

America's *Poshlust* Vacuum

The Young-Girl, Émigré, and Artist in Nabokov's *Lolita*

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In his biography of Nikolai Gogol, Vladimir Nabokov identifies the Russian term *poshlust*, a word that defies perfect English translation but which he describes as “[n]ot only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive.”¹ Nabokov describes advertising as an epitome of the false attractiveness of *poshlust*, wary of the cognitive dissonance required on the part of both the buyer and the seller of the “sham” in which they are taking part. Nabokov writes: “The rich *poshlust* emanating from advertisements of this kind is due not to their exaggerating (or inventing) the glory of this or that serviceable article but to suggesting that the acme of human happiness is purchasable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser.”² Of course, we know this ennobling to be patently untrue, yet we are still susceptible to advertising’s lure. Nabokov’s most famous—and infamous—novel, *Lolita*, published in 1955, encompasses his ideas of a particularly American mid-century *poshlust*. The height of Cold War-era expansion of suburban, middle class “values” provides the perfect landscape for Nabokov’s explorations in *Lolita*. Nabokov’s exploration of—and implication in—the roles of

¹ Vladimiar Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions Books, 1959), 70.

² *Ibid.*, 67.

émigré, artist, and “Young-Girl” form a thorough understanding of Nabokov’s American *poshlust*.

The character Lolita is both the perfect consumer *and* the perfect product of America’s “*poshlust*-painted vacuum.”³ The backdrop of Humbert’s predatory behavior, particularly in the novel’s second part under the guise of a classic American road trip supports Nabokov’s exploration of American commodity fetishism in all its capitalist, *poshlust* glory. A passage from the first chapter of Part Two, in which Humbert recounts his year-long road trip with Lolita across America, encompasses Nabokov’s understanding of what he sees as American *poshlust*, which permeates all aspects of our capitalist culture:

If a roadside sign said VISIT OUR GIFT SHOP—we *had* to visit it, *had* to buy its Indian curios, dolls, copper jewelry, cactus candy. The words ‘novelties and souvenirs’ simply entranced her by their trochaic lilt. If some café sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks, she was automatically stirred, although all drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster. And she attempted—unsuccessfully—to patronize only those restaurants where the holy spirit of Huncan Dines had descended upon the cute paper napkins and cottage-cheese-crested salads.⁴

Humbert’s role as émigré, and, therefore, supposed “outside observer” seemingly allows him to understand with ironic detachment the *poshlust* in a way that is distinct from those living inside of it. For example, Humbert’s play-on-words teasing of the almost religious fervor with which Lolita (the ideal consumer who is “stirred” at the idea of an ice cold drink, as if she herself *is one*) worships at the altar of “Huncan Dines” insinuates that Humbert thinks of himself as removed from the *poshlust* culture. It is not that Humbert doesn’t enjoy certain aspects of the trip himself, but rather that he takes pride in his ability to recognize the coarseness

³ Ibid., 72.

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage International, 1997), 148.

from the outside. In the above passage, Humbert notes that he and Lolita *had* to visit the gift shops and *had* to purchase all the curios—the whole system of which they are a part relies on it. Humbert seems to be aware of the system while believing himself separate from it. It's Lolita who *needs* these things, not him.

In 1999, the anonymous French theorists who published under the name Tiquun wrote about their Theory of the Young-Girl. In the introduction to the text, they describe the Young-Girl figure as a way for capitalism to “coincide through the social.”⁵ Tiquun theorizes that both the period of adolescence and the concept of woman coincide in the Young-Girl figure to provide a perfect consumer of the society that she herself has made:

Youth and Femininity, hypostatized, abstract, and recoded into Youthitude and Femitude, are then elevated to the rank of ideal regulators of Empire-Citizen integration. And the figure of the Young-Girl thus realizes an immediate, spontaneous, and perfectly desirable unity between those two variables.⁶

Therefore, through *Lolita* the text, we see the ways in which Nabokov uses the character Lolita to expose the consumption of youth *and* the sexualization of femininity to create a precise example of how America's *poshlost* came to be.

