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## **POPULAR CULTURE IN ITS POSTMODERN CONTEXT: VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *LOLITA***

### **Abstract**

The principle concern of this paper is to explore elements of popular culture in relation to postmodern literature; namely, the most important forms of intertwining 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and popular culture as its referent field. In this regard, one specific feature which this paper hopes to further address and elaborate on is the concept of postmodern identity in its consumerist and consumptionist ends, and how it relates to the novel of *Lolita* as a whole. In doing so, the paper explores characteristics of postmodernism and establishes its place and significance of essential manifestations of postmodernism in popular culture.

**Key words:** postmodernism, popular culture, consumerism, *Lolita*, Nabokov

### **1. In a Quest for *Lolita***

The novel *Lolita*, though usually interpreted as an allegory of romance in bridging the literary modern to the postmodern, is also a representation of

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the respective postmodern cultural values, norms, and society in which it is set, and when it was written. It itself is an artifact of the popular culture of the America of its time, specifically the post and Cold War 1950s, and may be seen as such throughout the novel. In this regard, as a product of its time, *Lolita* should be relegated to the period of cultural, historical, and intellectual ideas of postmodernism, emerging from the literary background of its own underlying philosophy.

While Fredric Jameson, the Marxist political theorist and leading thinker in the field of postmodern critique, does not find the novel to be a primary instance of postmodern ideals in its truest form, it does offer something even more important, an ever so unique bridging of the apparent prior modern into the postmodern, as the novel's background quality, which sheds light upon the two differing, yet emerging, schools of thought (the modern into the postmodern): "Jencks's late moderns are those who persist into Postmodernism, and the idea makes sense architecturally; a literary frame of reference, however, throws up names like Borges and Nabokov [...] who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms" (Jameson, 1991: 304).

It would seem then that if one desired to see a clear illustration of what the postmodern would be (especially in regard to the modern), one would then be apt to take Jameson's advice and read the novel *Lolita* to gain such an understanding.

## 2. The Postmodern and Popular Culture

Though originally coined by Tonybee<sup>1</sup> in the 1940s to describe a post-world-war-two era and picked up on by art theorist Charles Jencks to describe the deconstructionist based art movements of the 1970s, the term "postmodern" has become all encompassing, though elusive in meaning, and, in all actuality, self-contradictory: "The word 'postmodern' itself seems odd, paradoxically evoking what is after ('post') the contemporary ('modern'). How can something be *after* the contemporary?" (Bennett and Nicholas, 2004: 248).

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<sup>1</sup> See: Tonybee, A. J. (1974). *A Study of History*. Vol. 1: Abridgement of Volumes I-VI. Oxford University Press.

Fredric Jameson, renowned expert on the “postmodern”, also provides no clear definition *per se*, even in his culminating work *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Being so hard to delineate, the essential definition is only alluded to in a general idea and laid out through example throughout the work. Perhaps though, this is the way “postmodernism” should be defined, as supposition could herein be made that postmodernism is merely an analysis of how things are and in their moment and shape the movement thereof, as opposed to how things are from a background, top-down, all pervasive meaning (i.e., modernism); part of the essence of the postmodern is the inability of its decision to be defined and to define what it gives rise to.<sup>2</sup>

To shorten the argument of the definition of the postmodern, let it suffice to say that Jameson is of two main minds in his work, characterizing the idea of postmodernism as a whole: 1) there is no prior meaning, rather the cultural realm in itself makes meaning as it transpires<sup>3</sup> and 2) mass consumerism/consumption is a readily visible facet and outlet of the postmodern ideal, whatever it may be and in whatever form it may take, as what is made or done gives the meaning as in a stream of development. In Jameson’s own words, what is most important is that: “A postmodernist culture is also implicitly to affirm some radical structural difference between what is sometimes called consumer society and earlier moments of the capitalism from which it emerged” (1991: 54).

The postmodern is perfectly reflected and to be understood in what it produces, especially in the consumer culture which it not only reflects, but also creates, feeding off itself. Therein, according to Jameson, the essence of postmodernism is that the massive influx of commercially available goods have influenced the mere definition of postmodernism itself: “What wears the mask and makes the gestures of ‘populism’ in the various postmodernist

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<sup>2</sup> “The postmodern, that is to say, does not simply reject the possibility of making decisions. Rather, it gives new attention to the value of the undecidable. What the new critics of the middle of the twentieth century called ambiguity or paradox is now considered in terms of undecidability” (Bennett and Nicholas, 2004: 249).

