of course, she, this nouvelle, this Lolita, my Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype." (41, 42) In retrospect, I believe it is only the aesthetic idealization of Lolita that eclipsed Annabel's, leaving Humbert characteristically the same man as before. When Lolita left Humbert, nothing was left to remind him of her imperfections and predilections to poshlust, making it that much easier to idolize her amid the guilt. When she leaves Humbert, Lolita 'eclipses her prototype' and wins his unwavering faithfulness.

Nabokov:

For the purposes of this paper, one may question who or what is Nabokov's Lolita? Some critics have uncovered "... telltale affinities between Humbert's boyhood romance on the Riviera and [Nabokov's] own recollections about a little Colette" with whom he used to "build damp sand castles in the Biarritz" when he was ten (24). Despite these tempting similarities, Nabokov justly claims that as a child of ten he had no sexual interest in Collete; insinuating that their relationship could not have sparked the novel .

Drawing upon three aspects I've used to describe Humbert's relationship with Lolita (European lenses, poshlust, and faithfulness against all odds) I would argue that Nabokov's Lolita lies in his perceptions of America as a country. Despite already discussing Nabokov's European lens and his opinions of Poshlust in America, I will briefly touch on both subjects highlighting the divergent approaches of both characters

before proceeding to describe Nabokov unwavering faithfulness to his adopted homeland, an appreciation that became only more fervent after leaving the United States.

Nabokov immigrated to America fluent in English, but his perceptions of America were somewhat tainted by the fantasies of his European boyhood. When Nabokov was a child, he lived in a Russian manor with his parents cultivating his passion for literature and Lepidoptera in a nearby bog, which his parents called ‘America’ because of its “mystery and remoteness” (Boyer 4) This childhood sense of wonder is reflected in the words of H.H. who remembers “... as a child in Europe gloating over a map of North America that had “Appalachian Mountains” boldly running from Alabama up to New Brunswick...” (211) When Nabokov first arrived in America he taught University students European literature and described the American landscape through his European heritage. Drawing parallels between H.H.’s *Lolita* and Nabokov’s *America* I would argue that like *Lolita*’s Annabel, America also had a historical predecessor in European culture and heritage. Yet, unlike H.H., I believe that Nabokov eventually recognizes the disappointment that such impossible comparisons could lead to. As Nabokov wisely acknowledged:

“The main reason, [I am restless] the background reason, is, I suppose that nothing short of a replica of my childhood surroundings would have satisfied me. I would never manage to match my memories correctly... **so why trouble with hopeless approximations?**” (Opinions 27)

This philosophy is the ideological difference between Nabokov and Humbert – while H.H. struggles to recreate his European ideal, Nabokov accepts the differences between cultures realizing that one can never recreate the past. Although both men eventually

recognize their tainted lens, Nabokov is able to move on, while Humbert sinks into further idealizations, commits homicide, and is later incarcerated.

Nabokov and H.H. also share a strong detestation for posh lust and philistinism. In the 1950s, America thrived as the inheritor posh lust with stifling academia, sensational vulgarity in Hollywood, cooking with Betty Crocker, and innovations in the advertisement/entertainment industry. Nabokov may have been vocal in expressing his loathing of posh lust, but he never made any biting criticisms of American culture. As Nabokov once wisely observed: "Rightly or wrongly, I am not one of those perfectionists who by dint of hypercriticizing America find themselves wallowing in the same muddy camp with indigenous rascals and envious foreign observers" (*Opinions* 131) Nabokov may have still viewed America disappointedly through a European lens and even become frustrated with American posh lust, but his unwavering love for his adopted homeland remained despite these defects. Much like H.H.'s adoration for *Lolita*, Nabokov admits that, "my admiration for this adopted country of mine can easily survive the jolts and flaws..." (*Opinions* 131) These jolts and flaws may be the growing 'posh lust' or disappointing cultural comparisons. Although there were many things in American society that displeased Nabokov, he boldly recognized them. Instead of ignoring these flaws, he accepted them as part the cultural experience and grew to enjoy his time in America. This deliberate decision sets Nabokov apart from H.H. who bitterly criticized the United States and willfully deluded himself to ignore these same traits in *Lolita*. Once pensive and awkward, Nabokov soon grew accustomed to American life, particularly after the publication and widespread acclaim of *Lolita*.

After leaving America to live in Monteux, Switzerland Nabokov conducted multiple interviews fondly referring to his adopted homeland. In various interviews Nabokov describes himself as “an American author...” (26) In one particularly memorable interview Nabokov proclaims: “I am as American as an April in Arizona” (98). This strong sense of American nationality, even after his departure from the U.S. parallel’s Humbert’s appreciation of Lolita after her desertion. Without the constant reminder of America’s imperfections and predilections for Poshlust, the United States eclipses all other places and wins Nabokov’s unwavering faithfulness. Musing over his experiences in America Nabokov has commented that: “I feel very nostalgic about America and as soon as I muster the necessary energy I shall return there for good.” (*Opinions* 56) Despite this, Nabokov never returned to America just as Humbert was never again united with his Lolita.

Nabokov and H.H. may have had many of the same opinions, but they treated their situations differently. H.H. refused to let go of his European lens and instead ignored Lolita’s faults, while Nabokov gradually let down his European lens and accepted America for all its faults. Despite these differences both gentlemen shared a fervent love for the object of their adoration particularly when they were separated from it and the constant reminder of its flaws.

Conclusion:

In spite of the many differences between Nabokov and H.H., I would argue that they are similar in their perceptions of American culture particularly with regards to their initial European lenses, detestation of poshlust, and unwavering loyalty to an idea

whether it be the aesthetic idealization Lolita or the feeling of home in America. Both America and Lolita are initially viewed through a tainted European lens. Nabokov overcomes this lens; Humbert does not. Both America and Lolita embody the same philistinism abhorred by both Nabokov and Humbert. Nabokov accepts these imperfections; Humbert does not. Despite these divergent approaches, both America and Lolita remain close to each man's hearts. While Nabokov's relationship with America is not completely analogous to Humbert's relationship with Lolita, there are striking resemblances. Many critics, including Nabokov himself argue that there are no similarities between H.H. and his author. This is simply cannot be true. Throughout the novel, there are various reflections of Nabokov's immigrant past that tie both characters together. Nabokov may have tried to distance himself from his protagonist, but he could never have wrought such an artistic masterpiece without leaving his phosphorescent fingertips behind.

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