Along with burgeoning Cold War-era ideologies of nationalism and consumerism came the rise of the adolescent. “Adolescence,” Tiquun writes, “is a category that was created only recently to the demands of mass consumption.”⁷ The ideal example of how the Young-Girl figure both creates and perpetuates herself, Lolita's existence on the cusp of maturity puts her in the position of being manipulated systemically while also clearly gaining a kind of pleasure from the kitschy, materialist pop-culture of which Humbert is judgmental and growing annoyed. It is through these social permeations that the Young-Girl figure is a successful tool in the proliferation of capitalist ideology. The Young-Girl diffuses capital into the social: a “molecular” diffusion that finds success precisely because it allows colonization “beyond strictly the sphere

⁵ Tiquun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2012), iv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, iii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

of production.”⁸ The ways in which Nabokov uses *Lolita* to represent *poshlost* of capitalist ideologies as through its dissemination into the social is precisely what Tiquun posits. Lolita the character represents both the “obviously trashy” and the “falsely beautiful” that exist in Nabokov’s definition; the falsity of the beauty stems from the fact that it was created towards a singular capitalist, fetishistic end.

The mythology of midcentury America lent itself to the motif of Eden, as Paul Giles notes in his essay “Virtual Eden: ‘Lolita,’ Pornography, and the Perversions of American Studies.” Giles describes America as a nationalist paradise on the verge of corruption; its citizens brimming with the hope of manifest destiny; of collecting, owning, and conquering as a way to assert one’s power and freedom. Giles writes: “In both its conception and execution, *Lolita* is a text shaped by the nationalistic contours of Cold War America.”⁹ Nabokov explores this Edenic myth through Humbert, who claims an almost manifest-destiny control over Lolita, physically and emotionally, which is shown through the literal journey Humbert takes with the young “nymphet.” Giles references and questions the problematic nature of Henry Nash Smith’s phrase “virgin land,” referring to

another metaphorical equation that had become a commonplace of American Studies during the ‘myth and symbol’ era: in mastering his female victim, Humbert, like Smith’s Western pioneers, believes he is capturing the nubile essence of the American continent.¹⁰

Therefore, when readers accompany Humbert and Lolita on their ride across America, we see how Nabokov inserts his commentary on *poshlost* into this narrative. Again, Giles writes: “Nabokov’s text positions itself self-consciously so as to reflect not only his new nation [...] but also the mythologies of that nation, the ways in which ‘America’ itself was being framed and reduplicated within this Cold War era.”¹¹ Nabokov’s writing acts as

⁸ Ibid., iii.

⁹ Paul Giles, “Virtual Eden: ‘Lolita,’ Pornography, and the Perversions of American Studies,” in *Journal of American Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 42.

¹⁰ Ibid., 46.

¹¹ Ibid., 42.

a way for him to assert “objective” judgment on the culture, but in doing so ultimately inserts him *within* the myth of America and the creation of the Cold War ideologies about which Giles writes. One can’t exactly boast an outsider’s understanding of *poshlust* while participating in this kind of manifest destiny. Morally and aesthetically, Nabokov is implicated within the aspects of American culture he abhors, which begs the readers to question the difference between awareness and separation. Even more telling, *Lolita* the novel is one of the first novels that Nabokov wrote in English rather than Russian.

Combining the “natural” predilection of American manifest destiny and Humbert’s objectively terrible conquering of Lolita allows readers to confront the associations between capitalism and fetishism. This association leads us to think about the ways in which the body is made to be an attainable object of ownership under systemic capitalist patriarchy. In *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Jean Baudrillard writes:

In the consumer package, there is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than any other—and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact that that encapsulates them all. That object is the BODY.¹²

The body, one’s personhood, is the ultimate “get” for those profiting off the West’s consumerism. Baudrillard continues:

[T]he obsession with youth, elegance, virility/femininity, treatments and regimes, and the sacrificial practices attaching to it all bear witness to the fact that the body has today become an *object of salvation*. It has literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul.¹³

Here, we again see what Giles referred to as the mythology of our nation as an almost Eden-like paradise. What Baudrillard describes as the growing obsession with the body, we can see in Humbert’s obsession with Lolita. Note that Baudrillard explicitly connects “virility/femininity”—not only does the body need to be sacrificially objectified, but the sacrificed (i.e., feminine) body also

¹² Jean Baudrillard. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 130.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 130.

needs to claim to *want it*, to be virile and *ready for it*. The falsity of a capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal, sexual domination that can also leave room for the dominated's (Lolita's) supposed choice in the matter requires the same cognitive dissonance that Nabokov points out in his explanation of *poshlust* advertising. On a smaller scale, Humbert represents the consumer culture he claims separation from; Lolita is the nation to which he has laid claim. Nabokov, through Humbert, describes Lolita:

She wore that day a pretty print dress that I had seen on her once before, ample in the skirt, tight in the bodice, short-sleeved, pink, checkered with darker pink, and, to complete the color scheme, she had painted her lips and was holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple. She was not shod, however, for church. And her white Sunday purse lay discarded near the phonograph.¹⁴

This passage reiterates what Baudrillard calls “the representation of the body as capital and as fetish (or consumer object).”¹⁵ Nabokov depicts Humbert's gaze of Lolita, encompassing the banality of *poshlust* consumerism through Lolita's femininity: her “pretty print dress” and “painted lips.” Moreover, there exists in the image Baudrillard's combination of said femininity with virility; Lolita is not only wearing a dress, but one “tight in bodice,” while her virgin-white Sunday purse lays “discarded,” again connoting that Lolita is not only partly *responsible* for her situation but clearly *wants* it on some level. Here, along with the obvious image of Lolita holding the “Eden-red apple,” Humbert's gaze is cemented as one that is actually not at all at odds with the coarse *poshlust* he claims separate from his own cultural leanings as a self-proclaimed erudite European émigré. Clearly, Lolita stands in as a possessable object of salvation; the dichotomy of the Madonna *and* the Whore are tied up in Lolita's body as “general status of private property” to Humbert.¹⁶ Thus, Lolita is the embodiment of midcentury capitalism, fetishized in her role as one both bought *and* physically conquered.

Richard Borden, in his 1995 essay “Nabokov's Travesties of Childhood Nostalgia,” notes how “throughout Nabokov's works,

¹⁴ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 58

¹⁵ Baudrillard, 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

characters variously seek to recover something they lost in childhood."¹⁷ According to Borden, Nabokov pays close attention to this time in one's life because it "offers the most immediate contact with, and intuitions of, the Nabokovian 'otherworld,' that higher consciousness or level of being."¹⁸ Through Nabokov's work, we can plainly see his belief that art (here, fiction) acts as a primary way for the ideal world to make itself known in a material or phenomenal context. Borden's analysis of Nabokov's use of childhood should be thought of in the same vein; we see the association with childhood's liminality as a metaphor for the Artist's ability to mediate matter and idea. The temporal and spatial ambiguity of childhood (and further, adolescence) represent similar mediation between realms and access to higher understanding and, therefore, artistic ability. To Nabokov, the Artist's work is both noble and necessary, which is crucial to Nabokov's grasp of immortality, which he continually tries to achieve through his writing.

Quoting Nabokov's own experience of childhood from his memoir *Speak, Memory*, Borden continues:

Childhood is the time when rational consciousness and the prisonhouse of chronolinearity least shape experience, and when one experiences a sense of perfect well-being, immersed in a "radiant and mobile medium," "none other than the pure element of time," which 'mimics immortality.'¹⁹

Time exists in a multidirectional way for Nabokov; the Artist's ability to escape a perfectly spatialized timeline makes itself known in many of the author's works. Thus, the fact that Humbert is obsessed with nymphets for only the liminal time they spend on the cusp of adolescence before completely going over the cliff into maturity aligns with Nabokov's own obsession with manipulating time to achieve the mimicry of immortality about which he reminisces in *Speak, Memory*. However, although Humbert's role as writer and as émigré often mimic Nabokov's own experience,

¹⁷ Richard Borden, "Nabokov's Travesties of Childhood Nostalgia," in *Nabokov Studies: Volume 2*, eds. D. Barton Johnson and Charles Schlacks, Jr. (North Carolina: Davidson, 1995), 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

Humbert's manipulation of time goes further, taking the shape of his obsession with and rape of Lolita.

This extreme example of the artist's goal to escape what Nabokov calls "rational consciousness," told through Humbert's obsession with nymphets, hyperbolizes the lengths the Artist will go to use his talents, achieve immortality, and fulfill his purpose—all of which align with Nabokov's anxieties regarding the ability (or inability) to reconcile the ideal and the real. Again, Lolita becomes merely a tool with which to do so. From there, the Artist's goal underlines what Tiqqun observes with their Young-Girl figure: Lolita's youth and femininity are usable and then discardable once she becomes cliché; her purpose exposed, the Young-Girl becomes unusable. Although Tiqqun's Young-Girl is a symbol of our relationship to and implication in commodity fetishism through essential dissemination of capitalism, it is also a clear example of how Lolita as Young-Girl represents something subhuman—something to be separated from or used as a means for the Artist (Nabokov) to gain greater understanding and judgment of American *poshlust*. Tiqqun writes: "It's not a question of emancipating the Young-Girl, but of emancipation relative to the Young-Girl."²⁰ Nabokov's goal of uncovering Lolita's *poshlust* means a discovery and eventual discard of the Young-Girl's function—her ultimate expendability.