<sup>3</sup> Having no set terms does not limit the power of postmodern theory, rather “this paradox of the time of the postmodern also points to the fact that, strictly speaking, the postmodern should not be thought of as a term of periodization: the postmodern challenges our thinking about time, challenges us to see the present in the past, the future in the present in a kind of no-time” (Bennett and Nicholas, 2004: 248). Therein, the associated aspects and results of postmodernism are those to be examined to gain clarity into its actual function.

apologias and manifestos is in reality a mere reflex and symptom of a [...] cultural mutation, in which what used to be stigmatized as mass or commercial culture is now received into the precincts of a new and enlarged cultural realm” (Jameson, 1991: 63). Jameson goes so far to say that postmodernism has initiated a self-perpetuating creation phenomenon, where consumption has rapidly enveloped the cultural realm as a whole, becoming the driving force behind the aesthetic ideals of postmodernism: “What has happened is that aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production generally” (1991: 3).

The idea of production and consumption as being a moving or mutating force in the creation of an epochal idea or cultural movement is not novel to Jameson. Walter Benjamin previously suggested that the mere establishment of a means of mass consumption and reproduction gave the individual more power over the object of art and its creation, influencing the nature of art itself: “For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (Benjamin, 2010: IV). Hence, divorcing art from the thereto traditional aesthetic principle, to the end purpose of reproduction for consumability, is the same envisioned by Jameson.

This new relationship between the object and the individual in postmodernism may be subsequently seen as revitalizing the idea of an object’s individual aesthetic as applied in practice and theory to the individual: “The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition [...] in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced” (2010: II). The relationship of the object with the individual in its consumption can therefore be seen as the ultimate token essence of postmodernism, being one of its fundamental pillars.

Much like postmodernism, “popular culture” also derives its own definition from its own instances. Popular culture, in its postmodern sense, would seem to be but a mere extension of consumption, i.e., the object to be consumed which Jameson or Benjamin touches upon. Fiske, a renowned theorist of popular culture is of a similar mindset in his exploration of the field in terms of the postmodern, claiming, “in general popular culture finds its most fertile soil in the fields of leisure and consumption” (Fiske, 1997: 213). If the object and its obtainment is part and parcel of the postmodern

and enjoyment in the produced object is the manifestation of the popular, then postmodernism and popular culture would seem to easily bear the same foundation to their identity: the production and consumption of the object. Therefore, the relationship between the object consumed and the consumer may also be considered essential to “popular culture”; namely the result of consumerism on the consumer in establishing postmodern culture.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, attached to the postmodern idea of consumption is popular culture's idea of consumerism, as being defined by what one owns, or that identity is found along within the pleasure of the consumption of the object: “People can turn cultural commodities to their own interests and find pleasure in using them to make their own meaning of their social identities and social relations” (2010: 56). Within postmodernism, consumerism has also become a micro culture of its own, the best definition of which is offered by Charlotte Sussman, where she sees consumerism as a set of beliefs and values, sometimes even a way of life that distances the obtaining of material assets, and the actual process of obtaining them, at the top of the list of priorities for those who believe in the concept.<sup>5</sup>

The affect of consumer identity, however, is not alone found in the object and its consumption; rather, the actual relationship in the process of the consumption of the object by the individual is of primary concern, as “between the person (who uses them) and these products (index of the ‘order’ which is imposed on him), there is a gap of varying proportions opened by the use that he makes of them” (deCerteau, 1984: 32). The object then, from its start to its end and the manner in which it is done (the relationship of consuming the object), is therefore but one end-result of the postmodern, ultimately giving rise to consumerist popular culture.

In postmodern popular culture, the consumer uses the object as fulfillment, where consumerism becomes a progressive trend and the purchasing of goods becomes the only defining quality of assigning purpose or meaning. In late capitalistic postmodernism, “everyone is a consumer. Consumption is the only way of obtaining the resources for life, whether

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Williamson, a British journalist and filmmaker concurs in this regard, postulating that “the original context of any product is that of its production. [...] Because of the product's context is, first of all, its production, what is the context of the consumer, without whom, after all, there can be no consumption?” (Williamson, 1995:229-230).

<sup>5</sup> See: Sussman, C. (2000). *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender and British Slavery, 1713–1833*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

these resources be material – functional (food, clothing, transport) or semiotic – cultural (the media, education, language)” (Fiske, 2010: 28). A postmodern member of society is then to be defined by their purchase, rather than thought or reflection. The postmodern individual in popular culture can therefore be comprehended by the relationship as to how they desire to consume, providing insight into the individual’s personality as relates to consumerism. Williamson even goes so far as to state that it defines one’s conscious: “[The] chosen meaning in most people’s lives comes much more from what they consume than what they produce. [...] All the things we buy involve decisions and the exercise of our own judgment, choice, ‘taste’” (Williamson, 1995: 230).

Accompanying this dominant aspect of consumerist self-definement is that pervasive consumerism “offer[s] a sense of control. If you pay for something you do tend to feel you control it” (1995: 230). This sense of entitlement to an object in its entirety stems from the actions of acquisition in order to acquire it and is a powerful underlying motive in consumerism. As a dominant force in postmodern popular culture, it may be also hypothesized that “ownership is at present the *only* form of control legitimized in our culture” (1995: 231). Postmodernism may therefore be essentially characterized in popular culture as the essence of owning or possession as to define individual identity. Yet, the mere possession of a thing, need not supply a final identity. With this need to control, there occurs a deficit of identity security. The nature of acquisition as to identity is purely transitory and does not endure. As Williamson suggests, ownership only offers itself alone, not a secure identity<sup>6</sup> since the compulsion to consume in order to gain an identity collapses into an endless cycle where one cannot be certain in it. Once an object is consumed, another is needed to maintain the relationship it once provided the consumer. Therein, Williamson criticizes the ideals of consumerism, stating that the acquisition, attainment, and procurement of objects only supplies consumers with an illusory sense of control, whether it be attainable or not: “The great irony is that it is precisely the *illusion* of autonomy which makes consumerism such an effective diversion from the lack of power in people’s lives” (1995: 233).

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<sup>6</sup> See: Williamson, J. (1995). *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers. p. 232.

### 3. Obtaining the Object of “Lolita”

If the consumerism inherent to the postmodern concept of popular culture compels one to form their own identity in the relationship reciprocal of the object of one's consumption, the novel *Lolita* can be consequently read as one man's desire to control a person as an object, to fulfill himself, his identity, his sense of being, his character, to the detriment of that same person.

The synopsis of *Lolita* is the following: The character of Humbert Humbert, a well-educated and read, attractive European émigré comes to a small town to focus on his “writing”. Seeking lodging, he eventually comes across an empty room offered by one Charlotte Haze, who falls in love with him. However, he is fascinated only by her daughter, Dolores, who is merely twelve, and whom he assigns the sobriquet *Lolita*. To stay close to Dolores and take advantage of her young attributes, which he so deeply desires, he hatches a plan to marry Charlotte, who, luckily for Humbert, shortly after dies when being hit by a car. From this moment, Humbert starts acting partially as a father, as well as a lover, towards Lolita. After a road trip in which he establishes a more predatory relationship with his “Lolita”, they move to another town, to a small college where he teaches French literature. Seeing that she is growing distant, and afraid to lose her, he tries another road trip a year later, where she escapes him. In the end, after being contacted by Lolita, he finds out that she had run away with another, older man, whom he eventually murders.

In 1940, Nabokov and his family immigrated to the United States where he earned his living teaching literature. He wrote *Lolita* while travelling on butterfly-collection trips that he undertook every summer.<sup>7</sup> Nabokov came to the idea for writing such a kind of a novel in 1939 and 1940 while he was still living in Paris; originally writing it as a short story in Russian, at the end of the 1940s, he decided to write it as a novel in English. According to Nabokov, *Lolita* was his successful “affair with the English language” (Nabokov, 2000: 316). It is not presumptuous to suppose that Nabokov may have written the novel as a growing reflection on the American society that he saw at the time. Given the position and relationship between Nabokov and the narrator of the novel Humbert Humbert, as both men of literature

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<sup>7</sup> A statement further seen by the fact that the “butterfly” even appears as one of the novels important motifs, subtly indicating the resemblance to the most famous fictional character Lolita.

and European outsiders in origin,<sup>8</sup> it could be even argued that Nabokov fashioned the narrator of *Lolita* to be a removed commentator for what he observed of the America of the time.