The final sentences of *Lolita* explore this non-consensual nature of Humbert's (and Nabokov's) artistic process:

One had to choose between [Quilty] and H.H., and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.²¹

Up until the very end, Lolita had no say in the inclusion of herself in Humbert's "refuge," even after her separation from him, and even in her death.

Because Lolita stands as the ultimate example of American *poshlust* fetishization and achievement of capitalist ubiquity,

²⁰ Tiqqun, 67.

²¹ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 336.

Humbert's proud detachment from *posh* culture is rendered null through Nabokov's self-aware prose; the reality of Lolita and Humbert's entwined "relationship" makes this so. Humbert is ultimately himself an example of the "falsely important" and "falsely clever" *posh* culture; Nabokov uses the obviousness of Lolita as the Young-Girl figure to expose Humbert's own manipulations of the system through his power as man, as detached émigré, and as Artist. For example, earlier in the novel Humbert confronts Charlotte, Lolita's mother and Humbert's then-wife, about his growing fear of emasculation resulting from his surrender of power to Charlotte. Humbert says:

I am concerned with a general trend. When you wanted me to spend my afternoons sunbathing on the Lake instead of doing my work, I gladly gave in and became a bronzed glamor boy for your sake, instead of remaining a scholar and, well, an educator. When you lead me to bridge and bourbon with the charming Farlows, I meekly follow. No, please, wait. When you decorate your home, I do not interfere with your schemes. When you decide—when you decide all kinds of matters, I may be in complete, or in partial, let us say, disagreement—but I say nothing. I ignore the particular. I cannot ignore the general. I love being bossed by you, but every game has its rules. I am not cross. I am not cross at all. Don't do that. But I am one half of this household, and have a small but distinct voice.²²

The "general trend" about which Humbert laments represents his anxiety over his situation's lack of strong patriarchal norms; a "glamor boy" is decidedly less masculine than a well-regarded, manly "scholar" and "educator," in Humbert's regard. Thus, we can see the connection between the Artist and the patriarchy which, in America, finds its strength in the manipulation of the Young-Girl figure to attain wealth and power through "necessary" domination. The Artist cannot be meek, cannot follow his wife to "bridge and bourbon."

The death of Charlotte at the end of Part One and the resulting sexual assault and physical and emotional domination of

²² *Ibid.*, 91.

her daughter represent Humbert's chance to, at last, reappropriate his lost masculinity and regain his position as patriarch. Nabokov uses Humbert's reappropriation of masculine power as a way to ironically illustrate how Humbert is not only a *part* of the *poshlost* culture from which he claims separation, but the power he yields over Lolita is *the reason* this culture exists. The Artist may have a necessary gift, but Humbert wields its power in ways no different than the "sham" of a capitalist commodity culture, not an enlightened emancipation from it. The question of whether Humbert even qualifies as an Artist figure, or whether he is merely a parody of male Artistic power, is up for discussion upon this proposal. This approach informs our reading of *Lolita's* form as a parody, or even a satire, of genres such as diary, confession, or factual criminal record.

Humbert's obsession with the ephemeral lifespan of a nymphet only reinforces his integration with the *poshlost* American fetishization of youth and girlhood as the ideal consumer-capitalist form, despite his proud supposed separation from said consumerism. Is this dramatic irony simply a key example of Nabokov letting the reader know the extent of Humbert's unreliability as a narrator? Or, further, to allow the reader to question one's own place within the *poshlost* cogs of the advertising machine (and the creation of *Lolitas*)? Again, we can interpret Nabokov's own exploration of *poshlost* as a study of both the creation of capitalist structures of power, exemplified in *Lolita* as the figure of Tiquun's Young-Girl, but also the ways in which the Artist exploits the power of the Young-Girl as a way to attain success through appropriating her ability to break away from the "prisonhouse of chronolinearity." *Lolita*, then, is about what happens at the expense of the masculine Artist's exploration.