To wit, this 1<sup>st</sup> person narration provides an unreliable narrator which compels the reader think, to even examine the truth of every statement. What is more, while the structure of the novel itself is straightforward (a presentation of Humbert Humbert's manuscript – his chronological unfortunate “love story” with a girl coined as “Lolita” to fit his fancies and obsessions) it is within this narration which reveals more than merely a confession, but an exploration of identity in consumerism, as shall be now shown.

#### 4. A Monster in Humbertland

Nabokov presents Humbert as, at times a sympathetic, but obsequiously clinical case, one who is completed by no further character development beyond the simple obtainment of an idea or fulfillment of a desire he possesses. Yet, the author does try to create an illusion of his growth. By placing him in the position of the narrator, Nabokov makes him and his story fallible in the mere presentation of the events, by being the only source of information about himself and others in the process. Duplicating his name in creating a surname, addressing himself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person warns that “Humber Humbert” wears a mask and it is only his false self in contact to the others and the reader. In fact, Humbert worsens the “reality” presented, providing final, artificial scenery of occurrences and its causes: “He must re-name everyone and every place in the book in order to disguise their ‘real’ identities” (Brand, 1987: 18).

Humbert, as narrator, represents different situations which lead him into a “difficult” position, which is no more than the realization of a tragic flaw. Yet, this prism of Humbert as such not only allows for the

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<sup>8</sup> Nabokov makes the novel *Lolita* in this fashion, but any consideration that he is representing himself in any manner beyond the superficial should not be taken seriously, as he is leading the reader into a labyrinthine game: “When earnest readers, nurtured on the ‘standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket’, leap to make the association between the two episodes [...] and immediately conclude that *Lolita* is autobiographical in the most literal sense, then the trap has been sprung: their wantonly reductive gesture justifies the need for just such a parody as Nabokov’s.” (Nabokov and Appel, 1991: 76-77).



so-called “truth” of the events to be distanced by a narrator’s unreliability, but for focus to be given to more singular ideas that drive the story as well. Compelled by description and explanation as a motive or confession, the plot of the novel is allowed to be explicated through Humbert’s own retelling as the mere “obtainment” of a sought “Lolita” – what the term or person of “Lolita” represents to him. Here then, is where the story of the novel lies and which focus is belied from character to progression, while maintaining the same end idea – Humbert’s need to have his “Lolita”.

As the story originates through Humbert, the assigned character he gives to Dolores of “Lolita” stems from his early childhood. As a young man, he was in love with a girl named “Annabel Leigh”, an obvious reference to Edgar Allan Poe in that her tragic and premature death severely influenced the rest of his life, engraving upon his psyche to seek out a “nymphet”<sup>9</sup> to replace her: “Was it then, [...] that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity?” (Nabokov, 2000: 13).

Stemming from his childhood experience, Humbert goes so far as to literally call himself an artist in his gift of recognizing the “complex nature of nymphets” (2000: 16). He comes across Lolita, by actual name “Dolores Haze”, and sees in her “Annabel”: “It was *the same child – the same* frail, honey-hued shoulders, *the same* silky supple bear back, *the same* chestnut head of hair” [italics mine] (2000: 39). He concludes with “she, this nouvelle, this Lolita, my Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype” (2000: 40) to which he suddenly sees a direct purpose to his desire: “Everything between the two events was but a series of gropings and blunders, and false rudiments of joy. Everything they shared made one of them” (2000: 40). Still, in spite of his simplistic desire to possess or own such a girl, throughout the novel Humbert is not merely interested in only having sexual relations with Lolita, but rather to enjoy her presence and ability to keep the memory on his first love intact: “I am not concerned with so-called “sex” at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (Nabokov, 2000: 134). Ironically, this is where his immaturity

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<sup>9</sup> Humbert defines a “nymphet” as a specific type of girl “between the age of nine and fourteen [...] who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demonic); and these chosen creatures I propose to call ‘nymphets’” (Nabokov, 2000: 16).

comes to the fore as this sexual trait reaches and reviles his pathological character which ultimately destroys everyone around him.<sup>10</sup>

What Humbert strives in his machinations to have is something unobtainable: the particular youth of a young girl to enliven him in his secret desires. It is almost a punishment as all young girls such as Lolita outgrow what Humbert desires, and therefore castigation at the same time: “In two years or so she would cease being a nymphet and would turn out into a ‘young girl’, and then, into a ‘college girl’ – that horror of horrors” (Nabokov, 2000: 90).

Humbert’s attitude towards a nymphet, his past history, his classification and harking desires, can also be taken as that of the act of simply acquiring one, much as one would shop around for a product or object to fulfill what one believes to be the essence of one’s character, or, at least, the end or purpose thereof. For this reason, Humbert’s sense of control over having Lolita drives his character throughout the novel, and may be read as a commentary on consumerism and its postmodern nature in popular culture itself, on the act of *buying her*: “Humbert can only have the illusion of possessing Lolita by spending a great deal of money to buy things for her. When Lolita becomes [...] a commodity, Humbert becomes a consumer” (Brand, 1987: 19).

However, nothing is clearly bought and possessed, unless it is duly paid for. As an object, Humbert tries to mollify Lolita with other objects of her own affection. He buys clothes, magazines and food for his “little nymphet”. Humbert is willing to do anything just to have her “play around [him] forever” (Nabokov, 2000: 21). He becomes a victim of his own mad desire in a completely unbalanced volition, objectifying a living person.

One prime example of this objectified relationship is in the first road trip Humbert takes with Lolita in hope that no one will ever find out “his secret”. They purposefully never stay long enough at one place in order to not only avoid discovery, but for his precious Lolita not to be taken away from him as well.<sup>11</sup> Beyond this as a literary device propelling events forward, the conjunction of Humbert in his obsession with Lolita in the

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<sup>10</sup> Jameson equates this very fetishism of Lolita’s character through Humbert to a growing exploration of taboos in postmodernism, as a greater exploration of the consumed object and its effects on artistic works: “The latest and the last in the long line of those taboo forms of content which, beginning with Nabokov’s nymphets in the 1950s, rise one after the other to the surface of public art” (Jameson, 1991: 293).

<sup>11</sup> See Nabokov, V. (2000). *Lolita*. London: Penguin Classics. p. 138, 139.

backdrop of said road-trip may also be used by Nabokov to provide criticism into the small-town, suburban America of the time, and its consumerist postmodern nature in popular culture: "This is why Lolita is, for the most part among other things, a brilliant, lucid and ironically subjective account of a journey, a huge panorama of America seen through a distorted mirror, through the eyes of a cynical European. [...] He does not want to reach any concrete place in particular, but in his constant changing of places, he tries to become invisible" [translation mine] (Paunović, 2006: 197).

Humbert's pathological jealousy, firmly believing that everyone wants to steal away his sacred guarded "object", in which he cloaks himself in the hypocritical presentation of a concerned "father figure" where Lolita is the actual victim of a pedophilic relationship illustrates that Humbert is indifferent to her other needs or anything that might represent her inner life: "I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind [...] there was in her a garden a twilight [...] absolutely forbidden to me" (Nabokov, 2000: 284). While he may profess to love "Lolita" until the end, it is only the love of the unobtainable object that forces his hand as a character. Lolita is not a person to him, she is something he wants to play with; she is "a word" where "Humbert is flesh: loins, tongue, palate, teeth" (Kauffman, 1989: 136). In Humbert's own words: "Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov, 2000: 9). His profession of love is empty. It is a tragic flaw of Humbert's obsession where "the Double parody in Lolita locks Humbert within that prison of mirrors where the 'real self' and its masks blend into one another, the refracted outlines of good and evil becoming terrifyingly confused" (Nabokov and Appel, 1991: 82).

Seen then there is Humbert not caring one bit for Lolita outside of her as an item to get his hands on. Surely, though Nabokov's "hero" does not enjoy hurting Lolita, he is her abuser for treating her as such. Humbert Humbert is ultimately presented as a deranged individual who uses and abuses Lolita as a material object and from the standpoint of the popular culture of the postmodern consumerist society of the novel, it is a criticism offered for its time of publication.

## 5. In Love with an Image or “How Much is that Little Girl in the Window?”

As has been noted, Humbert is an unreliable narrator. Exceptionally eloquent, he has an unusual gift for rhetoric. Utilizing a needless abundance of academic words and sentences than would a layman to hide his true intentions, Humbert's outward confession can succeed in persuading the reader of how he is not actually guilty of anything. Yet, such lofty ideals that Humbert likes to shield himself in do not completely hide his true motives.

Williamson notes in her book *Consuming Passions* that “as a contemporary advert puts it: ‘*One instinctively knows when something is right.*’ [But] unlike advertising, Art has a reputation for being above things vulgar and mercenary, a form eternal rather than social, whose appreciation springs from the discerning heart, not the cultural background” (Williamson, 1995: 67). If Williamson is to be considered, while Humbert may loom largely upon his *Lolita*, the reader may not be so easily fooled into his “innocent” objectives. Instead, what is left is that *Lolita* may be seen in Humbert's eyes as a sexual product being advertised and obsessed over – opposite to that of the artist who would not incite the vulgar. Humbert is therefore not the artist as he portends to be, but an advertising executive trying to sell the reader on his version of *Lolita*, an object of his own making and fancy, a fact undeniably found in his own words: “What I had madly possessed was not she, but *my own creation*, another fanciful *Lolita* – perhaps more real than *Lolita*; overlapping encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will no consciousness – indeed, *no life of her own*” [italics mine] (Nabokov, 2000: 62). The method of persuasion that Humbert embarks upon is therefore similar to that of promoting an object, where “advertisement is a false double of art in that it deceives a viewer into thinking that an object can be possessed in actuality and not merely in the imagination, consumerism is a false double of aestheticism in that it involves a dependence upon the actual rather than the merely imaginative possession of objects” (Brand, 1987: 20). In this regard, Humbert tries not only to sway the reader to accept his ideas as the norm, but also himself in the process, selling himself on the ideal nature of his romantic intentions.

The reader is easily drawn into Humbert's little game, perceiving him as if he were only some kind of a well-mannered madman. This arises as

the reader views all events and characters exclusively through Humbert's own objectifying eyes. Such is the case with little Dolores: seen through the eyes of her sexual predator, Lolita is viewed as nothing but a worshipped and classified object with which he fulfils his abnormal needs. As Humbert is the narrator of the story, Lolita is a "flat" character, projecting only Humbert's whims and desires, with no internal character thereof to that of Lolita herself. As Kauffman notes in her essay *Is There a Woman in the Text*: "Lolita is little more than a replication of a photographic still. [...] He longs to have a frozen moment permanently on celluloid, since he could not hold her still in life. She is thus the object of his appropriation, and he not only appropriates her, but projects onto her his desires and his neuroses (Kauffman, 1989: 137). Therein, no "true" character of Lolita in the text exists, just Humbert's objectification of a little girl.

Unmasking Lolita's real but (essentially) non-existent character that is amended and usurped by the voice of the narrator does not lend itself to be easily undertaken since the narrator is so sexually aroused by the *nymphet* that he fetishizes her body (paying attention only to parts of it, e.g. the way she holds her toes, the way she speaks, etc.) to such an extent that the reader is left more with a superficial description than a character made to resemble an individual young girl. Lolita's character is seen but in parts, never as an entire person.<sup>12</sup> Humbert's fetishism objectifies Lolita so greatly that its progression is best symbolized by the replacement of her name Dolores Haze, with the nickname "Lolita" – emptying her identity and filling it with his wants instead.

The story of Lolita's character does offer more insight into her as a separate individual outside of Humbert's encompassing gaze, but, sadly, not enough to establish a separate character outside of his grasp. To wit, the circumstances in which Lolita grew up were that she was without a father figure and under a mother who did not care for her, treating her daughter as a competitor, one aspect which influences Lolita's formation and maturation. Due to her subsequent naiveté, Lolita willingly falls in love with an older man, *Quilty*, which she finds normal, and even defends, only complaining about how he broke her heart and how she was an active participant in the affair, not the victim Humbert had assumed.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lolita's lack of a character actualized through her presentation by Humbert is not unique; the rest of the female characters are described mostly as superficial and unworthy of any of his attention, and they only receive outright criticism.

<sup>13</sup> See: *Lolita* p. 279.

It could also be argued that Lolita had come to see herself only as an object of others' desires. At the end of the novel, Lolita is unable to come to complete terms with what had happened to her (both with Quilty and Humbert), and sees her present choice (her husband) as something which is the best compromise, given her past. This is a trait which can be seen when Humbert gives her money that she and her husband desperately need for improving their life together. Humbert also gives her a choice to "go with him" as well. Strikingly, at first she understands it as if she needs to "repay" him for it and "go with him to a hotel" – clearly not understanding his gesture. Despite being pregnant and married, somehow she has never emerged from seeing herself as merely an object to him, or perhaps even to Quilty. Torn between the two predators who have defined her, one in narrative (Humbert) and another as a counterpoint to the main character (Quilty), she cannot escape the definition they assign her: an object of their desire.

Still, the object is not the same for both characters, illustrated by the first exchange that Quilty and Humbert share, directly prior to Lolita's first sexual experience with Humbert, in which the two have a mundane conversation, and Quilty mentions: "Where the devil did you *get* her?" [*italics mine*] to which Humbert replies "I beg your pardon?" (Nabokov, 2000: 127), not fully understanding the direct overtones. Surely, Humbert in this light is presented more gallantly than Quilty who has never so elaborately hidden or justified his intent, and Quilty's character could be seen as the carnally perverse mirror to that of the perversely romantic of Humbert's. From these snippets of dialogue,<sup>14</sup> Lolita as an object to these two men and her definition thereof could be taken to be that merely of an object, one based on a fetishism and another purely on exploitation, but in both still just something to be used, no matter the excuse.

This fetishism of Lolita implies that she cannot be anything but a "material object of desire" for anyone, which is why a progression of Lolita's character cannot be seen until she is removed from all – even if, in the end, she may not know who she is and what she really wants. It bears repeating that growing up in an environment where she has never been the

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<sup>14</sup> Another instance is when Humbert is rampaging through Quilty's house, on the verge of shooting him, he deadly seriously posits: "'Quilty', I said, 'do you recall a little girl called Dolores Haze, Dolly Haze? Dolly called Dolores, Colo.?' " Quilty, thinks nothing of Lolita to such an extent that he does not even understand the verb to call, mistaking it for "by telephone": "Sure, she may have made those calls, sure. Any place. Paradise, Wash., Hell Canyon. Who cares?" (2000: 296).

subject to another, Lolita is not the subject in Nabokov's novel either, but a motive of someone else's manipulative and confabulatory reflection above all; Humbert is the narrator who takes himself as a reference point, and distorts reality by subordinating the truth to an *a priori* notion of himself, even so much as to make him into the hero, claiming to have killed Quilty in the firm belief that he is defending himself and his "Lolita".

To this extent, Lolita is unable to escape Humbert in his domination of the text. The most freedom she has is when Humbert recognizes she falls out of the sphere of what he had once imagined her to be. When Humbert realizes that his "artistic creation" does not exist anymore, though willing to accept her even if she is pregnant and blemished, he has one of his "epiphanies", which are "all the more obvious and frequent indicators of Humbert's growing inability to control himself and his own thoughts" [translation mine] (Paunović, 2007: 135): "I know that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (Nabokov, 2000: 203). Yet, there is nothing of regret, only his Lolita has surpassed him in life, and has now been disposed of after having been consumed.

Lolita is never to reach being a self-individual or subject to others, confirmed by her denial of abuse: "She asked me not to be dense. The past was the past. I had been a good father, she guessed – granting me *that*" (2000: 272). She never overcomes the trauma but is induced by others' behavior and modeled as a victim apart from the fact as to whether in her environment the abuser exists or not. Humbert does not simply determine Lolita's fate; he also interjects that he loves her even if she has lost her nymphet qualities, as if his love is a reward for her which in a great part diminishes Lolita as an autonomous person.

## **6. "One loves ultimately one's desires, not the thing desired."<sup>15</sup>**

A superficial reading of *Lolita* will provide the reader with nothing more than an account of one man's sad and pedophilic journey in the pursuit to realize his own perverse goals, which end and begin in the death of an elusive literary figure. The novel is clearly not meant to be taken as such. Instead, an inspection of the narrative and its characters reveals a

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche's aphorism

criticism of finding one's identity in the consumption of an object, *vis-à-vis* the postmodern culture of consumerism.

As a literary character, Humbert was drawn to and compelled by his own nature to possess a "nymphet". While this may have been his primary motivation, it is also his tragic flaw. Without his "Lolita" in the young Dolores Haze, there would be nothing of him to note. In fact, even though a small majority of the novel consists of taking road trips, the reader does not experience much of them beyond his poetical lusting of Lolita, showing how closed he is to anything but his obsession of her. Albeit, there is some development in his character, as "at the end of the novel, Humbert recognizes that his observations of the American landscape have been distorted by the prism of his obsession: 'We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing'" (Parker, 1987: 83). Nevertheless, this admission only comes after the fact and not during.

Just as consumerism instills a desire to have, hold and control an object, Humbert wishes the same in his relationship to Lolita. Yet, he can never be satisfied, even admitting in several places how transitory his possession and her state are. It would not appear that Humbert ever lets go of his obsession, even after having been sentenced to life imprisonment. "The diary he discloses to the court is the best proof how the disappearing of the worshipped object did not decrease at all greatness of his affair. [...] It would seem that Humbert, once again with exactly the same intensity, is experiencing the sweetness and the agony of enormous (still) unfulfilled passion" [translation mine] (Paunović, 1997: 113). Humbert's identity is far too much based on his pursuit of his ideal Lolita for him to abandon, it is all that he has to characterize himself. Clearly, this is a criticism of identity being based on self-reference to an object and, therefore, anti-consumerist.

Truthfully, Humbert's prone position as he seeks to be the owner (for lack of a better word) of Lolita is the only needed plot device of the story of which all other subplots are based on. In the same instance, it is a criticism of the same self-destructive pursuit of identity through consumption. What Humbert wants is not to be had by any means, even if he fools himself into believing it can be so. The fixation on his "little nymphet" forces him along nonetheless, producing a character who would develop without "developing". As Williamson notes: "Desire itself is channeled into this endless, obsessive theorizing about desire – harnessed in its own pursuit; [...] *the more elusive its object, the more interesting this pursuit is*" [italics



mine] (1995: 12). Nonetheless, Humbert is only one actor in this story. There could be no Humbert without Lolita to prod him onward. Just as Humbert is defined by the object, his object is defined by him or perhaps, has no definition beyond him.

If the novel can be taken as a censure of the consumerism for when it was written, then Lolita is more than an object of a lecherous man's desires. In fact, she may even be given as an epitome of consumerism itself to lend even more criticism of her objectification. It has been observed that the character of "Lolita is indeed an 'ideal consumer'" (Nabokov and Appel, 1991: 62). In Humbert's own description, he even mentions: "She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster" (Nabokov, 2000: 148). Indeed, the reader does not know much about Lolita beyond the special natures of her nymphic qualities Humbert so values in his object. In her youthful childishness and as a tragic figure at the end of the novel, there is not even much to be said of her as having individual characteristics separate than that Humbert assigns her. In between though, in her more intimate time with Humbert, she comes most typified by her wants and desires. Although this may not be atypical for a teenager in postmodern popular culture, she is directly placed in the story to reflect consumerist sentiment. However, while Lolita may be taken as the "ideal consumer", she is still a victim of being consumed, "she herself is consumed, pitifully, and there is, as Nabokov said, 'a queer, tender charm about that mythical nymphet'" (Nabokov and Appel: 1991: 62).

One thing is certain for the novel. "Lolita is but one part of that universe of fiction arrayed around the consciousness of Nabokov, who would join Humbert in his lament that words do indeed have their limitations, and that 'the past is the past'; to live in it, as Humbert tried, is to die" (1991: 85). Indeed, Humbert has made this world of his own choosing, but is jailed by it. He seeks his freedom as he creates his Lolita, striving for his fulfillment and identity through her, but unable to do so, makes a tragedy in the consumption of her and himself in the process.

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ПОПУЛАРНА КУЛТУРА У ПОСТМОДЕРНИСТИЧКОМ ОКВИРУ:  
ЛОЛИТА ВЛАДИМИРА НАБОКОВА

**Сажетак**

Рад се бави теоријским одређењем популарне културе као и практичним увидом у најважније видове међусобног прожимања популарне културе и књижевности постмодернизма. У складу с тим, испитује се и објашњава концепт постмодерног идентитета у потрошачкој култури и конзумеризму, и како се тај концепт може довести у везу са Набоковљевим романом *Лолита*. Као производ свог времена, *Лолита* пружа верну слику одговарајућих постмодерних културних вредности, норми и друштва у којем је радња романа смештена и периода када је написан. Такође се приказују и најважније карактеристике постмодернизма, нарочито када се популарна култура постави за референтно поље, чиме се успоставља битно место и значај рефлексивна популарне културе у књижевности постмодернизма.

**Кључне речи:** постмодернизам, популарна култура, конзумеризам, *Лолита*, Набоков